



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

**THE ARCANES AND THE ORDINARY:
AN EXPLORATION OF PATRIARCHY AND THE
POSTCOLONIAL
IN
THE WRITING
OF
BETH YAHP, CATHERINE LIM AND SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN
LIM.**

by

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A THESIS

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The arcane and the ordinary
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Declaration

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.



Julie Dixon

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines the work of Beth Yahp, Catherine Lim and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. Particular emphasis is given to four texts. The first is Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury*, published in 1992 in Australia but located imaginatively in Malaysia at the time of the Emergency (1948 – 1960). The second is Catherine Lim's *The Bondmaid*, self-published in 1995 and set in 1950s Singapore. The third, Catherine Lim's *The Teardrop Story Woman*, published by Orion in 1998, is set in a similar time and place to *The Crocodile Fury*. The final text is Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moonfaces*, an autobiographical novel, published in 1996, which explores Lim's experience of a Malaysian childhood and youth and her adult life as an Asian-American. The thesis addresses a perceived lack of detailed critical engagement with the work of these writers.

At the same time as these texts were being published, ideas of the postcolonial (post-colonial, 'post'colonial) gained theoretical credence. The term, postcolonial, could be applied to these texts if one took the simplest common denominator: they had all been set in areas colonised by the British who had since departed, hence post – colony. However, while the ideas of self and other, of centre and margin, of subalternity and of hybridity reverberated within the writing, such ideas never fully explained it. Feminist theory has also addressed these issues, and others which have little to do with colonisation and much to do with the experience of being a woman. The tension between the explanatory power of these perspectives and the ways in which the writing challenges the implied homogeneity of much in theory is examined in detail in the study which follows.

...for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is for the purposes of the work, *becoming*.

Toni Morrison (1992: 4)

I have also wondered ... when the postcolonial is supposed to end. First we were colonials and now we seem to be postcolonials. So is the colonial the new Anno Domini from which events are to be everlastingly measured? (Sahgal cited in MacDermot 1993: 33).

The thesis which follows, is an analysis of the ways in which both feminist and postcolonial theories of literature (particularly those of the last decade) illuminate, explicate or obscure the work of three writers. The texts which comprise the central focus of study are Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury* (1993), Catherine Lim's *The Bondmaid* (1995) and *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998) and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moonfaces* (1996).

Toni Morrison sees imagination and, implicitly, the act of storytelling, as enabling "for the purpose of the work, *becoming*" (1992:4). The parameters are set within and by the work itself, the writer connects into the imagination, but does not take herself intact into the other. Limits and integrity remain unbroken. The tension between the telling of the story - that act of imagination which is not (according to Morrison) merely voyeuristic - and the interpretation (both of act and product) is often strained. To place the text then within the theoretical category of the postcolonial raises the question Nayantara Sahgal has asked: "Is the colonial the Anno Domini from which events are to be everlastingly measured?" (in MacDermot 1993: 33). The almost religious hegemony implied by the linear temporality of Anno Domini, implicated as it is in a Christian chronology and emphasising the eurocentrism of the focal point of the colonial, negates or diminishes experience not measured from a centre which remains a ubiquitous west. The four texts themselves move in and out of a concern with the colonial, at times emphasising the abuses of a particularly situated patriarchy rather than the abuses of a British colonial regime.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse has stated: “All along I wonder whether there is such a thing as postcolonial theory” (2000:92), allowing a minor grammatical dissonance to occur in an otherwise perfectly articulated piece. The ‘all along’ implies past into present, the ‘I wonder’ however is in the habitual present tense in English with no hint of an ongoing past signalled by the use of the perfect. The critic/theorist’s play with language is possibly an indication of the strange time frames within which theory works - past as present, theory as hindsight, the present as some kind of predictive and predicative future. And yet the ‘thing’, which may not have existed, in the very act of its negation, demands discussion. The two threads – story as almost tactile entity and theory as evanescent but compelling engagement with the stories told – are essential strands of the construct that will follow.

Umberto Eco has described a hermeneutic approach to the literary text, emphasizing the interpretive moment which occurs in the act of reading. He asserts that there are two levels of interpretation in critique and two model readers: “a first level or naïve one, supposed to understand semantically what the text says, and a second level or critical one, supposed to appreciate the way in which a text says so”(1988: 36). I would argue that “seeing the way in which a text says so” is a valid part of our engagement with stories, though the implication of an uneasy hierarchy in which a binary of expert and other (naïve) reader is created needs to be juxtaposed with and balanced by a practice of reading influenced by certain feminist critiques. In these, text is seen as “intact. the texts woven in/are the very fibers of our tissue. TISSUE: 'teks-, text.' the body of language whole again” (Warland, 1986: 143). Here reading becomes integral to experience, a ‘naïve’ affective response different from but not exclusive of the analytical distance implied by Eco’s second level of reader.

The eclecticism of approach evident throughout the thesis reflects the uneasy relationship extant between theory and the literary text examined. Graham Huggan has argued that an eclectic, inclusive approach can, at its best provide “the grounds for fruitful alliances (between colonial-discourse analysts and feminists for example, or between more traditional New Literatures critics and radical scholar-activists in the ethnic/ minority fields)” and at worst “it affords a rationale for the kind of intellectual tourism that meanders dilettantishly from one place to another in search of ill-thought

goals” (2001:2). Vicki Bertram’s argument for the value of a diverse approach has been central to the development of this thesis’ position, in its attempt to avoid Huggan’s “intellectual tourism”.

Bertram in a discussion of contemporary women’s poetry in her own thesis asks whether (in response to a critique of her limited use of theory) it is appropriate “to invoke the theoretical insights of French philosophical tradition, with their highly specialized, privileged terminology, when ... writing about a Caribbean woman’s poetry?” (1997: 264). She answers her own question by arguing that if she could take theoretical insights and somehow weave them into her reading, then she “could apply a more flexible, responsive version of theoretical engagement” (1997: 265). She states that rather than adopting a “grand theory to explain the world, I wanted a Pick’n’Mix version of my own making, gathering snippets from widely diverse fields of inquiry, making unexpected links across disciplines” (1997: 266). Bertram explores the difficulty of fixing meaning and in fact sees this as something which can be put off indefinitely, asserting finally that it is the “negotiation between text and reader” that lies at “the heart of all textual criticism” (1997: 276). She places the process of what she calls “imaginative empathy” at the heart of reading poetry. I would argue it is also central to reading prose (fiction). And she deftly points to the “apparently contradictory awareness that empathy is only ever imaginary” (1997: 276). This is a rather dainty disclaimer, an acknowledgement that ‘we’ (white, women academics) have no privileged access to ‘truth’.

The texts focused on in this thesis are specifically located and nominally postcolonial,¹ and come from a region (comprising Malaysia and Singapore) which in the past has been accorded minimal *critical* attention. Arif Dirlik (who is not a proponent of postcolonial theory) has only recently argued that in “the midst of a ‘globalism’ craze, it may be important to consider what it is that a place-based imagination has to offer, and what may be the conceptualisation of places that contributes the most to this end” (in Olds, Dicken, Kelly, Kong & Wai-chung Yeung 1999: 50). Dirlik is not considering such place-based imagination in precisely the context formulated in the thesis and has

¹ Labeling the texts, on which the thesis will focus, as postcolonial is of course subject to the debate which infuses the term - as shadowed initially by the inclusion of Pieterse’s sceptical comment.

expressed concerns about the construction and consumption of 'a' local from within the control of 'global' economic imperialism, which I think reflects the disquiet of Susie O'Brien and Stuart Hall. In brief, this disquiet relates to the construction of a consumable, capital O, Other for the west to devour, and of a new (neo rather than an implicitly celebratory post) colonial paradigm (O'Brien 1998, this is discussed more fully later).

Recognising these concerns does not however obviate the need to analyse the productions of particular sites in order to dissolve the elisions and the gaps which occur. While Grewal and Kaplan in an argument at times similar to Dirlik's, claim that specifying location² "is a standard gesture in the West, part of the production of value and knowledge that creates canons, races, genders and a whole host of other marked categories", they also argue that the term "'local' signifies a more particularised aspect of location - deeply connected to the articulation of a specific time - and a potentially transformative practice"(1994:149). In the terms of this study then, it seems important to examine the work of writers who are situated in a region often homogenized into undifferentiating categories – Asian or at best Southeast Asian. For too long much of the critical theory which did concern itself with the region, for example Said (1993), Torgovnick, (1990), Donaldson (1993) dealt with the work of writers from the west. Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* and the *Heart of Darkness*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, are texts examined and then reexamined in the context of postcolonial discussion and are texts also firmly situated within a traditional English literary canon. Exploration of the colonialist discourse which has framed such analysis is important, I think, to the deconstruction/reconstruction of hegemonic readings and as such an important challenge to the dominance of modernist grand narrative. But as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985:245) has argued, it is not enough to reinterpret such texts, it is also necessary to extend analysis beyond that of the so-called master narratives, to explore local literatures in a way which acknowledges them *as* literary texts and not just another aspect of third world "information retrieval". The emphasis in this thesis on the work of women writers who locate much of their writing within a Malaysian or Singaporean context, addresses in part the lack of critical engagement, in-depth and serious analysis

² Location in itself is a disputed term. Lati Mani (as Lydia Liu has pointed out) has argued that "'location' is not a fixed point but a 'temporality of struggle' and ... its politics is characterized by processes of movement 'between cultures, languages and complex configurations of meaning and power' " (Liu 1997: 108).

that is still evident (although such work did gain greater credibility towards the end of the 1990s). The writing examined in this project can bring new perspectives to the way in which such critique, or its absence, can be read, and thus contribute to the development of Grewal and Kaplan's hoped-for transformative practice.

Leela Gandhi, like some other commentators who will be discussed in what follows, provides a cautionary cynicism to the valorizing propensities of hoped-for transformation, arguing "[t]hus, the metropolitan culture designates itself as the privileged addressee – the chosen audience – of the romantic postcolonial text" (1998:162). This is linked to what Gandhi has termed the insidious remnants of New Criticism, a "suppressed discourse which inhabits the secret enclaves of both postcolonial and poststructuralist literary theory" (1998:160). The inherent idealization and romanticisation of the text implicit in the taint of New Critical Theory, Gandhi sees as leading to literature as compensation "for the inadequacies of the world" (1998:160). However, acknowledging the limits of the literary as a tool for political agency does not mean that the literary text should not be explored within a political context. It means only that exaggerated claims for this as transformative practice are not tenable.

In such contexts the subject position of both reader and writer of text must be open to scrutiny. Nirmala Puwar, in an analysis of the representation of South Asian women as "visible objects of knowledge" in the academy, has rigorously critiqued the differential positions that exist in academia where white academics are licensed to play the game of appropriation. As in the wearing of "nosestuds and anklets ... [v]ersions of these eurocentric phantasmic constructions can also be found in (white) feminism" and in postcolonial discourse (2000:132). It is here that Ien Ang's delineation of incommensurability offers another way of dealing with the impasse created between a (perhaps) naïve empathy and a cynical opportunism. She defines incommensurability as:

the residue of the irreducibly particular that cannot, ultimately be shared. It is not simply an absolute impossibility of communication, but relates to the occasional and interspersed moments of miscommunication (or breakdown of communication) that always accompany communicative interchanges between differently positioned subjects (1997: 59).

Part of the irony is, as Ang herself argues, that these very differences and dissonances propel us to go on looking for an understanding we can never wholly achieve. The emphasis on specificity which is central to this thesis is always prefaced with that sense of the possibility of incommensurability, that the reading which produces the comment/critique is in itself specifically positioned and probably blinkered in ways that cannot be fully guarded against.

The thesis title has been taken from a line in a story by Catherine Lim (1989). This is an overtly ironic, almost satirical tale which examines the position of the writer when she is made a 'representative' of national consciousness. An angst-ridden situation, it elicits a dance between the writer and the protectors of national image that explores the way in which language can be manipulated. A single line in a series of oppositions initially touched my own imagination. Lim saw the act of writing as in part concerned with the play between the "arcane and the ordinary". The two terms, both as opposition and complement, seemed deeply evocative. The 'arcane' implied worlds of the magical and the mysterious, a space beyond the reasoned and pragmatic. The 'ordinary' suggested images of the commonplace, a 'reality' reconstructed through both the individual consciousness of the writer and the socio/political forces impacting on her. This evocative phrase, in turn, seemed capable of holding some of the variety, intricacies and complexities of subjectivities to be explored in the writing which would form the focus of my discussion.

This exploration, as has been noted already, is situated in the postcolonial context of modern Malaysia and Singapore ('postcolonial' here meaning countries which have historically experienced British colonization and subsequent decolonisation). While each of the sites represents a clearly different national construction and the points of diversion become more emphatic over time, some commonality still exists imaginatively. Indeed, in order to cite Singapore's recent literary antecedents one must turn to Malaysia (Brewster, 1989). The shared experience of colonial pasts impact on the work produced by of Beth Yahp, Catherine Lim and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, as does these writers' shared background as children (specifically girl children) of Chinese

immigrants to the region³. Such similarities are, however, fragmented by the disparities of class, of diasporic and individual experience, and by the layering and texturing of the different national concerns. Any suggestion that these writers could represent or represent a particular national subjectivity is complicated by the fact that two of them no longer live in either Malaysia or Singapore. Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury* has been claimed as both an Australian discovery (winning a 1993 Victorian Premier's prize for first fiction)⁴ and a Malaysian text (Wong 1995:11). Shirley Geok-lin Lim, an American citizen for more than two decades, received the 1997 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation for *Among the White Moonfaces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*, and yet as Tan Gim Ean states "Lim's status is such that in the roll call of Malaysian writing, the country still claims her for its own " (1996: 6). Another commentator more cynically remarks, "And we [Malaysians] keep claiming the poet Shirley Lim (though not officially, mind), despite the fact that she has lived in the United States for most of her adult life. Does it have to do, I wonder with the fact that she is the only writer connected to us who's ever won a Commonwealth literary prize?" (Fadzilah Amin 1996: 9). Mani's comment that location is never fixed and is often a point of contestation, is particularly insightful in this context. Given these however, the stories themselves are generally placed (with the significant exception of Lim's American narrative in *Among the White Moonfaces*), in the nation states of Malaysia and what would only later become Singapore.

Rey Chow, when reflecting on the positioning of Asian Literature in American Universities, states that "the standard representatives [of such literature] have for a long time been China and Japan in East Asia, India in South Asia, and Persia and Arabia in the Middle East"(1993:124). She challenges this homogenising practice, arguing that in order to address the implicit politics of such assumptions, it is necessary to insist on the "non-monolithic nature" of Asian literature⁵. In a later discussion Chow (1998)

³ Whether this 'makes' the work 'postcolonial' is predicated by the uncertainties which continue to inform my own understanding/s of that highly contested term (see the debate which follows).

⁴ Graham Huggan, in an extended discussion of the literary prize, particularly the prestigious Booker, has argued that the "fetishisation of cultural otherness risks merely reduplicating the authority of assimilationist paradigms... remaining bound to an Anglocentric discourse of benevolent paternalism (2001: 111). It is not my purpose here to discuss the import or meaning of the prizes given but the point is note-worthy.

⁵ Hong Liu (2001: 264) places an interesting qualification on Chow's call for specificity, one with which Chow might well agree. He argues that (in the context of Asian Studies) it is necessary to

reiterates and reformulates the concerns she has with the potential for the ghettoisation of certain fields and of those who choose to comment on them. Anne McClintock too, criticises "a fetishistic disavowal of crucial international distinctions that are barely understood and inadequately theorized" (1992:293) and Edwin Thumboo has expressed his dissatisfaction with the "kinds of abstract theorising which neglect local circumstances in their 'post-colonial' enthusiasm to see relations with the former imperial power as paramount" (Bennett, Doyle & Nandan 1996: 3). Joseph Pugliese also argues his unease about the appropriation and homogenisation that he perceives occurring in the very construction of the term "'post'-colonialism [which] too often homologises the difference and disparities between colonised nations" (1995: 354).

Edward Said's (1978) germinal discussion of Orientalism is related to Chow's concerns about the way in which the west reduces the 'Other' to uneasy homogeneity and in so doing diminishes 'it'. Said, of course, has argued that the production of the Other occurs in the creation of oppositions which distort representations of self by those living outside certain culturally hegemonic boundaries, thereby diluting or defusing otherness into/within confinable limits. This idea of self/other; the occident/orient is formulated through the "conceptual grid" of Said's *Orientalism* (Vanita Seth, 2001: 298). Seth argues that this binary can be organized around "the transhistorical sign of the west" and as such can ignore "historical specificity" (2001: 297), by assuming that such opposition was always the case, which she argues in Europe was not in fact so, or was a sole construct of the west, whereas, "numerous civilizations throughout history have engaged in the intellectual and practical exercise of distinguishing themselves from their neighbours" (2001: 299). While Said's views have been criticised for an overemphasis on the west's construction of its other, in a binary that does not give full weight to the varied contestations which also repeatedly occur (Ato Quayson, 2000), his analysis remains pivotal to understanding later developments in the field which eventually became identified as the postcolonial.

Here a brief gloss of the term itself is needed. Elke Boehmer has divided the word into two distinct formulations. For her, these are, 'postcolonial' and 'post-colonial', the

"eschew not only Western-centrism but also the nation-state framework". That is, to avoid too great an emphasis on sub-regional divisions which underestimate the "Sino-Southeast Asian connections" (2001: 261) that have been (and continue to be) formative within the region.

hyphenated version “taken as another period term designating the post-Second World War era” (1995: 3). Bill Ashcroft defends the use of the hyphenated form, arguing that “the hyphen is a statement about the particularity, the historically and culturally grounded nature of the experience it represents” (2001: 10). Most writers however have eschewed the subtleties of the hyphen and continue to use ‘postcolonial’. Ato Quayson comments that the “hyphenated version was first used by political scientists and economists to denote the period after colonialism” but was later used in “more wide-ranging culturalist analysis in the hands of literary critics and others” (2000:1). Quayson states his preference for the unhyphenated term because this distinguishes “it from its more chronologically inflected progenitor” and because the unhyphenated version has gained “marked dominance” in the field (2000:1). Quayson, in his introductory chapter, points to the complex nuances that imbue the term, linking it both to a preoccupation with the “experience of colonialism” and with (often in opposition to the dominance of the colonial) the discourses of decolonisation, as does Bart Moore-Gilbert (1997).

In terms of some delimiting of the field which has been termed postcolonial, Robert Young (1995: 163) names Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as “the Holy Trinity of colonial-discourse analysis”. Spivak’s theorising of the silenced subaltern raises the central issue of the erasure of voice in the context of colonial and patriarchal dominance, and it is she who has asked the provocative ‘postcolonial’ question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and has given the deeply provoking answer that *she* can’t. In a thesis (mine) preoccupied with the role of the storyteller and with the importance of the hearing of those stories, Spivak presents both challenge and compelling insight. In an unusually succinct statement, she debunks the absolutes that are often ascribed to the act of creating/performing theory: “And you make mistakes. Big deal. One is making mistakes all the time” (1993: 307). The implication is of a teacher’s sense that one does not learn, cannot advance understandings while too assiduously avoiding ‘error’. It conveys, also, the impression that no theorising, particularly that of a ubiquitous ‘post’colonial, can in fact avoid mis-representation, it can only continually question and refine but never definitively answer the questions thus raised. Spivak, I think, infers the choice is between this and no theoretical engagement at all. This resonates in a field of study which deals with Ang’s incommensurability and with the questions of how people imaginatively construct the world/s around them.

Young goes on to identify the critical challenges put forward to the analysis offered by this 'holy trinity'. He emphasises the critiques of "Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Benita Parry or Ajiz Ahmad, who have criticised a certain textualism and idealism in colonial-discourse analysis which, they allege, occurs at the expense of materialist critical enquiry" (1995: 163). Parry has been deeply critical of what she terms Bhabha's penchant to elide materiality in favour of "the linguistic turn in cultural studies" (1994:5). Ahmad is concerned by the literary appropriation of the term, which too often eschews any stringent engagement with its "spatial and temporal applications" (1995:9). I partially agree with Young that while there is a stress placed in Said, Spivak and Bhabha's work on the textual, this does not exclude the possibility of other investigation. As Young has said: "There is considerable cogency to many of these objections [Mohanty, Parry, Ahmad], but it could be argued that they also involve a form of category mistake: the investigation of the discursive construction of colonialism does not seek to replace or exclude other forms of analysis, whether they be historical, geographical, economic, military or political ..." (1995:163). An acceptance of this non-exclusivity however does not address Ahmad's concerns about the triumphalism that can characterize the discourse of postcolonial criticism nor the sense that it may, as a form of critique so valorize discourse that it elides the continuation of material horror. Anthony Guneratne confronts "the big postcolonial party we have celebrated in recent seasons" which he contrasts with continuing horror of colony: "In the months during which Saro-Wiwa⁶ waited to die ordinary people all around the world (though frighteningly few from Asia and Latin America) carried placards and marched in demonstrations to secure his release, but I saw no tidal wave of grief or outrage in academia, only the fashionably muted eddies of discontent among the new elites of postcolonial theory" (1997:3).

This thesis is engaged by and with the textual constructions of people's worlds. But in that act of engagement there is no question that such concerns can at any level be a substitute for, in the context of the environmental, "local or global activism" (Landry and MacLean 1996:268). In a discussion of Spivak's translation of Mahaseta Devi's work, Landry and MacLean also argue "neither can activism alone put forward the new

⁶ Ken Saro-Wiwa was a Nigerian writer who was hung "for having led the protests of the Ogoni people against the exploitation of their lands by Western petroleum companies" (Guneratne 1997: 2).

imaginary maps” with which to reframe our understanding and our speaking of the world. Spivak cogently points to the importance of “fictions” in providing new ways of seeing, showing that the work of a writer like Mahasweta “can *obliquely* provide” (my emphasis), an alternative vision of “an ecologically emancipated and sexually democratized future” (Landry and MacLean 1996: 268). That the relationship is oblique does not lessen it as possibility.

Of course, Gandhi’s earlier caveat to the romanticisation of ‘postcolonial’ writing remains: “If literature compensates for the inadequacies of the world, the poetic ‘imagination’ and ‘creative faculty’ are now endowed with the political energies necessary for the work of social transformation. The poet/writer, in other words, is fashioned as the revolutionary *par excellence*” (1998:160). And yet, for me, the following lines from the Singaporean poet Lee Tzu Pheng illustrate an approach to textuality which speaks to this dilemma.

In a poem called *Nonetheless* she writes:

‘words cannot equal experience’
my father once wrote;
yet words are nearly all that people have:

to think what we feel,
to speak what we are,
to write what we live (1988: 30).

In another poem, *Disclosure*, Lee considers the pain words can hold:

it is appropriate how quietly we speak
of the blade bearing down two inches to the left
of the sternum, then the twisting up
to carve its slow curve into our registering
mind

pain is its own point:
the mind in traction roots sensation up
like sinews out of flesh
to the one convulsive center

speak quietly of this,
as I would with you,
for is this not what mind and body tell us?

we have but words to draw for each other (1988:29).

The commission of discovery, of disclosure, of exploration through words, sometimes, is as cutting as the blade bearing down and then twisting up, carving the consciousness. The immediacy of the description does not negate the materiality of real world pain, of a literal carving into the body, but acknowledges the link between mind and body, saying and feeling /for is this not what mind and body tell us/. The challenge is /to think what we feel/to speak what we are/.⁷ In her imaging of the /mind in traction/, and in the tactility of rooting sensation up into the consciousness /like sinews out of flesh / Lee displaces the binary separation of the cerebral and corporeal; the materiality of action and the substantiveness of physical pain is drawn in the palpable concreteness of words and thoughts. And these words that come:

from darkneses as deep,
hold firm against the desolating air,
and gather shapes
that tell of love, or pain, or something
not quite there (1988: 31) .

For the writers who provide the focus for this thesis, words explore and record, they /hold firm against the desolating air/, and gather the shapes which sit at the back of the mind, the effects and affects that are /not quite there/ but which continue to speak quietly to us and of us, the words we /draw for each other/. These verses from Lee's poetry come after the 'footnote' that tells Saro-Wiwa's death; the telling of a story does not, cannot make change happen in and of itself.

There are concerns other than that of a postcolonial emphasis on the textual and discursive. Criticism is also directed at the conflation that seems to occur where colonial-discourse analysis becomes subsumed in the *postcolonial* and the accent is then placed on the primacy of the colonial. Another critique relates to the fit between the theories of the postcolonial and the specificity of texts actually produced after the (disputed) end of colony.

Doireann MacDermot in an incisive summary of the problem of emphasis indicated here, quotes from Nayantara Sahgal's plenary address to the ACALS conference where Sahgal poses the question asked at the beginning of this chapter " 'I have also wondered ... when the postcolonial is supposed to end. First we were colonials and now we seem

⁷ The convention selected for quoting lines of poetry follows the model used by Bertram (1997).

to be postcolonials. So is the colonial the new Anno Domini from which events are to be everlastingly measured?' " (1993:33). This will remain a pivotal question throughout and is reflected in the concerns expressed by Ahmad's *In Theory* where he pointed to the condescension implicit in the term postcolonial. In a discussion of mid-twentieth-century novels written in Urdu, Ahmad contends:

All the novels I know from that period are predominantly about other things [than the experience of imperialism]: the barbarity of the feudal landowners, the rapes and murders in the houses of religious 'mystics', the stranglehold of moneylenders upon the lives of peasants and the lower petty bourgeoisie, the social and sexual frustration of schoolgirls, and so on. The theme of anti-colonialism is woven into many of those novels, but never in an exclusive or even dominant emphasis. (1992: 118)

Ahmad's own emphasis is on specificity, on cultural construction which contains but is not defined by its relationship to colonialism. The list of 'other' issues (the ironic distance of my use of inverted commas is deliberate here) is reiterated to emphasise just some of the things which have engaged this particular cultural group in this particular historical period. Ahmad problematises the very term stating that in:

periodising our history in the triadic terms of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial, the conceptual apparatus of 'postcolonial criticism' privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principal of structuration in that history, so that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath. (1995: 6)

He argues that while this may be how the history of these countries looks from "the outside" this is hardly how it appears from within those histories. This subtly inverts the outsider/insider status constructed by the west. Ahmad goes further in his definition of the postcolonial, commenting that this "word 'postcolonial' was to be used increasingly not so much for periodisation as for designating some kinds of literary and literary-critical writing and eventually some history-writing, as *generically* postcolonial" (1995: 7). In a final formulation he argues that "at least in one of its many nuances, 'postcolonial' is simply a polite way of saying non-white, not-Europe, or perhaps not-Europe-but-inside-Europe" (1995: 8). Definition by negatives or against an implied norm of white and Europe, denigrates experiences and histories for which white and Europe may in fact be the peripheries. I found it of interest that consciousness of the "non-white, not-Europe" (or more accurately, not-American) became pronounced in

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moonfaces* (1996) when she moved to America. This internalization of the category – woman of colour/ writer of colour – and my own uneasiness with it contrasts with my sense that it would be redundant (possible, but superfluous) to designate Catherine Lim as a 'writer of colour'. The move to the cosmopolitan centre (America) created for Geok-lin Lim a different view of herself as "non-white", not quite American and this is explored more fully in Chapter Five.

McClintock, in an often-cited article, has also pointed to the difficulty of the prefix 'post' which, she says, "reduces the cultures of peoples beyond colonialism to *prepositional* time. The term confers on colonialism the prestige of history proper" (1992: 86). McClintock goes on to state: "I am struck by how seldom the term is used to denote *multiplicity*" (p.86). Indeed, in an argument similar to that of Ahmad's, McClintock makes the point that "many contemporary African, Latin American, Caribbean and Asian cultures, while profoundly affected by colonization, are not necessarily primarily preoccupied with their erstwhile contact with Europe" (1992: 87). While there is some agreement between the two theorists, Ahmad does criticise McClintock for extending the "term 'colonialism' so markedly that all territorial aggressions ever undertaken in human history come to fall under one singular dispensation, thus erasing, among other things, the specificity of that capitalist colonialism that the nation-states of Europe uniquely produced" (1995: 20). I think, with McClintock, that it is necessary to acknowledge that 'colonialism' is not the unique 'property' of Europeans and that colonial dominations and repressions have occurred in many different historical and regional situations. And yet, Ahmad offers a succinct reminder that there were/are also differences within imperialisms, and that the "capitalist colonialism [of] the nation-states of Europe" was exceptional and continues to have distinctive and far-reaching impacts into the present. Susie O'Brien (1998: 177) carries this further, arguing that it takes "neocolonial conditions to produce the academic *discourse* of the 'postcolonial'". This implicates the 'third world' academic living in the 'first world' in a kind of complicity with neo-colonial entrepreneurship; an uneasy symbiosis which is reflected but not fully explored in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's autobiographical text *Among the White Moonfaces*. Lim examines her status as a 'third world' intellectual in the academy, noting the tokenism evident (at times) in her appointment to certain positions, but she touches only briefly and uneasily on the ironic privilege of her own situation (see Chapter 5 below).

The complexity, O'Brien contends, of defining an enveloping colonial is at least partially masked by the ongoing emphasis in analytical terms, on the primacy of the former colonies, that is on the culpable imperialism that came from Britain or Europe⁸. For some former colonies, of which Singapore is one example, that earlier relationship with a then physically extant coloniser was neither characterised by the sickening, unmitigated violence and destruction that occurred in other contexts, nor was it the imposition of rule onto dispossessed natives in quite the way that characterised other regions. In some senses the relationship of this ex-colony (which has made economic, in capitalist/new colonial terms, good) to Britain as coloniser has changed definitively in ways which no longer tally with earlier delineations of the coloniser/colonised dichotomy. While not challenging O'Brien's assertion that "the *dissolution* of imperialist forces ... also represent the conditions for the *consolidation* of the new forms of domination represented by global capitalism" (1998: 176), it does challenge earlier constructions of unassailable, eurocentric hegemonies and subjugations. The young Singaporean poet, Grace Chia, perceives a very different power relationship to an older binary of coloniser as powerful and colonised as victim. The condescension inherent in such a simplistic duality is reversed, the text is tinged with affection for the ex-imperial power which has become a shadow of its former self. Chia writes a poem to Mother B (Britain), which says of her visit there:

I think I shall not impose myself too long.
You're an island yourself, like my Ma;
keep kicking, Mother B,
that's the best way an island won't sink –
if you had jaws and could bite,
you would be a shark, but I guess
you're past your prime; (1998: 6).

The reversal implicit in /I think I shall not impose myself too long/, makes the choice hers, gives control to her. These are images of lost power, contained within and by the English 3rd conditional - if, could - but the reality is don't and can't. /if you had jaws and could bite/ demotes the aggressive and aggrandising shark to the pitiable status of an ineffectual guppy. In this poem the hated colonial becomes the colonized:

⁸ In a far-reaching study of imperialism Micheal Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) argue that a new form of Empire still exists. Different from earlier eras, this is linked to American constructions of international relationships and to the power of multi or transnational corporations.

When have you become Gulliver,
colonized by tiny people with greed and pins
who make dessert out of you?
Mother B, you're an open pie
for the American franchises, Turkish kebabs, Italian pizzas,
Chinese duck rice, Greek pitas
and Indian curries (1998: 7).

The twist here of course is not that the era of great imperial conquest had no impact but that the power base has shifted. Pity for the former overlord/mother enters the picture, the neocolonial invading the once unassailable (/you would be a shark/) imperial centre. The construction of the new colonisers is an interesting one implying as it does an invidious multiculturalism, but hinting at the agency of the /American franchises/. It is a hint only, partially interrogating the insidious neocolonial enterprise such franchises might embody. Stuart Hall argues that such 'multiculturalism' wants "to recognize and absorb those differences within the larger overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world" (cited in O'Brien 1998:168). The subtly menacing nature of this, O'Brien concludes, rests in the emphasis that remains on the British as the erstwhile coloniser in the theoretical discourse thus eliding the economic incursions of the U.S. Difference then becomes, in this brave new world, the new exotica. As Hall puts it: "You take it in as you go by, all in one, living with difference, wondering at pluralism, this concentrated corporate, over-corporate, over-integrated, over-concentrated, and condensed form of economic power which lives culturally through difference and which is constantly teasing itself with the pleasures of the transgressive Other" (in O'Brien 1998:169). The sexual titillation of "constantly teasing *itself*" (the emphasis is mine), suggests a self-love that is almost wholly unengaged with the Other except as a transgressive, and therefore seductive, object. The need for attractive packaging, allows for "superficial adaptations to local conditions" (O'Brien 1998:169) but retains an unalterable consumerist focus, allowing for the incorporation of the literary product into the neocolonial portfolio with little or no challenge instigated; the exotic as transgressive but attractive, an object for the safe voyeur to consume and then move on from. Graham Huggan has defined exoticism as "a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* – one that renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness", one that creates a binary between self as known and knowable and other as "immanent

mystery” (2001:13). Like Seth in her discussion of self/other, Huggan emphasizes that the “exoticist production of otherness is dialectical and contingent”, it may in different times and places serve “conflicting ideological interests” (2001:13). This position argues against the monolith of a western construction of its other while acknowledging that such a construction may have a contingent dominance in a particular time and place.

Susan Hawthorne (1989), more than a decade ago, expressed concerns at the voyeurism possible in engagement with an exoticised Other. Such a response can be incorporated into the mythologising purview of a new imperialism or simply become a patronising engagement with the different. Susan Bordo argues, citing de Beauvoir, that “within the social world, there were those who occupy the unmarked position ‘essential’, the universal, the human, and those who are defined, reduced, and marked by their (sexual, racial, religious) difference” (1997:194). The tendency has been to dissect the Other from a point of objectivity and superiority, from a position of the normal in opposition to the un/abnormal or, as Hall has construed it, to incorporate this into a frisson of almost sexual tension, a delicate partaking of the deliciously (decadent) different. This tension becomes most problematic for me in chapter four of this thesis. It is in this chapter that I discuss Catherine Lim’s construction of the footbound grandmother (from *The Teardrop Story Woman*, 1998). It is in this context that the uneasiness/inappropriateness of response becomes most visible for me. Jane Haggis & Susanne Schech in a discussion of white feminist practice have stated that “Western feminists often focus on ‘abject cultural practices’ such as female circumcision or bride burning when trying to get close to the other woman’s pain and her cultural difference” (2000: 394). Aileen Moreton-Robinson has pointed out “even in feminist spaces where difference is accepted as part of political practice and theory, ‘race’ belongs to the ‘other’” (cited in Haggis & Schech 2000: 389). This Othering of course implies a norm against which an/other can be created. The norm over time has been white and male. In Chapter Five I will look again more intensively at the way in which the (very contested) norm of ‘white’ informs the writing being analysed. Each of the novels and each of the thesis chapters looks in detail at the way in which the category ‘woman’ is constructed by or interpellated into the text.

Julie Marcus in the early nineties argued that the “central questions of difference which occupy so much scholarly and political space cannot be resolved outside that of gender” and that orientalist stereotypes, particularly of women, inform “dominating, international understandings of the nature of the world”⁹ (1992: ix). Marcus contends that while it is clear that all “knowledge is uncertain, unstable, constructed and imposed through relations of power” this does not mean that we abandon the attempt at connection and what she calls a “more adequate approximation” (1992: vii). Grewal and Kaplan (1994: 3) in their introduction to the aptly titled *Scattered Hegemonies*, argue however that “some feminist practices” in terms of this type of analysis have used “colonial discourse critiques in order to equate the 'colonised' with 'woman' creating essentialist and monolithic categories that suppress issues of diversity, conflict, and multiplicity within categories”. And McClintock again has something crisp to add, arguing that the continuing plight of women “cannot be laid only at the door of colonialism, or footnoted and forgotten as a passing 'neo-colonial' dilemma”.

The continuing weight of male economic self-interest and the varying undertows of patriarchal Christianity, Confucianism and Islamic fundamentalism continue to legitimize women's barred access to the corridors of political and economic power, their persistent educational disadvantage, the bad infinity of the domestic double day, unequal child care, gendered malnutrition, sexual violence, genital mutilation and domestic battery (McClintock, 1992:92).

McClintock’s emphasis is on the multiplicity of responsibility, and the multiplication of abuse that cannot be elided. In her turn, Sara Suleri expresses concern at a too simplistic construction of one of the ‘evils’ McClintock has noted, that of Islamic Fundamentalism. She argues (in an eerie echo of later protests a decade later): “It is not the terrors of Islam that have unleashed the Hudood Ordinances on Pakistan, but more probably the United States government’s economic and ideological support of a military regime during that bloody but eminently forgotten decade marked by the ‘liberation’ of Afghanistan” (1992: 766). Suleri is more in agreement with McClintock

⁹ Marcus situates her discussion of this within the context of the Iraq war (1991). Here she argues “the familiar tropes of orientalism were replayed in each day's press... as the people and policies of Iraq appeared in the American media reporting as effeminised, 'black' and irrational, the essential gendered nature of these categories was laid bare” (1992: ix). The return of this discourse (slightly modified in that we all now must be tolerant of moderate Muslims) seems to have occurred in reports associated with the ‘war on terror’. The 2001 editorial in *Hecate* reiterated objection to the American propaganda that exploits a new formulation of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (see Chapter 4 below).

when she states that the “coupling of *postcolonial* with *woman*, however, almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for ‘the good’” (1992:758). Despite their differences, these critics make it clear that homogenized categories of ‘woman’, ‘oppression’ and the ‘colonial’ itself have become increasingly unworkable.

In the texts which provide the focus of this thesis, particularly in *The Bondmaid*, *The Teardrop Story Woman* and *Among The White Moonfaces* McClintock’s concern with the “weight of male economic self-interest” and the undertow of patriarchal Confucianism is unerringly reflected. In *The Teardrop Story Woman*, Catherine Lim examines the link between ‘good’ and ‘woman’ in a deeply patriarchal society. The writing of both Catherine Lim and Shirley Geok-lin Lim re/presents different yet not incompatible understandings of the impacts of patriarchies, the undertows of Confucian fundamentalisms. Catherine Lim explores sexual violence, mutilation (though not genital) and, implicitly, the weight of State Fatherhood; Shirley Geok-lin Lim examines the complex interactions of gender and race in the equally complex weave of privileged disadvantage that informs her understanding of her life’s experience (both in Malaysia and America). Beth Yahp in *The Crocodile Fury* re/defines ‘the’ stereotype of “Asian Woman” which too often informs western critique (see Chapter 2 below). And in doing so displaces the male/white, female/ coloured binary with a much more complex reading of colonial (and as Ahmad emphasised) not-colonial relationships and influences.

McClintock’s somewhat broad list of the oppression of women in itself, however, requires greater specificity and Chandra Mohanty’s powerful essay on western representations of ‘third world women’ as solely victims provides a timely warning. She argues against the uniformity of “ ‘women’ as a group, as a stable category of analysis” because this “assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalised notion of their subordination” (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991: 64).

Spivak, in a critique alluded to earlier, of western feminist responses to literatures beyond their literal and hegemonic borders, has argued that “a basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo- America establishes the high feminist norm. It is supported and operated by an information

retrieval approach to 'Third World' literature which employs a deliberately 'non-theoretical' methodology with self-conscious rectitude"(1985: 246). Such rectitude fails to engage the text as text and while thus avoiding the excesses of Leavisite reification (see During 1984) also elides the "jouissance" (Hay in Bennett and Miller 1988) of active involvement in, deconstruction of and even validation of the imaginative production.

It is argued here then that the theorising of the orientalist, postcolonial and of a particular (and consistently more challenged) feminist position can serve to trivialise the textual products with which they seek to engage. This tendency to homogeneity or minimalisation in the West can lead to the formation of another type of colonising imperialism which then impacts on the ability of those who are interested to critique and interact with artistic constructs coming from the 'Orient'. Trihn Minh Ha has argued that the west is willing to tolerate, even to appropriate the voice of the Other, stating "we [the dominant society] no longer want to erase your difference, we demand on the contrary, that you remember and assert it, at least to a certain extent"(1989: 30). This is a much earlier expression of O'Brien's later critique of the capitalist west's willing incorporation of an attractively packaged other. The assertion of difference is encouraged but controlled, limited often, not by challenge or repression but by slight, dismissal or appropriation.

B.K Choon, in a text which examines the way imagining and creativity are structured in Singapore, asks that the world looks more deeply at "the imaginative energies deployed, invested and used in creating the notion of Singapore", and at the way in which the essays in his text implicate and make "problematic the usual gesture of dismissal by which most observers tend to skim over Singapore culture"(1992:5). This usual "gesture of dismissal" has often been exacerbated when one comes to examine the work of women writing in the region (this refers to both Singapore and Malaysia). Kirpal Singh in a discussion of the early work of Catherine Lim has argued "it seems to me that she has the markings of a really terrific writer. So far Catherine has dealt with 'little' ironies ... But where are the 'big' ironies?" (1993/4:23). It would seem that Singh's definition of large ironies are interlinked with the 'big' issues of national scale. The criteria by which such judgments of significance come to be made are usually the product of various dominant patriarchal and/or imperialist/elitist groups. Liu (1994:18)

argues that it is necessary to question "the practice of nation-oriented and male-centered literary criticism". Lim (1978, 1989) admittedly employs the ironic in playful and less than reverential subject treatment yet occasionally her irony develops a savage undertone and includes exploration of disturbingly confronting topics such as the blindness of an educational bureaucracy in dealing with the issue of patriarchal physical and emotional abuse and subsequent youth suicide (1978); neither a 'significant' male nor national topic as such. The similarities between Singh's comments here and a much more recent response to Lim's latest novel (*Following the Wrong God Home*, 2001) are worthy of note. In review this comment appeared in *The Weekend Australian*:

It is a minor tragedy that Australians do not know names such as K.S Maniam, Malaysia's finest novelist whose works of immeasurable power lay bare traces of race and identity; or Fransisco Sionil Jose, the grand man of Philippine letters...

Australians are somewhat more likely however, to know of Catherine Lim, Singapore's foremost novelist. Lim, unlike Maniam or Jose, has the advantage of being an ethnic Chinese, more than that a Chinese woman. Further Singapore provides her an at least semi-Western context. Just as Western audiences recognise that India and Indian themes might be interesting, so there is a place for Chinese women writing of love, suffering, Chinese gods, mother-daughter relations and the infinite entanglements of the all-powerful Chinese family.

It is no disrespect to Lim to say her work bears a cousinly relationship to that of Amy Tan – who, as a Chinese-American, has become something like the chief popular interpreter of Chinese culture to American audiences. (Sheridan, 2001:12-13)

The reviewer (Greg Sheridan) goes on to say that he likes Lim's work because "Lim is above all a story teller". I have included the rather long quote in full because it reflects issues that were clearly important to the much broader discussion I have undertaken in this thesis and to several of the underlying theoretical concerns that have framed that discussion. The contrast the reviewer makes between the work of Maniam, Jose and that of Lim, underpins an implied opposition. Maniam and Jose create works of power, Maniam laying "bare traces of race and identity", Jose undertaking a large historical project as the "grand man of Philippine letters" and neither of these statements do I wish to challenge, but Lim's work somehow becomes diminished in a dialectical slight of hand here. Lim's work is known and valued because she is an "ethnic Chinese" and more than that an ethnic Chinese "woman". Her work deals with (suitably semi-westernised) stories of "love, suffering, Chinese gods, mother-daughter relations and

the infinite entanglements of the all-powerful Chinese family". The critique's tone reminds me of Singh's prior lamentation that Lim does not deal with big issues. Sheridan acknowledges that Lim is "above all a story teller", even that this, her latest book contains stringent political comment, yet it seems that somewhere implied there is a *but* - while this is all well and good it is a pity that readers don't take more seriously the serious *male* writers of the region. It is indeed a pity, but then so is the taint of condescension which still seems to inform much of the comment that accrues to the "ethnic" and "Chinese" and "women" writers – permeated by a sense of the writing as postcolonial, in the nuance given by Ahmad of 'non-white', 'not Europe', without the sardonic distance created by the censure of this position that Ahmad implies. Perhaps this is an unconscious example of Dirlik's caution against the commodification of the local where it becomes muddled by a proliferation of identifying adjectives ('ethnic' [Chinese] 'women's' writing). This may occur too when the writers are made representative of their simplified singular ethnicities as in the unease that inhabits Shirley Geok-lin Lim's 'representative' hyphenated Asian-American 'identity'. In a scathing examination of the position of Asian-Australian writing, Tsien-Ling Khoo states of Beth Yahp that "Since winning the New South Wales State Literary Award for *The Crocodile Fury* Beth Yahp has been consistently referred to as Australia's answer to Amy Tan ..." (1998: 3). Khoo goes on to say "Yahp was accidentally called 'Amy' by an unknown reporter. Such a mistake echoes the stereotypical 'they all look alike' attitude that renders Asian people a supposed mass of unknowables" (1998:3). Yahp herself has commented on the individual invisibility that comes with migration, where she felt subsumed by the stereotype of an undifferentiated 'Asian' (see Chapter 2 below). Susan Bordo has extended the critique of Edward Said's work, saying that for Said (and I think implied, other male critics in the area) "One does gender or one engages in criticism of broad significance" (1997:193). Bordo argues that the Other – marked by gender and or race and or religious difference – may be acknowledged for their accomplishments which will often "be appreciated, but always in their special and peripheral place, the place of their difference" (1997: 194).

In the hierarchy of the critical, the position of these writers as women together with the historical impacts of both patriarchy and the idealisation of Asian women, may bring us back a full circle back to a minimalising western stereotype. Julie Stephens, in a review of Broinowski's *The Yellow Lady*, discusses the portrayal of 'Asian' women "as doll-like

and quaint, puppets and painted butterflies, alluring but weak, and always available to be dominated" (1992:17). Yahp's construction of the character of the grandmother is a particular example of challenge to these stereotypes. Such unimaginative type-casting is contested in the writing examined here which reflects a multiplicity of women's voices, of different cadences, strengths, and positionings which comprise multiple subjectivities (often in the context of the much maligned 'ordinary' of experience).

Clearly the issues raised by the analysis of such writing are complex and multivalent. The resonances of the colonial and the patriarchal are layered and interwoven, creating complex webs of contestation, opposition and even acquiescence which challenge the superficial and the homogenising in theory. The idea of patriarchy is itself an "enormously problematic term among theorists" (Palmer, 1989:68). The equation of patriarchy with male dominance can provide "a simplistic and inexact impression of women's relations with men and with one another" (Palmer 1989:68). Geraldine Moane explores the complexity of the concept in her book *Gender and Colonialism* arguing that a variety of counter-arguments have challenged the "monolithic concept of patriarchy as involving the domination of all women by all men" (1999: 9). However in linking this to colonialism Moane reiterates the connection between Simone de Beauvoir and Franz Fanon who "both invoke the concept of the 'other', which has become a key concept in writings on colonialism, to describe how characteristics of men, or the colonizers, become the norm" (1999: 27), and where the imperialism of both is, by this process of normalisation, itself often naturalized (as has been intimated above). The tension between the traces of colonial patriarchy and of a form of Chinese not-western patriarchy (I continue to use the term even while acknowledging that it is contested) inhabits the four central texts discussed in the thesis. Each writer explores this very differently and there are certainly instances where Ahmad's dismissal of the primacy of the colonial to the experience narrated is clearly evident. It is in the reading of the texts together, though, that the greatest insights come. This reading together was always a feature of the Leavisite approach to English literature which was so instrumental in elevating the study of what became, in this paradigm, canonical texts. While the text was read for and within itself, it was also and always placed in hierarchies with other texts and read against them. While I wish to resist the reinstitution of simply a different canon, the reading of the four texts in connection (rather than opposition) with each other has made the experience of reading them far

richer. Shirley Geok-lin Lim criticises theory that leaves out place and culture in its construction of an intertext¹⁰. In a distancing from what she calls 'colorless' feminism she questions a "feminist canon of foremothers that centralizes Anglo-American writers such as Virginia Wolfe and Gertrude Stein and constructs a theory out of their privileged white upper-middle-class oriented lives"(1994: 41). This, she declares, can speak only at the periphery of her concerns. Chidi Okonkwo asserts: "Intertextuality transforms the novel into an extended metaphor for a polyphonic world with which it exists in whorls of relationships, for it participates in this world as an argument within a larger argument at the same time as it constitutes a space within which the world is integrated through imagery, literary allusions and echoes" (1999: 106). This polyphony, as implied in Geok-lin Lim's example, needs to be other than attached to the referent of a canon of work from the west.

The chapters of the thesis are informed by different theories either as challenge or as illumination. The writers themselves are very different and the shape they give to their texts, the way they read and construct the experience of that textual world reflects diversity rather than commonality, certainly there is little homogeneity. *The Crocodile Fury* creates a 'powerful' woman in the figure of the grandmother (though my reading is disputed by others, see Chapter 2 below). In this text the temporal and corporeal are subject to disruption at any given point in the non-linear 'narrative'. Catherine Lim's two central texts are more traditionally novelistic in structure, fitting into seemingly familiar modernist European genres of romance, even of melodrama. Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moonfaces* is autobiography, a construct of the self, the narrative structured as realist and chronologically linear. Yet each text challenges neat categorisation, all create textures and cadences from which the others can be read with greater depth, with the echoes and sudden insights that we, and here I characterise my audience as possibly, of like experience to myself – relatively middle-classish and waspish, so often normalise our interpretation of the literature we peruse from within the safety of our own cultural canon.

Chapter Two focuses on Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury* (1993). Yahp inscribes a recognizably postmodern space, full of narrative circles in which the novel fragments

¹⁰ I am basing this on a rather simple definition of 'intertextuality'. Graham Allen (2000: 1) speaks of meaning as "something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates" but he warns that the term, in contemporary theory, is not transparent.

and displaces time-lines. This could be a postmodern take on a 'postcolonial theme' or a version of the traditional talk story, a new cosmopolitan narrative or a reconnection to the rhythms of an older, oral tradition. For me it is both. *The Crocodile Fury* is a story of the arcane, the supernatural (if we accept a western definition of what is natural¹¹), it deals in both the magical and the mundane. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, exemplar theorists of the postcolonial ten or more years ago, have stated: "The formal technique of magic-realism with its characteristic mixing of the fantastic and the realist has been singled out by many critics as one point of conjuncture of post-modernism and post-colonialism" (1989:165). Spindler, in a typology of magic realism has argued that it (the magical real) is a way of writing that disrupts time and space, and in the gap created between the certain and the uncertain, a new reading of the reified social can be constructed. For Spindler the transformation of the "common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal" (1993:4), allows for a historical realignment with the (colonised) community whose spiritual knowledge has been rejected/denigrated by colonial powers; a 'magical' discourse as counter to the rationalist paradigms brought by the colonisers. The chapter examines the construction of this "formal [postcolonial] technique" and it is in this juncture of the postmodern¹², the postcolonial and the resistant, that Bhabha's concept of ambivalence will also be explored.

Bhabha's ambivalence is situated at an intersection between the colonial and its 'other'. In this intersection lies disruption of certainties – so the master (coloniser) is mimicked (by the colonized) and in the mimicry sees *himself* in ways which skew 'normality'. The 'other' alters, creates alterity in the act of mimicry, and so generates an ambivalence within/around what is 'natural' for the dominant group. Further, this skewing of perceptions allows space for a counter discourse that resists subjugation. In Spindler's typology, the category magical realism becomes a resistant discourse, reasserting the 'natives' nonmaterial worldview against the naturalized, rationalist and materialist worldview of the colonial, metropolitan power. For me, the seemingly simple binary of this, however, eschews the complexity of the so-called 'native'

¹¹ Suzanne Fraser (2001: 117) in a very different discussion about the terms - 'natural' and 'body' argues that nature is seen as a "closed category, the contents of which are self-evident and remain stable over time". This closed category has, I will argue, predominantly Eurocentric antecedents which seem to require scrutiny (see also Chapter 3).

¹² Arif Dirlik (2001: 16) in discussing the historiography of China, makes the observation that scholarly techniques which move across disciplinary boundaries are not new in China this aspect of the postmodern is a common feature "of intellectual life in China".

response and this forms the basis of much of the argument which informs my second chapter. Lawrence Phillips is critical of Bhabha's idea that the in-betweenness created in ambivalence is "auto-resistive" (1998:7).

Monika Fludernik in an essay that examines the formation of stereotypes looks at Bhabha's theorisation of ambivalence and in an endnote argues that "Bhabha's commitment to never defining his terminology in a consistent manner – no doubt a deliberate poststructuralist ploy- makes [it] somewhat frustrating to pin down in precise terms". She goes on to give a definition of ambivalence from Freudian theory, where "it denotes a simultaneous presence of contradictory affects (love and hate, trust and distrust) towards the object of desire" (1999:58). This difficulty of definition was evident when I tried to distil the way in which Bhabha's theory might help elucidate (for me) Yahp's text.

Chapters Three and Four focus on two of Catherine Lim's novels, *The Bondmaid* and *The Teardrop Story Woman*. In Chapter Three in particular, the idea of the storyteller, the issues of voice, of silences and boundaries are central. Spivak's question - whether we can hear the voice of the subaltern - is not one Lim has actually asked, believing, it seems in her re-telling of the story of *The Bondmaid* that one can recreate, if only in the imagination, such a voice. Has this always been part of the function of the storyteller herself, to delve into experiences not recorded in his/stories, to keep imaginatively alive the echoes of other spaces, other memories? I don't think this can be answered; the mediation through the writer's social and psychic vision inevitably alters the voice, and, the question of who listens or who can hear, remains. For Spivak (1999), of course the unvoiced, unspeaking subaltern was that voice excluded or elided from the forums of the powerful. The most accessible summary I have seen of her complex argument is that she "questions whether or not the possibility exists for the recovery of subaltern voice that is not an essentialist fiction" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995: 8). Controversy has followed Spivak's early formulation of the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Ming-yan Lai provides one of the many critiques challenging what is seen as Spivak's pretension in 'speaking for' the silenced. Lai refers to a story by the Taiwanese writer, Huang Chunming, who constructs the figure of a deaf-mute who cannot be understood by those who come from outside and attempt to interpret her experience. Lai claims Chunming's narrative "marks the limits of the intellectual's

knowledge and ability to represent the female subaltern in resistance against imperial [and patriarchal] power through the figure of the deaf-mute” (1998: 48). Chunming’s story, Lai asserts, “draws attention to the irreducible difference between the intellectual’s failure to hear and the subaltern’s ability to speak” (1998: 48). Given Spivak’s later (1999) mournful conclusion that the subaltern could not be heard rather than could not speak, the point of contention in the two positions seems less absolute.

Catherine Lim’s emphasis on the not-colonial aspects of experience in *The Bondmaid* has, in fact, led George Landow to question whether the novel can be called postcolonial. He argues that in emphasizing the flaws of Chinese culture, a text like this may serve to “undermine the position of those who argue for more connections to” the traditional (2000:1). At the same time he claims that the “novel combines the techniques of Victorian social and psychological realism – a very Western, and in that sense *colonial*, form” therefore producing a “work that is unintendedly postcolonial” (2000:1). The presumptions underlying this analysis, in terms of the influences that may have impacted on Lim’s construction of both of her texts, will be examined in detail.

Indeed in the angry scatology of *The Bondmaid*, and in the construction of figures within her texts who inhabit a liminal space, Catherine Lim seems to reflect French feminist, Julia Kristeva’s discussion of the link between the construction of woman and of the abject in social terms. Kristeva, as Barbara Creed (1993) has also noted, sees abjection as disturbing the neatness of “identity, system, order” (1982: 4). Abjection, is the unnameable exceeding the contained world of the civilised with its hierarchy of “borders, position, rules”, and is in some signifying systems associated with the female in its exceeding of the boundaries of the feminine and the good woman. Women, after all, breach bodily borders with their menstruation and lactation in ways which represent challenge in societies where the norm of the male body dominates, where the “clean and proper body” Kristeva (1982: 71) has described, requires control and a manipulation of the female through the social construction of the feminine. Kristeva’s theory of the abject seems to ‘fit’ here but should be qualified by Rajyashree Pandey’s discussion of horror in Japanese *manga* (a type of comic) where Pandey introduces an interesting qualification to a simplistic correlation between Kristeva’s European theory and, in this

case, these Japanese texts. He argues that "the normative discourse that brings horror to a closure in the Western horror genre rests upon very different religious and cultural assumptions to those found in Japanese manga" (2000: 20). Pandey, in this context, questions the absolutes of Kristeva's borders, seeing for instance, the possibility of greater fluidity "between human and beast". This he links to the interpenetration between good and evil, life and death made possible by the "radical non duality" (2000: 25) of the Tendai school of Buddhism. This different construction of horror may also provide some insight into the discussion, which occurs in Chapter Two, of the possibly eurocentric binary opposition between magical (or *supernatural*) and real.

Linked to the idea of female abjection, particularly in *The Bondmaid*, is the issue of the impact on women of an overarching and destructive patriarchal system. The way Catherine Lim explores this, the eurocentric/westernised influences or *otherwise* (in terms of Chinese influences) which seem part of her textual production, will also be explored. Indeed Isgani Cruz (1994) argues that the exaggerated emphasis on eurocentric theory ignores the significant contributions available in Chinese critiques and approaches. And it became evident through this study that purely eurocentric critique often seemed inadequate. Hong Liu in a discussion of Asian Studies has argued that it is important to take account of Sino-Southeast Asian interactions and argues "Southeast Asian traditions took shape in active interaction with dominant external models"(2001: 261) particularly Chinese. While acknowledging Aihwa Ong's sense that "in diaspora, older racial images have also been dusted off to ornament contemporary forms of political economy in Southeast Asia" (Olivia Khoo 2001: 72) and that in this diasporic movement China no longer "assumes epistemological and ontological significance in what constitutes Chineseness" (Khoo 2001: 72), the insight that may be possible from the kind of approach advocated by Cruz and Liu (emphasizing the influence of Chinese ideas) offers a useful alternative to eurocentric perspectives.

In *The Teardrop Story Woman*, Lim continues her angry denunciation of patriarchy. She examines the construct of the 'good' woman more fully. The way in which the body of the good woman is created (discursively and materially) is examined in the contrasts and similarities between the characters of the Second grandmother and her beautiful granddaughter. The discursive strategies through which ideas of beauty and sexuality

are built within social paradigms seem to call on feminist theories of the body (cf. Grosz: 1995) but also to require a reconsideration of a Chinese construction of that corporeality (Vento, 1998).

In Chapter Five Shirley Geok-lin Lim's autobiographical fiction *Among the White Moonfaces*, in part examines the language choices the writer has made. Another poet of the region, Wong (1993:133) bitterly describes the "naked and orphaned psyche" of the writer who chooses to write in English in a region where the national and patriotic is inextricably linked to the 'native' (in this case Bahasa Malay) language. In theorising the postcolonial, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin in 1989 discussed the way in which choosing the language of the coloniser could lead to a subversion and revision of that language which refracts the experience of the colonised in unique and challenging ways. The imposition/chosen use of language other than the (m)other tongue may, Bhabha (1994) has argued, create a site of contestation through which ("non-white, not-Europe") writers seek to explore and creatively reconstruct a historical, national and personal identity. The hybridisation which results can allow for an explosive energising of discursive practice. Yet the idea of the hybrid (as has already been touched on) impacts deeply on particularly Shirley Geok-lin Lim's representation of her experience. Bhabha (1994) argues that implicit in the idea of the hybrid is the sense that those who have been culturally displaced will find new ways of looking at, interpreting and constructing cultural experience. Yet such 'hybridity' may also be seen to imply a lack of the purity associated with the nostalgised precolonial 'native' or (worse politically) a complicity with the old imperialist regime. Geok-lin Lim's anguished re/creation of her experience as a Malaysian who also is not one, raises issues of a diasporic experience that while complicated by the added layer of British colonialism, is also impacted on by her lack of a highly contested 'native' status (see Chapter 5 below).

Robert Phillipson (1990) has argued that there is an ongoing imperialist potential in embracing the language of the colonisers, stating that English itself is a neocolonial tool, which acts as a gatekeeping mechanism for the new imperialists. In such an argument, the subversive propensities of the new Englishes are seen to be the subject of a benign patronisation, which deflects the 'natives' from challenging the inherent

linguicism¹³ of the basically homogenising tendency in English language usage. Pidgeonised English might be tolerated in powerful forums but it is rarely respected; it is for 'home' or the semi-private site, a cute and impotent remnant of less civilised antecedents. "What to do, lah. Cannot also can, Aiyo!"¹⁴ carries the rhythms of the spoken language and its distinctiveness, at a personal level it resists subjugation to rhythms that are foreign, skewing the language into something new and dynamic. Yet it is of interest to note that in all of the major texts studied, there is minimal reference to or use of a particularly distinct English sub/version. It is only in Catherine Lim's savagely poignant story of 'The Teacher' that the implications of the use of non-standard English are explored and this is not, here, a cause for celebration (see Ch. 6).

The triumphalism which seems to imbue Bhabha's argument that hybridity (or diasporic experience) almost inevitably produces an energy, an imaginative and creative productiveness, has also been questioned by Chow. She argues that this may in fact simply reflect an "old functionalist notion of what a dominant culture permits in the interest of maintaining its own equilibrium" (1993:35). This echoes Trinh's earlier concerns about the permitted in the postcolonial, but does not explore the concerns of artists whose choice of the colonial language is in fact despised or ignored by the new postcolonial hegemony, 'forcing' some into exile, a position which Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1994) argues is hers. In *Among the White Moonfaces*, she examines the sense of unease of the exilic in postcolonial texts but cannot align herself with the now dominant Malaysian 'indigenous' group which has dis/replaced the ambivalently viewed colonial regime. This complicated relationship with both the colonial and the governing cultural group means that hybridity is multilayered and contested.

Lyn Pan, in her introduction to the book *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, argues that she is "one of the 30 million people whose historical experience ... [is] part of the Chinese diaspora" (1991:ix). The diasporic Chinese experience, in the context of both Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and America, of the three writers is an experience of migration

¹³ Linguicism is the 'ism' of language subjugation and prejudice. It points to the inherent imperialism in the imposition of a coloniser's language on various social, ethnic or national groups. It is similar to racism, ageism etc.

¹⁴ This example was given to me by a Singaporean teacher with whom I worked. He was demonstrating a response which indicated that the person involved did not have time to do something asked of him, however the person asking was of high enough status that it was imperative he try to do it - cannot also can.

and of exilic consciousness that changes and creates ambivalences within the 'postcolonial' experiences. Responses to such texts often emphasise the less exotic aspects of such exploration and place it more within the mundane and dismissible 'migrant' which Gunew (1991b) describes with such poignancy. Yet, Grewal and Kaplan state: "Postcolonial diasporas also clearly problematize the centre-periphery model since they reflect the transnational circulation of population" (1994:16), and within these complex movements of populations lie complex and often contradictory responses to historical and personal time and space.

Finally Chapter 6 examines the creation of the idea of the Other through both the 'devices' of the Arcane and the Ordinary written into the texts. There has already been some discussion of the Arcane (the uncanny interpellated into the colonial space to disrupt it) in the discussion of magic realism. The Ordinary, in Chapter 6 is linked to a discussion of the everyday. Stephen Muecke states that at one level:

The idea of the everyday is ... dead in the sense that 'modernism' and 'critique' are no longer steady enough to reflect a pure domain of the everyday. What can continue, however, is the original impulse - the search in unlikely places for things that really matter (1998:38).

Inherent in much of the writing of the 'ordinary' in the texts examined in this thesis is the sense, I think, of that "original impulse" to "search in unlikely places for things that really matter". Outside of the categories of 'modernism' and 'critique', even outside of the category 'postcolonial', there continues the search for what is really important. John Frow argues that the everyday or ordinary is often defined as a negative, "it is understood as whatever is not philosophy or scientific rationality, not History in the sense of the grand narrative, not the sacred, not the institutional, not formal or official or mass-mediated knowledge, not the strange or the exotic or the uncanny or the unfamiliar" (Frow, 1998: 58). Frow, of course, goes on to acknowledge that the everyday entwines history and the sacred, but is neither of these. The tendency to underplay the significance of the ordinary (rather than the real) has been one aspect of the denigration of both the 'native's' and women's writing. Significance is linked to "the formal or official" or to "the strange or the exotic" not to the minute detail of the familiar and the personal. When either of these occurs in writing there has been a

tendency to lament the lack of engagement with “big ironies”, ‘important’ philosophy and capital H, histories.

It becomes clear, even from so brief an overview, that no single theoretical position can describe the elusive, multi-faceted and often subtly challenging texts such writers create. It is in the engagement between theory and text that the possibility of greater understanding lays. A cautionary Spivak has said that the feminism (which she links to the postcolonial) “we inhabit has something like a relationship with the tradition of the cultural dominant, even when adversarial” (1999: xi) but, she argues, it is still important to continue to engage in the dialogue. What follows is an attempt at such an engagement.

Chapter 2 Immediate Namings

Probably everyone would agree that an Englishman would be right in considering his way of looking at the world and his life better than that of the Maori or the Hottentot, and no-one would object in the abstract to England doing her best to impose her better and higher views on these savages ... Can there be any doubt that the Whiteman must, and will impose his superior civilisation on the coloured races. (Earl Grey, 1889 quoted in Skutnabb-Kangas, 1983: 340)

The highest degree of culture known to the Hindoo or Chinese civilization, approaches not the possessor one step nearer to the ideas and views of the European. (Henry Hotz, 1856, quoted in Young 1995: 48)

These two quotations are historically situated within the discourse of the colonial. The sheer arrogance of Grey's speech supplemented by the gentler reasoning of Hotz, contains the blueprint for the symbolic and epistemic violences that came to be imposed on the colonies of the time, composed as these were of the "Hindoo or Chinese", or any of the "coloured races" caught up within the civilizing agenda of European (or here essentially English) entrepreneurial expansion. To enforce "better and higher views" becomes the moral obligation of the only (English) epistemology. To help them, the savages, accept the Englishman's "way of looking at the world" becomes a symbolic and literal priority. The erasure of woman, the assumptions of universality - "everyone would agree" although this is qualified slightly by probably - the certainties of a superior civilisation, are blatant precursors to "the ways of seeing" which may still infuse the west's response to its perceived other.¹⁵ In contrast, Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury* (1993) is a text written long after the conceit of Grey and the speculation of Hotz which offers both recognition of how such a world view intrudes into the space of her own history and a subtly nuanced interrogation, at times rejection, of the primacy of that colonial-discursive imposition.

The Crocodile Fury, unlike Grey's invasive, uncritical certainties, is inscribed in ambivalence always questioning what is savage and what is not, whose way of seeing should be valorised. In this text uncertainty characterises the reading position - whether

¹⁵ Chris Weedon would dispute the modifier 'may', stating: "many assumptions about whiteness and colonized Others prevalent in the era of empire persist into the present and surface repeatedly in both individual and institutional racist practice" (1999: 158)

the magical is real or the real magical; whether the exotic is here and 'us' or there and 'other'; if beings are male or female or both; who is white, who is not; who is victim; who is human. The punctuation of question mark and inverted comma is implied throughout the text. According to Homi Bhabha, ambivalence "is a moment when the impossibility of naming the difference of colonial culture alienates, in its very form of articulation, the colonial cultural ideals of progress, piety, rationality and order" (1994:129). Bhabha locates this ambivalence at the point where it displaces the transparency of the colonial text, disrupting, as Ania Loomba points out, the authority of "colonial discourses to produce stable and fixed identities" (1998:105). Bhabha links this to the idea of splitting where "two contradictory and independent attitudes inhabit the *same place*" (1994:132). His emphasis is on the ambiguity created in the colonial text at the "interstices of a double inscription" (1985:150) where the "colonialist project of English civility" is troubled by the mimicry of the colonial subject which repeats but repeats differently, even slyly, the "original and authoritative" civility (1985:150). Bhabha therefore places the colonial moment at the centre of the enunciatory ambivalence which discursively occurs. The world view of a Grey in such a context becomes a site of implicit contestation, mimicked but not perfectly reproduced by the other, allowing for unquestioned paradigms to become dislocated, and potentially discredited. Uncertainty as it occurs in *The Crocodile Fury*, however, is not always played out against the centrality of the colonial nor is colonial hegemony the exclusive authority whose transparency is clouded by the intrusion of a discomforting other. The colonial becomes only one element, rather than being the core of the "enunciatory ambivalence". In this novel the colonial is not the exclusive synonym for authority, however split, mimicked or alienated. Given this, though, I will argue that, as the narrative develops, it does indeed challenge the western "cultural values of progress, piety, rationality and order", and the tension created by attempting to read from a position in the west *against* an invasive western hegemony will become apparent.

Yahp's novel disrupts the binary emphasis of Bhabha's analysis of colonial/other and focuses, in an almost oxymoronic shift, on the certainty of other ways of seeing, of perceptions of reality which avoid or even pity the primacy of the empirical and the rational as it has been constructed in the west. The emphasis in *The Crocodile Fury* is away from the centrality of the coloniser toward the autonomy of its so-called Other and

this is most usefully interrogated through the construct of the grandmother-character in the text:

My grandmother is a teller of stories. She is a keeper of secrets and unnamed things. Grandmother is small, her face wizened, etched deep and leathery by the sun. She perches special sunglasses on the end of her nose out of pity for ordinary people, so they won't suffer the full blast of her tiger glare. The bones of her elbows and knees stick out. Grandmother walks hunched over, she waddles with shoulders stiffened and legs bent like a coolie, like a soldier itching to draw. Her feet are so crooked she walks with great difficulty. 'Slowly!' she cries, beating the back of my legs with her stick. Grandmother walks fingering her various aches and pains. She is old now so her aches are numerous: headache from car and truck pollution, face ache from neighbours passing without greeting, swallowed jar ghost ache bloating her belly with wind. The ache of her long ago hospital promise continually nagging at her brain (Yahp, 1993: 115).

The presence of the magical and of the teller, the telling of stories weaves through *The Crocodile Fury*. The wonderful figure of the grandmother, feisty, not always likeable, special sunglasses perched in front of tiger glares, dominates the narrative. She walks "hunched over, she waddles with shoulders stiffened and legs bent like a coolie. Like a soldier itching to draw". This is an image which tilts at the conventional stereotype of the denigrated and racially marked servant; her gait, seemingly battered down and shuffling as if carrying the burden of oppression, is then conflated with that of the gunslinger/soldier - the empowered and problematic image of American western freedom and agency "itching to draw"; the forward thrust of the pelvis as she walks is capable of denoting either image. It is this complex figure which threads through and invigorates the text.

The grandmother is the perennial survivor, the bonded child handed over to the house "on the hill", because her "family had too many girls" (1993:133). She contains and controls her seemingly inherent victim status: there is only momentary pathos; she is also now old and cantankerous, she of the tiger glare and the hefty, often-wielded cane. The granddaughter/ narrator in the text is herself crafted by the grandmother. Her hair is pulled taut to control vision, to enable sight (1993:15); she is scripted, the grandmother has planned the learning of the nun's magic since the narrator's birth (p.192), and she is inscribed, crescents are imprinted on the narrator's newborn eyes (p.160). The unvoiced

subaltern¹⁶ exists not in the supposedly subjugated figure of the old woman but in the eerie, shadowy figure of the rich man's lover, and the rich man himself rarely speaks. This ambiguous dispersal of authoritative positions points to the ways in which Yahp, writing from within a self-consciously postcolonial paradigm, calls on something other than the conflict between the colonial past and present in order to write the world she generates. Central to this is the interweaving of both the arcane and the ordinary in the text, the inference that the magical may exist, that the unexplained, super-natural may be mundane, even a norm. The constructions of the grandmother's world view lie within perspectives in part unshaped by the colonial and neither colonial nor, therefore, postcolonial. It is from this basis that the usefulness and limitations of the insights available from within the paradigm offered by postcolonial theory and the literary critical referent of magical realism, will be discussed.

As already noted in the first chapter, the term postcolonialism can too often serve to denote a kind of homogeneity of experience which lacks a sense of diverse historical context and the specificity of circumstance. A reiteration of Joseph Pugliese's comment is pertinent here:

'Post'-colonialism too often homologises the differences and disparities between colonised nations, thereby establishing another type of imperial sign which gathers together different bodies of knowledge and oppositional histories, as it simultaneously controls their taxonomic distribution and discursive function. (1995: 354-5)

This glossing of the differences in texts and in experience can lead to an inflation of the part the coloniser has played in the construction of identity. Pugliese points to the possibility of a neo-colonial function in his concern about the way such theory may contribute to the distribution and control of meaning. He continues: "Disturbingly in this scenario, 'post'-colonialism functions as a type of unified subject which obliterates alterity in favour of conceptual homogeneity and corporate manageability: under the assigned rubric, a process of categorisation ensures that certain 'themes' assume the paradigmatic status...'The Natural'...'Form'...'Mysticism' " (1995:355). The emphasis of the inverted commas Pugliese employs, parodies the taxonomic function, the need to categorise by genus, to reduce to a list of like or unlike properties. It points to an ironic

¹⁶ The theory of a silenced subaltern as formulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

uncertainty about category as implied in the neatness of the list. Anne McClintock in her somewhat scathing discussion of the term 'postcolonial' also argues that it "signals a reluctance to surrender the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular and ahistorical abstraction" (1992: 86).

This tendency to homogenise the postcolonial, to compress and make ahistorical the precolonial is one of the reasons that it is necessary to closely examine text, to test the theoretical against the work it purports to illuminate. The placing of the colonial at the centre of much of the response to postcolonial writing can, as Pugliese claims, serve to flatten out "difference and alterity". A book such as *The Crocodile Fury* can be taxonomised within the genre of the 'mystical' or the gothic (as occurred at the "Write in Fright" session at the 1994 Melbourne Writer's Festival) or within the parameters of the literary category of magical realism, but it cannot as text be fully 'explicated' by these categories nor by the genus of the postcolonial itself. Of course as Donnell points out "de-homogenization can be a tricky process" (1995:103), one involving questions about the right to read and the limits of cross cultural interpretation. Pugliese also questions the appropriation often inherent in such readings, perceiving this to be another instance of "symbolic violence" (1995:355).¹⁷ He asks if even such questioning can become another ruse for capture, for the reinstatement of hegemonic control. In such a context the limitations of my own reading position require acknowledgement. My perspective as a relatively privileged, western reader is the context from which the following discussion proceeds and the confines of that subjectivity border and constrain the reading, as they would any critical enterprise. Given this, the *raison d'être* for the reading is precisely that process of "de-homogenization", a reaction to an early intuited sense that theory too often elides the intricacies and differences of these texts in their specificity, and as such erases the way in which they resist homogenisation.

In *The Crocodile Fury* the trope of patterning, of etching, of not only the telling but also the writing of stories is consistently reiterated. The narrator is crafted, scripted and inscribed by both the grandmother and by her grandmother's nemesis (pontianak ghost

¹⁷ This is also an issue for Chapter Three where the role of the teller of the story, as well as its reader, is problematised. Spivak (1999), of course, deploys the term 'epistemic violence' when discussing imperial power. The symbols, and the systems of knowledge which create and disseminate those symbols, are clearly implicated in the imposition of colony.

or lover¹⁸), by the forces that seek to thwart the old wisewoman. There are recurrent images of language, of literacy which recall but also undermine a western logocentrism that judges civilization through the ability to write even though philosophically the written word is seen as derivative of and dependent on the spoken.¹⁹ Theo D'haen's discussion of another text, Coetzee's *Foe*, underlines the importance of the 'word' in western constructions of civilisation. He states that in *Foe* the 'native' has had his tongue removed, he is both "literally dumb" and lacking in that most authoritative denominator of (western) reason, literacy (1995:196). An attempt is made to teach Friday to write but this is unsuccessful and "Friday is condemned to remain outside the pale of white civilisation in which, as Michel Foucault has argued, language is power" (1995: 196).

Friday is perfectly positioned as native and Other because he can neither speak nor write. Conversely in *The Crocodile Fury* the grandmother can write, her power as a spirit medium is somewhat dependent on her ability to craft and inscribe appropriate spells. She possesses that precursor of civilisation, of progress and yet clearly does not fit a progressivist definition of "piety, rationality and order" (Bhabha1994:129); she after all 'irrationally' believes that she suffers from "swallowed jar ghost ache bloating her belly". She resists the easy categorisation as Other for she has access to recognisable traits of the civilized (an irritating trait of the Chinese or Hindoo) while remaining stubbornly outside the boundaries of a fully cosmopolitan hegemony. She can't be tamed and 'civilised' by a literacy to which she has access already. She indeed is not quite 'Native' for she fears the jungle in a typically urban way and much prefers the constrictions of an artificial environment -"Grandmother shivers and shudders at the thought of me in the jungle" (1993: 38). In the narrative, the narrator/granddaughter is taught to write the nun's language (the grandmother acknowledges the colonists do have some power and ever the pragmatist, is all too willing to exploit it). The English words

¹⁸ The pontianak ghost, who is also the rich man's lover, is a Malaysian myth, born from the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth, she is vampire-like in her habits (Mythology P, 1999). See also Chapter 6.

¹⁹ Gunther Kress asserts: "Western technological societies value the forms and logic of writing over the forms and logic of speaking... Writing also represents permanence and control rather than the impermanence and flux of speech" (1985:46). This contrasts somewhat of course with Jacques Derrida's position in *Of Grammatology* (1976) where there is an acceptance of the privileging of speech in western philosophy. The logocentric privileges the word, speech precedes writing therefore writing is dependent on speech. Either way, though, it is a certain kind of (western/rational) speaking and writing that holds authority.

snake "from left to right like rows of soldier ants, like tiny black bricks. So unlike the winged shapes Grandmother made on her charm papers to show me, shapes now thick, now an eyelash" (1992:100). The contrast between the small regimented lines, laboriously building meaning and the elegant sweep and implied freedom of grandmother's "winged shapes", now one thing then its opposite point to the logogram (Halliday 1988: 19) as the more flexible, more fully realised literacy. The Grandmother's world of spirits and demons is also a world of winged shapes and intricate symbol. Yet Grandmother "wants her seeing to be written in shapes and patterns she herself can't read...So everyone will know. What will they know, Grandmother? What?... That there's more than their way of seeing" (1992: 192-3). The grandmother wants the granddaughter, not to mimic, but to appropriate the nun's way of saying but *not* the nun's way of seeing. In the alterity created there is no sly civility. The grandmother "doesn't like the nuns. She says they are little people whose words make shadows too big for their bodies" (1993: 112). In fact the grandmother "can never hear anything said by the nuns ... They cannot speak human language properly" (1993; 256). She will appropriate²⁰ their shapes upon the page, not to slyly amend their (disputed) authority by dissonant repetition but to offer a new epistemology, a different way of seeing, consciously using their "magic".

This emphasis on other ways of seeing appears throughout the book and informs the following depiction of a physical landscape:

The hill's peak is curiously twisted, humped with green-fringed boulders in the shape of a woman turning away from the harbour, in the act of turning back...[this is where] jungle spirits who look like monkeys, or very small men [live]. There too rest the spirits of the dead awaiting reincarnation, and the gods of thunder and lightning, of fire and fruitfulness, of earthquake and the seven hundred winds (Yahp, 1993: 7).

The colonist's/the Rich Man's "mansion that later became a ghost house" is located here where the "hill's peak is curiously twisted". This is a mapping of the world that differs profoundly from any extant western cartography. The terrain does not consist solely of empirical properties, it must be *seen* by one capable of seeing, it describes a space both in and outside of the physical where the presence of the "spirits of the dead...and the gods of thunder and lightening" is indicative of a place of power. As a contrast to this, a

²⁰ Ian Buchanan, in a discussion of de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* states "Appropriating means to impose forms, to create forms by exploiting circumstances" (1993: 61).

predominantly western mapping of external space would, as ZawiahYahya argues, provide a "conquering, comprehensive, omniscient vision" transporting "you to a height at which aerial photographs are normally taken ... in one powerful omniscient vision, you could see the whole topography of an area that stretches from ocean to coast and right into its hinterland." (1993:108). Yahya links such a way of seeing to the dominance and invasiveness that has been portrayed as characteristic of a Western ideology. The emphasis on omniscience, the need to map the whole of a topography comes from a particular epistemology which, as Paul Carter argues, has its own problems:

The difficulty of drawing a continuous, dimensionless line [for a coastline] is not simply a ticklish problem for the draughtsman: in modest compass it describes the logical paradox inherent in Enlightenment epistemology. A science that claimed to be well founded had *ipso facto* to leave no gaps in its reasoning, but if it were to make any progress it had necessarily to begin somewhere and end somewhere else... But for the gap there was nothing to know, but (sic) the scope of knowledge was to eliminate it. (1999:128-129)

This implies the rationalist need to erase the emptiness of what is inexplicable within a positivist paradigm, to control an inscribed space by imaging and thus 'knowing' it. Christian Jacob too speaks of the "map's claim to represent the world in a way that challenges mimesis itself" (1999:24). The supposition that the scientific version of the world is the one which most surely represents existence has been opened to question in recent discussions of western cartography (such as Carter's and Jacob's). The question is of *whose* reality is mapped, and of the underlying knowledge paradigms which link a particular way of graphing the world with an ideology of progress, the implied advance, in McClintock's biting phrase, from "slouching deprivation to erect, enlightened reason" (1992:84). Such an epistemology can suggest that the world we inhabit must be "a continuous, dimensionless line" with no gaps and any other way of conceiving it must, of necessity, be primitive. Yet as Jacob points out any "map is an interface - pragmatic, cognitive, metaphysical - between its users and the world that surrounds them"(1999: 25).

The worlding²¹ that has occurred in Yahp's description, reveals alternative priorities in the importance of what constitutes the space inhabited. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1993) in a different but related context (that of a discussion of the relevance of Marxist theory to sub-continental Indian history) writes of the 'anthropologizing' that can occur in the production of theory. He argues that the "secular and modernising historical consciousness is itself part of the problem of the 'colonisation of the mind' for many 'traditions' such as those of 'Hindus'... For most 'Hindus', gods, spirits and the so-called supernatural have a *certain 'reality'* " (1993:424, my emphasis). He then states that while "our scientific truths are the same, our gods and spirits are often interestingly different. The modern exists by converting a lot of this difference into 'relics' and monuments" (1993:433). That is, in commodifying and codifying what doesn't fit a positivist paradigm. In contrast Yahp does not present an anthropological case study of some other and faintly derisable belief. In her description, a place where rest "the spirits of the dead awaiting reincarnation, and the gods of thunder and lightning..." (p.7) is given a "certain 'reality'". This text constantly moves in a shifting of the tangible and the intangible but remains ambivalent about what is real or unreal. Indeed such a binary opposition is made inconsequential or rather does not need to exist for a character (the grandmother) who does not fully share a secular and modernised consciousness. The normalising of the grandmother's position by the narrator places the 'modernised' reader at the interstice of this difference. The grandmother's aches and pains are caused both by "car and truck pollution" and by "swallowed jar ghost ache". She can appropriate the modern - one can almost see the John Lennon sunglasses - and be comfortable with the other than modern - at least as defined by a eurocentric historicity. In the Grandmother's world the 'magical' and the 'real' come together, and either can *be* the other - the emphasis on the grammar of the copula rather than the opposition of othering.

In literary theory the two terms (magical and real) originally were brought together to explain the work of pre-eminent Latin American writers who created worlds punctuated by the 'inexplicable' and the 'uncanny' (Rushdie, 1991). Slemon argues that the use of Magic Realism may encode "a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and

²¹ Spivak uses the word in the context of western mapping - "what is at stake is a 'worlding', the reinscription of a cartography that must (re) present itself as impeccable" (1999: 228). Yahya's worlding is rather the inscription of a cartography that owes nothing (but its articulation as an opposition) to the west.

its totalizing systems" (1988, cited in Baker, 1993: 86). Some discussions of magical realism seem not only to posit but to require a conflict between the colonial and 'pre' colonial pasts. Belief systems can then become archaic remnants which are sufficiently evocative to exploit as tools of resistance but not of sufficient power to actually *be*. The 'certain reality' must be explained to the secularised mind as either primitive /superstitious and therefore subject to 'scientific' interrogation (the anthropological brief until recently) or as a reaction to the admittedly massive impacts of the colonial experience - magic as a trope of subversion. This latter to some degree presupposes a shared scepticism. It implies a distancing that may even entail derision of the supernatural if actually presented as fact rather than as symbol as has been normalised in Cartesian rationalism. However "the hill's peak" curiously twisted in the "shape of a woman turning away the harbour, in the act of turning back" where live the spirits of the jungle is, in *The Crocodile Fury*, a part of the narrator's seeing, a part of the grandmother's teaching. The lyricism of the fluid motion, turning away, turning back contains no hint of secularised irony, no anthropological distance.

The argument that magic realism is a deliberately subversive device in an anti-colonial frame of reference cannot be easily dismissed. Too great an emphasis on this nevertheless, can come close to an ongoing privileging of the colonial moment. In such a response that moment then becomes the *anno domini* of the culture (see Chapter One for a full discussion of this) or at least, as in Bhabha's account, the point from which all interesting tensions and tropes seem to originate; the point against which writers must be assumed to write. Adam and Tiffin have argued that "the formal technique of 'magic realism' with its characteristic mixing of the fantastic and the realist has been singled out by many critics as one of the points of conjuncture of post-modernism and post-colonialism" (1990:69). The juxtaposition of the two - fantastic and real - fits with post-modernism's fragmenting and questioning brief but there is little exploration of the possibility that the fantastic may *be* no less real than the 'real' itself, that the opposition of 'the real' and 'the fantastic' is itself a construction. Yahp always allows for such a *possibility* and yet interestingly there is no time in the text when the inexplicable cannot be explained. The natural order is not violated; it is just extended to include other possibilities of existence, other " 'certain realities' ". Spindler in formulating a typology for the magical real has argued that it is "a literary mechanism which allows for a realignment with a spiritual community whose authority has been disrupted by colonial

power"(1993:4), however Spindler does not actually define what constitutes magic itself. A sense of some kind of spiritual community does exist at a pragmatic level in *The Crocodile Fury*. Spindler's phrasing (spiritual community) is somewhat sanitised and sanctimonious for the intensely hard-nosed experience that belief is here, but it does point to a commonality of perception. His definition however, remains situated against the centrality of the *colonial*.

Slemon in a later essay argues that the "concept of magic realism is a troubled one for literary theory" (1995: 407), stating that it "threatens to become a monumentalising category for literary practice and to offer to generalizing genre systems a single locus upon which the massive problem of *difference* in literary expression can be managed into recognizable meaning in one swift pass" (1995: 409). Here he is responding to precisely that homogenising of disparate work which so concerns Pugliese, this taxonomy occurring because text may contain some element of fantasy and have been written by postcolonial authors. Yet in the context of this concern about the packaging of such text into a kind of academic "corporate manageability", Slemon can still state that the "term 'magic realism' is an oxymoron" (p.409), allowing the implicit opposition of the two terms to remain unchallenged. In western literary analysis of course the oxymoron is a given. The question then needs to become whether or not the category *has* to form such a binary. In a eurocentric formulation the certain 'reality' of the gods and the deeply integrated nature of that 'reality' with empirical existence are in danger of being elided or at least as Chakrabarty (1993) has stated, made into an almost secondary artefact or 'relic', perhaps the very monumentalising against which Slemon warns. Even in the context of 'western' writing, concern at the taxonomic and appropriative function of certain critical responses has been noted. Linden Peach in a discussion of Angela Carter's novels has argued for caution in "applying convenient critical labels, such as 'magic realism', to Carter's non-realistic, philosophical writing which explores the 'actualities' in which many of us live" (1998:11). This rationalist dichotomy between the non-real and the actual is an interesting one in the context of *The Crocodile Fury* where, too, the binary of the real and its supposed antonym is challenged.

In fact the novel clearly resists any simple taxonomic placement. This became more evident for me when at the 1994 Melbourne Writer's Festival, *The Crocodile Fury* was located with other work labelled generically gothic (that of Patrick McCabe, Herbjorg

Wassmo and Jim Crace). In theorising the gothic, Noel Carroll situates it against the intellectual background of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason and scientific analysis and it is in such a context "that the horror [& gothic] novel emerges as a genre" (1990:56). Fred Botting adds to this, asserting "if not a purely negative term, Gothic writing remains fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic" (1996:2), that is providing an opposition to the ideology of Enlightenment reason as the centre of the human experience or human progress. Linking the gothic and fantasy genres, Rosemary Jackson argues that fantasy "is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility" (1988:21). Such analysis categorises the gothic as an inherently eurocentric genre, one which is formed from reaction against a particular hegemony. And Zamora and Faris in their introduction to the book *Magic Realism* have argued that, somewhat like the gothic if less characterised by excess, magic realism itself is a strategy that "resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalisms and literary realisms" (1995: 6). Again the emphasis is on eurocentric phenomena and historiography. Yahp, in a discussion of *The Crocodile Fury* based on the 'Write in Fright' session at the Melbourne Festival adds her own perspective to the categorisation undertaken in that forum:

For me the gothic was a natural choice when I came to write *The Crocodile Fury*, when I wanted to explore the issues of power structures, colonialism, the gulf between the haves and have-nots in a colonial society, the 'idealisation' of women, especially Asian women - all issues which can arguably be boiled down in their simplest forms to severe cases of 'us' and 'them'.

The Gothic allows one to cross the barrier between 'us' and 'them' in a heightened, exaggerated way. It opens up a space, a chink in the wall, between us (what's known) and them (the unknown). (Yahp 1996:14)

Here Yahp places her own text within that oppositional framework which has been structured in a western analytical paradigm. According to the author the text has been consciously constructed to confront colonial issues. And confront them, subvert them it does. She creates strong Asian women instead of passive stereotypes, she undermines the controlling power of the 'White' Man through the autonomy of the Chinese female protagonist (to be discussed more fully later). The problem however, of confining a reading of the text to a critical perspective only reliant on these oppositions, is that it

may also erase other textual possibilities. In an interesting contrast however to this exemplary reading of the novel as challenge to the colonial, Yahp provides a very different insight. She states that "In Malaysia such a story [her opening ghost story] would bring about *knowing* oohs and ahhs and *immediate namings*" (Yahp 1996: 13, my emphasis), indicating local familiarity rather than transgressive unknowability. The issue of immediate namings is what interests me here, for such a reaction does not occur against the context of the age of reason nor in that moment of colonial ambivalence "when the *impossibility of naming* the difference of colonial culture alienates, in its very form of articulation..." (Bhabha 1994: 129, my emphasis). In this particular instance Yahp's text, and her comment on it, creates a direct opposition to Bhabha's theoretical position. Here the colonial does not exist, or if it does it is as a periphery, something at the edge of vision rather than at its centre. What Yahp describes is a culturally specific response which can effectively offer another paradigm of being (to that of the western/secular) but which exists apart from and unaffected by such a function (as opposition to something). The immediate namings are recognition of a reality that is impervious to and oblivious of materialist scepticism. The ghost story which Yahp briefly tells would not, in such a context, require an explanation of its meaning, validity or allegorical message, it would rather require identification of the being alluded to and that being's significance in terms of threat, benevolence or required action. *Of course it is only a story* (as Yahp again says herself):

Lucky you didn't open your mouth, some she-ghosts pull your soul out through the mouth ... With that kind of background, that kind of training in ghostly taboos, stories and superstitions dutifully packed up and then unpacked along with the more visible luggage I brought to Australia with me, I suppose it's not surprising: the attraction I have for ghost stories...What is surprising is that after a lifetime of appeasing the parallel non-lives of unearthly creatures in Malaysia, I had to come to Australia to actually see one.

OK, let's just say I imagined it... (Yahp 1995: 13).

While there may be some ironic distance, there is also no certainty that this is solely imagined. If an ambivalence exists it is not as Bhabha's split in colonial authority, but rather as an uncertainty of naming, of identifying an exact referent. Whether the seeing is only a psychological evocation of her own displacement and disappearance into the

undifferentiated Asianness²² which came with her migration to Australia, or not, remains undecided. What is clear however is that the "parallel non-lives", "the mystery of the unknown that is at the heart of most thing to most people" (Yahp, 1995: 14) retains a fascination which cannot be simply dismissed as unsophisticated. Yahp, capable of highly erudite critique (her 1996 article is one example of this), is not a 'subject' uninitiated into the intricacies of the cosmopolitan centre.

Ang Chin Geok in her book of short stories says, "In my parents' country the landscape teemed with demons and spirits. People built winding paths and screens in front of their homes, and placed mirrors above their doors, to thwart these spirit beings who could only travel in a straight line" (1997: 3). Her parents' country (Singapore) is not a world in which the spiritual or the supernatural is a subversion of colonial 'reality'; this part of that world is a place where colonial 'rationality' (in this context and for some people at least) is unimportant. Ang describes her parent's world and seems to have distanced herself from this way of seeing. But later in the text she tells the story of Peng An, a western educated professional, who sees and speaks to her dead mother while attending a science conference in Brisbane. Peng An states that "until then, I had not known that I might have some ability to tap into other worlds. I speculated on whether that had been the purpose of my mother's visit, to demonstrate the existence of other realities, to remind me to look beyond the obvious, to enlarge my horizons" (Ang 1997: 271). The nuance of the phrase "to look beyond the obvious" is one which implies a challenge to the reductionism that may be inherent in a positivist, scientific perspective which seems to focus on the obvious and the provable. Doireann MacDermott makes a similar point when she says that for "the Western reader living in an entirely irreligious world, the idea of a prosperous stockbroker paying daily visits to a temple or the tough leader of a political party traveling long distances every month to worship at a particular shrine, is intriguing to say the least" (1993: 39). The history that has constructed the (perhaps too homogenised itself) western reader, the post Enlightenment emphasis on "progress, piety, rationality and order" may not have the same resonance for those from different histories.

²² At the 'Write in Fright' session (1994 Melbourne Writers' Festival) Yahp recounted an incident at a post office soon after her arrival in Australia, where she said, she suddenly realised that she had become invisible as an individual and had been subsumed in the somewhat unfamiliar identity of 'Asian'.

This implicit questioning of the hegemony of the rationalist view of the world is often undermined by western theory, where beliefs (such as 'talking' to a dead mother) can be infantilised. Naomi Lindstrom in a discussion of the magic realism in the work of Tamara Kamenszain, argues that in "her retelling of the story, [Kamenszain] seeks to recapture the outlook of a child or a premodern person, one who is uninhibited by the fear of appearing idolatrous, superstitious, or demented" (1996:227). A *lack* of fear of superstition, of appearing demented is equated with the viewpoint of a child which is in turn equated with what seems to be McClintock's "slouching deprivation" of the "premodern". This linking of child and premodern adult conflates innocence, childishness and spirituality/naivety in a way which condescends and denigrates. Yahp's text definitively subverts this for it is the 'superstitious' character of the grandmother who is effective; strong, active, non-naïve; the grandmother who has the ability to "tap into other worlds", to recognise the "existence of other realities". This character is neither innocent nor an idealised child - she is capable of conscious acts of cruelty (she believes her curse of the kitchen maid actually contributes to her "terrible" death, Yahp 1992: 172-3). She is dangerous. The character of the mother, who eschews 'superstition' for a more 'adult' religion is the one who is in fact child-like, passive and gullible (though of course such a statement ignores some of the complexity with which Yahp imbues all her characterisations):

Grandmother says: *The world is full of gods, humans and ghosts. Some ghosts are hard to recognise, they are masters of disguise who mingle freely with humans. Others are easily discovered: these are like jungle mists, or their mouths and eyes are extra large...*

Before my mother became a Christian, she believed in the value of walking crooked. She believed in the value of fooling both humans and ghosts. Grandmother trained her to raise her fists and puff out her lungs. (1992: 76-7)

The act of "raising her fists and puffing out her lungs" should be comical, but is not. Even as an idiosyncratic, even slightly amusing response to the vicissitudes of life, such a response is never infantile. It is rather, symptomatic of the mettle of a belief system, and believer, which takes on all comers (human or otherwise). Yahp, like Ang, has created an ambivalence about 'reality' yet this ambivalence is not predicated on a conflict between "two contradictory and independent attitudes" which "inhabit the *same place*". For western readers or those exposed to western ideology it must be

acknowledged that a reading is likely to occur against a background which automatically dichotomises the corporeal (real) and the non-corporeal (not-real) but another reading is also enabled, one which involves "immediate namings" and no such binary. Any uncertainty (in the latter of these readings) is related to who or what is named, rather than to whether it exists. For the grandmother in *The Crocodile Fury* the world is "*full of gods, humans and ghosts*" and the narrator of the story creates little distance from this; those characters who eschew the grandmother's wisdom or have no access to it are somehow lesser in the text. Deprived of the *ability* to perceive other worlds, they remain more peripheral, less fleshed as human beings as well.

Miriam Wei Wei Lo however, argues for more of a narrative balance between the central protagonists than I do, implying that the story gives equal weight to the three central 'women' figures, "the narrator, the narrator's mother and the narrator's grandmother" (1999:59). I am not convinced of this and continue to read the grandmother's perspective as more authoritative though clearly other 'ways of seeing' are also expressed. Lo argues that the mother's conversion to Christianity means a loss of the "Grandmother's world-view" and the gain of "release from a past that was agonizingly painful" (1999: 64). While this can be supported, there is also evidence in the text that the loss of the grandmother's worldview is debilitating, leaving the mother somewhat acquiescent, lacking in the spirit which so energises the grandmother.

The ability to accept an other than empirical reality is a characteristic of the magical real, although clearly, the term is applied in the analysis of a variety of texts and is, as has already been intimated, frequently and inaccurately conflated with fantasy, the surreal or the gothic. Because each genre contains elements of the 'unreal' (distortions and displacements of norms) texts which contain any of these elements may be placed in any of the several genres, and indeed there are overlaps. Horror is more prevalent in the gothic, fantasy can contain terror but usually with less emphasis and is more aligned with science fiction and folk or fairy tale, the surreal often involves a jarring distortion of the real and is claimed as an influence on the development magical realism. The problems of excessive taxonomising are exposed by these overlapping and blurring definitions.

Brooke-Rose (1992:127) in a discussion of palimpsest also links this to magic realism. She describes one form of this as the "totally imagined story, set in a historical period, in which the magic unaccountably intervenes". When explicating palimpsest Brooke-Rose quotes the narrator in *Shame* who declares "As for me: I too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist" (1992:125). Krishnaswamy argues that in this context the migrant imagination becomes an "imperializing consciousness imposing itself upon the world"(1995:137). In contrast to this Yahp is not describing a migrant's story, although her characters are predominantly from the Chinese diaspora. This is lived experience before the stories became wholly nostalgised memory however affectionately, even evocatively created. The talk stories that frame *The Crocodile Fury* have a different resonance, for all Yahp argues that her text is crafted from fairy tales. They would for Ang and perhaps for Yahp ("OK, let's just say I imagined it"), seemed to have retained more of Chakrabarty's "certain reality" than is generally credited to the allegorical function of the western fairy tale, or which exists in the surreal or gothic construction of text.

The book is set in a *factual* time and space (Malaysia in the twelve-year emergency²³) yet the space and time, in *The Crocodile Fury* remains essentially the grandmother's. This is a lived world in which the barriers between the imagined and the literal have been rendered effectively meaningless. Baker argues: "despite the presence of fantastic events ... it [magic realism] is always linked with the 'real' world, grounded in recognisable reality through social, historical and political references"(1993:82). And in *The Crocodile Fury* there is little sense of the unaccountability of magic or of the supernatural itself which always remains grounded in an identifiable historical space. Unlike Brooke-Rose's analysis of palimpsest however, there is no sense of an overlaying of meaning, the imagined superimposed on an everyday 'reality' or simply

²³ Lo declares that "Yahp does not name the place, but it is almost certainly Malaysia" (1999: 57). Grace Chin argues that "Yahp's anarchic post-modern novel rejects the definitions and boundaries imposed by specificity" (2000: 7) and this is why it is difficult to 'place' in Malaysia. My reason for placing *The Crocodile Fury* in the years of the emergency follows a similar deductive form to Lo's and there are distinct similarities to Catherine Lim's more 'realistic' depiction in *The Teardrop Story Woman* where there is no doubt about actual, historical period. The twelve year emergency went from 1948 - 1960. It was a response by the British to a communist insurrection against the colonial government. The state of emergency continued for three years after Malaya achieved independence, the communists were perceived to be no longer a threat in 1960 (Turnbull, 1989). Both Catherine Lim (in *The Teardrop Story Woman*) and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (in *Among the White Moonfaces*) set some or all of their text in the period of Emergency.

skewed away from the naturalised and accepted 'known'. Even the concept of the imagined is problematised in that there is really no sense in which the grandmother's 'imagined' world is set apart from or is even, necessarily, different to the empirical world she occupies. In this text the reason to establish a dichotomy, a boundary between the imaginary and the real is robbed of the authoritative position in which such binaries generally arise. There is no dislocation here; it is not a story of displacement that uses a trope of the surreal, or the unreal to image the distortion and displacement of other culturally distinct realities. The emphasis is not on exile but on home. Migration may have been the space from which Yahp wrote the text and the invisibility and dislocation of the migrant experience may have been the trigger to the writing ("belonging neither here nor there", Yahp 1995:13), but the life of the spirit, of a world that is not physical is not reduced to the simply imagined. While the possibility that this is just the old woman's fantasy is not totally discounted, it is relegated to unimportance. The world of "*gods, humans and ghosts*" is integral to the grandmother's sense of being and to the social 'reality' of the world in which it takes place. The grandmother's is the authoritative textual voice and through her the reader too can be initiated into a cognitive space which does not divide the physical and the spiritual, so that s/he becomes enveloped in the 'talk' stories which speak of deeper beliefs and of parallel existences. The surrealism that accompanies many textual forays into fantasy is not a central force here.

In a review of Salman Rushdie's seminal postcolonial text, *Midnight's Children*, it is claimed, "Rushdie makes a special world, as if, in his determined linguistic frenzy, he inflates, like a balloon, a globe that does not match the one we occupy but actually stands as an alternative to it. But not, importantly, a replacement for it" (*New Statesman*, 1991: 1). The building of imaginary countries, the globes which do not quite match the "one we occupy", fit into Bhabha's delineation of "enunciatory ambivalence", emphasising the slanting of naturalised discourse, the slight distortions and discursive changes in how the world is perceived which can challenge "fixed and stable identities", producing the alienation which occurs at the "interstices of [the] double inscription" of colonial or western representation (Bhabha 1985: 150).

And this too is characteristic of the genres of science fiction, fantasy or the gothic, a tilting at and reconstruction of reality to subvert or skew concepts of the norm, of

accepted and authoritative versions of what is real. It has been argued that women, colonised by a male naming of the world, have exploited the possibilities of re-naming and re-presenting reality which is presented by such genres. As Anne Cranny-Francis argues, "the reader of fantasy [or of science fiction] has the opportunity to develop a critical understanding of the nature of his/her society precisely because s/he is no longer constrained by hegemonic discourses, no longer constrained by the subject position those discourses define" (1990:76). Clearly a postcolonial writer such as Rushdie is employing similar strategies in order to refocus the readers' easy certainties about existence, and those readers are assumed to be western(ised). In Yahp's text however, while the world created may be "a globe that does not match the one we occupy" (particularly as western readers) it is not presented as an alternative/an overlay. This world view is validated, authoritative even 'hegemonic', not because the author agrees with or seeks even to espouse it, but because the holder of the view herself is so clearly authoritative, in touch with a possible rather than wholly improbable reality. The narrative dimension of the genres discussed above, of the writing as solely a creation of the imagination, as purely an allegory or plainly a tilting at an established norm is missing here. I would expect as a reader, with all others who read her, that Ursula Le Guin's wonderful textual universe²⁴ could not be perceived as an actualised space. With Chakrabarty, though in a different context, I have no such assurance that there are readers who would not accept the Grandmother's way of seeing in *The Crocodile Fury* as denoting a (possible) actuality.

As this argument develops there seems to be creeping in a tendency to overvalorise the grandmother's authority in order to challenge the primacy of the colonial. In the context of the debates surrounding magic realism, Connell has argued that situating it "in a distinct epistemology which is organically linked to the persistence of mythic material- as well as an unproblematic use of 'traditional' cultural forms - fundamentally essentializes these writers and writing practices" (1998:108). This tendency to valorise and appropriate Native or Other experience often essentialises folk literature as though it were definitive text. The unproblematised celebration, as set piece, of dynamic, fluctuating systems of belief can in its turn infantilise non-western cultures into patterns of unchanging innocence that undermine the contingent, varying and complex nature of

²⁴ Le Guin is, in my opinion at the forefront of science fiction writers. In a series of novels she has created a coherent universe which challenges political and gendered hegemonies.

such systems. As has been suggested already, it would be difficult to argue for the innocence or immutability of beliefs in the context of *The Crocodile Fury* where the representative character of the grandmother is often quite simply *not* nice, and is, also a manipulative pragmatist. Lo identifies a strategy of idealising the Other, which she feels has occurred in several critical perspectives she has read and which she links to Rey Chow's critique of "the tendency to 'relate to alterity through mythification'" (1999: 65).

The difficulty of reading *The Crocodile Fury* in terms of essentials or truths, of ignoring ambivalence and reaching for absolutes is illustrated by the evanescence which characterises even the recurrent trope of the crocodile. This is multivalent, changing with each character; reality as a shifting space. For the grandmother the crocodile is supernatural, "a creature who can't be controlled" (1993:18). For the nuns there are many crocodiles - "Thin crocodiles, fat crocodiles, ones with greased hair" (1993:186) who threaten virgin virtue and from whose bite one (if female) does not recover. To the mother the crocodile is more innocent, its fury the fury of the taunted lizard boy, the fury of the man who fights, the love that is never properly fleshed, the conflict that never fully impinges on people's day to day realities. For the bully the crocodile is the soldiers, or a photo opportunity. But as Lo's more detailed analysis of the crocodile reaffirms, "the tale of the evolution of this crocodile acts as a warning to anyone who would seek to valorise one particular story of the crocodile as the only version possessing native authenticity" (1999: 69).

To return to Connell's concerns however, Bauman would alternatively question the west's implicit valorisation of positivism and logocentrism, arguing that this in itself is linked to a 'modern' fear of contingency because "contingent existence means existence devoid of certainty"(1993:15). This then leads to the inability to "face up to" the "fact that science, for all one knows or can know, is one story among many". The hierarchy which places the rational and scientific at the centre (and which decides what constitutes science and rationality, the limits of its philosophical and historical legitimacy) is further explored by Spivak. She talks of the project "of initiation into humanity" as rather "the project of culture (with the unacknowledged proviso of limited access for the non-European), civil legislation, and faith" (1999:30). According to Spivak, Kant perceives other civilisations (if they would indeed be even seen as civilised) as

producing "senseless supplements". Here "Polytheism is defined as demonology and Christian monotheism as 'wondrous'", this is because Christianity is in a certain sense "almost philosophy" (1999:30). The link of speculative reason, moral law and a certain kind of belief system is what then leads to civilisation and therefore to progress. The clear denigration of the negatively nuanced polytheism against the positively predicated Christian monotheism, underpins the relegation of the Other's world view to the prepositional position of the 'pre' of before the Enlightenment (which is the beginning of the modern), before the preeminence of the rational, conscious and moral and western mind.

This inability to "face up to" the challenge "to science's right to validate and invalidate, to legitimize and delegitimize - to draw the line between knowledge and ignorance...logic and incongruity" (Bauman 1993:22), is implicated in a logocentric western construction of the world. In other contexts the binary oppositions of the 'natural' separation of the spirit and the body may have little or no valence. Cixous (in Clement and Cixous 1985) has argued for the potential power of unreason over reason, and Clement in the same text (in a reaction against the valorisation of "Christian monotheism") has discussed the celebration of the sorceress, the powerful female figure who tapped into other realities. Clement states that, "The sorceress who in the end is able to dream nature and therefore conceive it, incarnates the reinscription of the traces of paganism that triumphant Christianity repressed"(1985: 5).

Yet even here where the validity of a solely empirical reality is undermined, the insight differs from that available in at least one reading of *The Crocodile Fury*. There, Christianity is not hegemonic as discourse or as lived experience. The hegemony is other and the nostalgised 'paganism' of Clement's theory has instead retained its power to explain the world (at least for parts of that world). Clement's conflating of the sorceress with the hysteric further places the 'pagan' in this western discourse at the centre of subversion and conflict:

The feminine role, the role of the sorceress, the hysteric, is ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time. Antiestablishment because the symptoms - the attacks - revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited. The sorceress heals, against the Church's canon; she performs abortions, favours non conjugal love, converts the unlivable space of a stifling Christianity. The

hysteric unties familiar bonds, introduces disorder into a well regulated folding of everyday life, gives rise to magic in ostensible reason. These roles are conservative because every sorceress ends up being destroyed and nothing is registered of her but mythical traces...(1985: 6)

Of course, Clement makes no claim that this relates to anything other than a wholly western context. Yet reading the discussions surrounding the magical real it is not difficult to see some of this western sense of magic and of the supernatural as influential. There is difficulty in dealing with a context in which the 'witches' have not all been killed but have instead retained some part in a social fabric and where the pathologies of certain forms of Christianity are absent or non-hegemonic. The grandmother (an almost sorceress?) is the "keeper of ancient knowledge"(Yahp 1993: 55), not a mythic or tragically immolated trace, the 'pagan', alive, kicking and authoritative. In fact when her third eye closes, she experiences the "ache of neighbours passing without greeting" (1993:13), because she has lost status. She is part of a lived tradition where men in business suits who are certainly neither 'pre-capitalist' nor in most aspects of their lives 'premodern', may still call on the lesser gods to ensure the success of business deals (Clammer 1993).

And yet the Grandmother is also an "outside" woman. She and the brothel keeper "were outside the rules and restrictions binding ordinary women. They were tolerated if not exactly admired". But both "provided essential services for the smooth running of their district, the brothel keeper appeasing the desires of the living while my grandmother tended those of the dead" (Yahp 1993:168). The pragmatism of such toleration again emphasises the lack of distinction between the earthy function of the brothel keeper and that of the spiritual function of the medium. However there are, also, multiple marginalities here. As always who is at the centre and who at the periphery of any hegemony is complicated. To be poor and a spirit medium who deals with 'dirty' ghosts²⁵ equals ex-centric in terms of a hierarchical society which defines status by wealth - rich man, bond maid - and by the deities one deals with, gods higher, ghosts lesser status. From a scientific perspective such a positioning equates with the superstitious, premodern, liminal. In the lived world of the text and in a socially possible 'real' world, she is an outside woman, but one who does an important or at the very least tolerated *job*, neither wholly ex-centric nor eccentric.

²⁵ "In the folk religion frame, ghosts are 'dirty things', contrasted with the 'purity' of the gods, their superiors" (Jean Debernardi 1993: 159).

The supernatural in the text does not occur as a response (in terms of the grandmother character at least) to colonial oppression. It serves rather as a counter point to the ineffectuality of the representative colonial figures, the rich man and the nuns and much of it would exist with or without their presence. In this context Broinowski comments that "even the old priest, dead at the time of the story, is a peripheral pretender in the fraught world of women, where ancient knowledge of magic and malevolent spirits is pitted against ignorant, modern chalk-statue catholicism"(1996:2). Yahp is ironic about the nun's sense of primacy, the "story of the ghosthouse is older than the oldest priests and nuns. Therefore it is rubbish; nothing of value in this city can be older than their old" (Yahp1993:110). Arrogance and childlike ignorance inversely characterise the somewhat timid world of the erstwhile colonial oppressors. But again it is impossible to dismiss ambiguity. The nun's religion does free the mother from the stigma, release from the presence of badluck ghost which has dogged her existence. In an ambivalence that is here closer to Bhabha's sense of a displacement which allows for choice in appropriation from the other, 'dominant' culture, the mother chooses what is in this one instance a slightly kinder belief system. That it is not always kinder is evidenced by the constant denigration the bully faces as a charity case. Lo argues that the grandmother's "contact with the rich man educates her in the ambivalences of a particular colonial relationship"(1999: 61)²⁶. She uses the example: "grandmother had complete freedom in his house as long as she broke nothing, and did exactly as he desired" (p.52). What Lo leaves out of this equation is that the grandmother so rarely complies with the rich man's orders. She does touch things and in the end breaks the very 'thing' he prizes most, his hold over the enigmatic lover. That the grandmother appropriates what she wants from the west, that she is curious about its power and attracted to the rich man would be difficult to dispute; that the rich man has any significant colonial power in the text is more open to contention. Yahp's 'naming' of him as rich man in fact emphasises the power of his wealth and erases the potency of his 'whiteness', of his colonial difference. The rich man in fact becomes a curiosity, an exotic Other himself. He is a part of the grandmother's talk story, partly mythologised and doomed because he cannot

²⁶ Grace Chin also argues that the Grandmother's character is almost wholly compromised by her submission to colonial power. "Her slavish mentality towards her colonial master reduces her to resemble a trained dog when she eagerly obeys her master's commands" (2000:2), this I think leaves out too many other things that the Grandmother is and does not allow for the ways in which the rich man's power is constantly subverted, in often the most trivial of ways, and challenged within the text as a whole.

'see'. He is deficient, the naivete his rather than the supposedly disempowered, disenfranchised and oppressed grandmother's.

"Once, long ago before that a rich man lived there, in the mansion that later became the convent library, the ghosthouse, and when he lived there it was filled with exotic treasures... The rich man was a collector of the exotic" (Yahp 1993: 4). The rich man, as a collector of the exotic, is linked to excess, an excess of wealth, excess of desire in a kind of dance superfluity. The exotic is outside the 'Asian' teller of the story, Said's Orient lies elsewhere - "the Rose of India, the juniper" brought *back* from the rich man's travels. The exotic is Other, existing in another colonised space. The rich man himself is part of this, for in "the sunlight it looked as if he was dipped in gold" (Yahp 1992: 4). He is a curiosity who provides part of the 'fable' context to the narrative moral - there are far more potent forces than he at work in the world space of the text. Yet he is also attractive to the small bondmaid who later becomes the formidable grandmother, an ambivalence at the heart of the book, the coloniser both ineffectual and yet a powerful seductive force. The play of desire, a trope intertwined of longing and sexuality and power, points to enigma. Lo argues that there are "instances in which Grandmother both mimics and appropriates Western culture" in defiance of the "supposed distribution of power" (of the west as all powerful, the east as powerless, 1999: 60).

The grandmother 'destroys' the rich man's lover, inadvertently also destroying him, in her (the grandmother's) between time just before womanhood. Pontianak ghost or victim, the lover herself remains insubstantial, Other, totally unvoiced, marginal yet holding malevolence shroudlike about her. Yahp says of her:

The victim bites back, or as is the case in *The Crocodile Fury* she is so much victim she is the water your hand hits through, she is smoke; her bruises are shadows constantly sifting. And yet much as I despise her, I couldn't submit the Other Asia to a literally maddening masochism - in *The Crocodile Fury*, the lover, silent, sensual, passive, a life size doll as pliable as rubber and twisted any which way anyone desires - the lover is not alive. (Yahp 1996: 71)

The lover is ghost, spirit captured, smouldering resentment. Again, in a play of ambiguity, she is always white - ivory skinned: "Moonlight glimmers the lover's pale skin"(p.47); while the rich man is gold (or yellow): "In sunlight the rich man looked as

if he'd been dipped in gold" (1993: 4). No other characters are so marked by colour. Yet the lover is not colonial, not western. She too is an exotic collection, with long black hair snaking to her knees. The lover "so much a victim she is the water your hand hits through" all passivity until released, then becomes the malevolent construct of the grandmother's promise (1993:298), the narrator's dream (p.151). She entices and destroys. The rich man has collected a force he cannot contain, an object to own that will devour him - "He lifted her gown to mark a pattern of nips and bruises on her thighs. On her thighs he patterned his rich man's marks, like hallmarks, layered and repeated, etched deep. 'So you will never leave me,' he whispered" (p.253). Inscribed by him, the lover nonetheless turns on him, destroying him in a parody of his loving "*The rich man could not hold her, the dragon-shape twisted to savage him, the reptile-shape slashed its tail, the fish-shape pressed serrated teeth to his flesh*" (p.282). The wild energy replaces the lover's passivity, the lover's debilitating despair, she returns to the primal savagery, takes her revenge on the rapist. And in another ambivalence she is neither female nor male but both (1993: 298). The victim/lover "not alive"; is neither and both, many years later the grandmother says, "He was different but I knew her" (p.299).

Gandhi (1998: 83) has argued that one of the areas of "controversy that fracture the potential unity between postcolonialism and feminism" is the figure of the " 'third world woman' as victim *par excellence* - the forgotten casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies" (1998: 84). Victim *par excellence* she is the passive beautiful Other Asia that Yahp discusses in her essay of that name and that she and Ien Ang (1996) despise. Ang (1996: 44) has argued for the value of ambivalence because it allows resistance to the hegemonic desire to collapse the contradictory into the coherent. Both writers, Yahp and Ang, scorn the stereotype of the passive Asian female, all receptivity and allure. Yahp's evocation of the ephemeral lover, eerily 'non-existent', voracious, yet passive object is a lure against which the grandmother as agent, as subject must strive.

At the end of the novel, in a continuation of paradox, when the lover clings to the narrator's "hand like a promise" (1993: 329), the question Yahp leaves us with, uneasily, is a promise of what? Will the narrator become victim, move away from the grandmother's autonomy and power, will the grandmother's promise (1993: 88), come

back to haunt her, to challenge and repudiate the ancient wisdom? We are left with ambivalence and here the undermining potential of the colonial interface with the 'Native' does become fraught with a poignant irony and sense of loss. We don't know if the granddaughter is lost to the grandmother, if she is subsumed by the grandmother's oldest enemy, the pontianak ghost as she is led away. "The lover clings to my hand like a promise, her hand fits the palm of my hand. ... Our thirst is a scraping that makes us run and run. East, towards the sea" (1993:329). Is she moving towards a participation in that Other Asia, where identity is blurred into an 'Asian Woman' sameness that stultifies and constricts existence? Grace Chin, again in a totally different reading argues that the ending is a movement into womanhood of the narrator; an emancipation from the stultifying control the grandmother embodies. She argues that the narrator embraces the "spirit of woman's illuminating and affirming qualities, which the lover represents" (2000:8). I think this ignores the threat and menace that is so much a part of the lover/ghost's construction. But perhaps the very binaries that seem to be forming in terms of differences in meaning merely point to the complexity with which Yahp has imbued her text and the ambiguities which thread through it.

As the narrator of the story moves to find her own space, away from both the bully and her grandmother toward *what* we are left unsure, the importance of the stories, of the bully's greed for memory and the grandmother's ability to tell, to talk that memory (1993: 63) is unquestioned. The grandmother's stories fill the narrator's "chest and head, they crust [her] skin with swirling knobs" (p.313). But she will "breathe slowly, carefully into the spaces that are left", making spaces of her own (p 313). The grandmother has believed in the writing of the stories, filled as they are with vengeance and pettiness and yet with indomitable strength and with rich, affectionate laughter ("We press our lips to her cheeks to make kissmarks she [grandmother] will laugh at when she wakes", p. 304). The narrator must "breathe slowly, carefully into the spaces that are left"; she must make her own stories but in her remembering, the toughness and the vitality, the laughter and connectedness remain (with no hint of sly civility or oriental passivity), reminding us that some things cannot be dominated and subsumed and that there is "more than their [or our] way of seeing".

"you fight the sex"

when it moves
to the rhythm of penile
scores, the Body discarded
for the Void
the person a counter
in the Game of Wife

"You break up families"

*paterfamilias, where Female
Voice is sweet with Pink*

*Miseries, girl-children
Strand from the weave
of Family staining it
with the Tear
of Forgotten Women.*

"and you are feminists"

*badged with the distinction
of mother's stories, continuing
Discontinuity from
Once upon a long ache ago.*

Nirmala PuruShotam (1993: 56)

The matriarch waited for the patriarch to leave the room, then she too rose to go, to the main hall where she was to receive a woman who had a child to sell. She sat in her chair with its back of magnificent inlaid mother-of-pearl, flanked on each side by a bondmaid as was her wont when she received village women presenting themselves and offering for inspection their female children, prior to adoption or sale (Lim, 1995: 41).

Catherine Lim has located *The Bondmaid* (1995) in colonial Singapore of the early nineteen-fifties. This text confronts a deeply problematised past, exploring it in an explosion of violent or scatological tropes which erupt into the narrative to disturb the telling of a story. In this context the figure of the bondmaid as inexorable subaltern²⁷ appears. She is present as both victim and agent, empowered, not in any social space, but through her indomitable *inability* to passively consent to the wretchedness forced upon her. The patriarch as absent origin of her misery (he leaves the room as she is bought), the matriarch, seeking her own prestige in another's debasement, complicit with the patriarch in the slavery of the child, are characters who re-present a history that is largely silenced in a modern Singaporean context.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has spoken of the "possibility of haunting"; and has also argued that "the epistemic story of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured" (1999: 208). In Lim's novel, despite era and location however, there is no eruption/interruption of imperialism, no tearing of

²⁷ Linked to Indian history predominantly, the Subaltern studies group "accused the dominant historiography of Indian nationalism of leaving out the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population..." (Loomba 1998:199)

time. The cause of distress is not the epistemic violence and disruption of the imperial, but rather the historical continuity of a destructive patriarchy. The "possibility of haunting" occurs in the space which allows for the "inspection" of female children "prior to adoption or sale". Even so, in Spivak, the scholar's, often poignant exploration of the silenced subaltern and Lim, the storyteller's, need to explore the darkness of a stifling social system, there are some surprising points of parallel. Spivak, academic, overtly political and theoretical, emphasises the imperialism inherent in the story of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, which she tells to explicate her sense of the subaltern as gendered subject who is not allowed to speak (Young 1992: 164). Lim, as a storyteller, predominantly here unconcerned with imperialism, explores narrative devices which open up the patriarchal implications of a silencing that has occurred - /the Tear/of Forgotten Women/, the forgotten woman ripped, crying. Both writers, so different in approach, are concerned with stories never fully told, with the traces of intolerable repressions.

Spivak tells of Bhubaneswari, a "young woman of sixteen or seventeen" who "hanged herself in her father's modest apartment in North Calcutta". She read this death so differently from those around her, that she says it led to "the passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak!" (1999:308). In her 1999 essay she follows this immediately by the comment, "It was an inadvisable remark". Her response followed the controversy which had surrounded the initial airing of that first 'inadvisable' statement.²⁸ It seeks to address but cannot resolve the fraught issue of remembering and rereading a largely silent or silenced past. There is both pathos and anger in Spivak's re-presentation of Bhubaneswari's suicide with its emphasis on the presence of menses, her lack of pregnancy and the seeming impossibility of this being read appropriately (the family members [women] to whom Spivak speaks insist she killed herself because of a failed love affair, despite evidence to the contrary). This situates Spivak's view of the erasure of a voiced subaltern experience at least in historical, and more chillingly still in personal, terms - the "subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (p.308). The irony then of Spivak's later anecdote is all the more poignant in its naming of a neo-imperialism:

²⁸ See Chapter 1 above.

Bhubaneswari's elder sister's elder daughter's eldest daughter is a new U.S. immigrant and was recently promoted to an executive position in a U.S.-based transnational. She will be helpful in the emerging South Asian market precisely because she is a well-placed Southern diasporic... Bhubaneswari had fought for national liberation. Her great grand-niece works for the New Empire. This too is a historical silencing of the subaltern. When the news of this young woman's promotion was broadcast in the family amidst general jubilation I could not help remarking to the eldest surviving female member: 'Bhubaneswari'-her nickname had been Talu- 'hanged herself in vain,' but not too loudly. Is it any wonder that this young woman is a staunch multiculturalist, believes in natural childbirth, and wears only cotton. (Spivak 1999: 311)

The paragraph has been included to give full weight to Spivak's subtle texturing of her distress. Her careful naming of "Bhubaneswari's elder sister's elder daughter's eldest daughter" evokes the differences in east/west family ties but is also a call on family, on women to remember, to be linked. Bhubaneswari's political statement in death, her involvement in the struggle to liberate India has been further and more thoroughly erased, subsumed by neocolonial capitalist imperialism; her 'niece' "will be helpful in the emerging South Asian market". The ironic placement of the modern, politically correct multiculturalism and cotton wearing against the symbolic violence of Bhubaneswari's erasure as political agent is a powerful call, as Spivak argues, to "acknowledge our complicity in the muting"(p309). The inclusive "our" is directed at the reader, the silencing of some histories and articulation of others therefore also becomes the reader's responsibility. Spivak acknowledges that she *has* "read Bhubaneswari's case, and therefore she [Bhubaneswari] *has* spoken in some way" (1999: 309), but the anguish of her silencing, of the mis-re-presentation of her story remains as a lesson from which, Spivak seems to imply, we should all learn. Terry Eagleton in a review of *Postcolonial Reason*, the text in which this discussion takes place, takes a swipe and I use the phrase advisedly, at Spivak's tendency to the "constantly anecdotal and autobiographical" (1999:6) linking this to an earlier comment about her "tiresome habit of self-theatricalising and self-alluding" (1999:5). In a critical tour de force he deftly connects this to her, possible, repetition of the "colonial's ironic self-performance"(1999:5). While Eagleton's acerbic critique reflects wider concerns about Spivak's analysis, his dismissiveness of Spivak's anecdotes I think misses the point somewhat and threatens to place him on the side of the "impersonal debates of the patriarchs"(1999: 6) which he, himself, argues Spivak so deftly undermines. There is presumption in Spivak's implicit critique of the politically correct neocolonial

transnationalism of the 'niece's' experience and the political certainties of Bhubaneswari's thought. What Spivak has done is 'read' Bhubaneswari's story against the convention of women's illegitimate passion (pregnancy) as the defining reason for such a woman to suicide. The waiting for menstruation and the writing of the letter explaining her political radicalism (Spivak, 1999: 307), are placed by Spivak against the hegemony that makes women's actions always social/personal rather than public and political. And yet, I would argue, it is in the refusal to engage urbanely in "the impersonal debates of the patriarchs" that Spivak's strength as a commentator continues to lie.

In a very different context Catherine Lim also describes a haunting and a remembering. Like Bhubaneswari's 'niece' she is far removed from the angst of the colonised, unlike her she has responded to the echoes of the old stories and seeks to retrieve (as problematic as that is) a voice never heard. The stories of her grandmother's possession of bondmaids and of one in particular who died at seventeen, she says, have stayed with her ('Catherine Lim and Meira Chand' Melbourne Writer's Festival 1998). There is guilt - she says - guilt for her grandmother's collusion in owning and abusing such girls. A guilt the grandmother was said to have shared, for when this particular bondmaid died (possibly from malnutrition) the grandmother took the unprecedented step of conducting propitiation ceremonies for her. Lim has pointed to the irony which accompanies this memory, in that her grandmother should offer rich food to a spirit which she did not deign to offer in real life. Another grandmother, she of the tiger glare in Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury*, speaks of the danger of "unfinished business" (1993: 203). The implications, perhaps, of these anecdotes are linked to the consequences of such "unfinished business"; the need to deal with the traumas of a not too distant past before one moves on to deal with the triumphalism of a still patriarchal and/or neocolonial present.

The Bondmaid can be read as Lim's own voicing of an intolerable memory. However as Judie Newman points out, citing Diana Brydon, "the discourse of marginality treads an uneasy path between appropriation and a new silencing"(1995: 193). An inability to resolve this tightrope tension between exploitation and erasure itself haunts the following discussion. The concern is that the telling of the story, itself, becomes a form of voyeurism, a ventriloquism which results only in further exploitation. Spivak has

stated that the "ventiloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual's stock in trade" (1999: 255). Catherine Lim would lay no claim to left intellectualism, yet she would acknowledge her own privilege, her distance from the tragedy of the reconstructed bondmaid (Lim Y. 1999: 71). The question remains whether the subaltern can speak; in the imagined world of text can the haunting be exorcised?

Lim has chosen²⁹ to write *The Bondmaid* in English and yet raises, overtly at least, few issues related to the British colonial past which has led to such a choice (unlike Spivak whose focus is on imperialism). Lim Yi-En claims that the text does make "allegorical reference to colonialism, in which the colonized is the enslaved"(1999:105). This seems to me a difficult position to support: a possible reading but not a potent one. As text *The Bondmaid* is, in fact, minimally illuminated by theories of postcolonial angst. Rather it ties into discussions such as those of Rey Chow in her exploration of modern writing and women in China (1991), which emphasise the impact of the non/pre/colonial as much as they interrogate western and modernising influences (this will be discussed in detail later). If one enters the fraught realm of reading for ideology, the preoccupation with an exploration of violence, disease and social decay provides an interesting juxtaposition with the nationalistic (Singaporean) preoccupation with what writer and critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim has succinctly called the "success motif" (1994: 137). Shirley Geok-lin Lim in a discussion of underrated women writers, uses the example of Janet Lim's autobiographical *Sold For Silver* published in 1958, which describes both the pre-war and war experiences of a young Chinese mui tsai or bondmaid. Lim (S.) states in response to this reading that "the girl's terror of violation in this instance, under a Chinese roof and within a social economic system with legislative standing in the Straits settlements, is perhaps more terrifying than the grown woman's flight from Japanese rapists, for it is sanctioned by men and women of her own community" (1994: 173).

This exploration of unpalatable aspects of a history which is, at least officially, meant to affirm Asian values as a bastion against western decadence and dissolution (Heng and Devan in Ong & Peletz 1995: 204) seems to inform Catherine Lim's text as well; much more so than an exploration of a colonial experience which remains, effectively,

²⁹ In fact the issue of choice is itself a complex one which is more fully explored in the discussion of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moonfaces*, Chapter 5.

peripheral. The emphasis is again on the local rather than the imperial as a touchstone of experience. In Shirley Geok-lin Lim's example the savagery of Japanese colonial oppression is subtly less distressing than a cruelty which constitutes a betrayal within one's own community.

The Bondmaid begins with a prologue which contextualises the progress/success trope against a past which is largely "silenced trauma" (Newman 1995: 192). A little old man takes on the bulldozers to save a "dilapidated shrine on a small plot of land ... that stood in the way of a three-hundred-million dollar industrial development project". There was "*a story, never properly pieced together*, of a young woman who died there under the most tragic circumstances, sometime in the middle 1950's, and was later seen in the vicinity by many people" (my emphasis). A shrine is erected to her and she (the tragic girl) gains the status of the "Goddess with Eyes and Ears", a goddess of compassion (albeit a forgetful one). The old man dies, the bulldozers move in and "today, a huge petrochemical complex stands where once the strange goddess with eyes and ears dispensed miracles". The listening, hearing, seeing disappears. Ironically the patriarchal god, the Sky god has "no eyes or ears" (Lim, 1995: 8).

If this situates the text then the beginning point of "the piecing together" is the initial sentence: "The child Han was about to be taken away" (1995:1). Lim captures the grinding poverty of the child's world and its boisterous energy, the too many siblings who suck up any material bounty but who also provide warmth and belonging. Compassion is not absent from the child's world, it is simply overwhelmed. The child is bonded. She literally becomes the property of the tai tai, the matriarch of the initial quote. Elizabeth Sinn in a discussion of Chinese traffic in human beings argues that there was a clear distinction between "good and evil trafficking" (in Jaschok and Miers 1994:147). She then explains what is meant by the 'good' sale of a child, which consisted of "the sale of boys as adopted sons and the sale of girls as domestic servants". Mutual obligation was inherent in such arrangements. So girls, usually orphaned or with parents unable to adequately care for them, would have "to be taught and tended", readied for a marriage which would not have been possible if they had remained in their 'former' families. Given the appalling poverty some faced³⁰ this, in a

³⁰ There is a terrible irony here which does implicate the rupture of imperialism (Spivak 1999). A number of these children were sold by opium-addicted fathers (Jaschok in Jaschok and Miers

fully functional form in a society where child betrothal was a norm anyway, may not have been a bad alternative to starvation. Rey Chow in her discussion of Butterfly Literature in China (Butterfly Literature was populist writing often influenced by the west but also very much a reaction against certain 'classical' writing that was valorised in China in the 1920's), provides a quote from a novel depicting such a situation:

A fierce-looking woman had led her from the side of her father, bereft over the loss of his wife, and brought her to this wealthy household. From then on orders, exhausting toil, tears, curses and blows became the principle elements of her existence. A life of dullness, of drab, unvarying monotony...She knew well enough what would happen to her. When she reached the proper age, Madam would say to her, "You've worked here long enough." And she would be placed in a sedan chair and carried to the home of a man Madam had chosen, a man Ming-feng had never seen... There after she'd toil in his house, work for him, bear him children. (Chow 1991: 98-99)

Here, while clearly the text constitutes criticism of the system, that system is operating as it was designed to. Drudgery and "exhausting toil" is exchanged for the child's care until "the proper age" when she can be married off as the matriarch sees fit (a variation [or worse] of this fate would not have been unusual for women, including those from the west, in many parts of the world). She will in 'proper' fashion be seated in a sedan chair and carried to her future husband. The drudgery and monotony will continue but she will be part of the 'proper' social order of marriage and children, the /Game of Wife/ will have begun. While this clearly does not appeal to her there is no hint here of the sexual abuse or total degradation that the character Han (in *The Bondmaid*) sees or experiences.

Lim is explicit in her depiction of this sexual excess and abuse, almost deliberately shocking "The door was slightly ajar; she peeped in and saw the heaving, panting bulk of Fourth Older Brother, half-naked, working itself upon the full nakedness of Wind-in-the-Head lying on the bed" (1995:163). The child-like bondmaid, Wind-in-the-Head has no defenses against the predatory Fourth Older Brother. She is tractable and compliant but that doesn't save her from the violation that comes with total

1994: 183). The sale of opium of course provided great wealth for the British ('Imperial Pushers', 1996: 1) who then expressed moral outrage at the system of bonding. Lim does not explore this. Her focus is on the abuse of the system where girls were not 'only' commodities in terms of being owned but were made into sexualised commodities whose value in marriage was negligible and whose virginity (and humanity) was denied the 'proper' social protections and constraints.

powerlessness. The euphemistic work which occurs here leads to a "disposal" for which the matriarch will pay - with the same "matter-of-factness with which she regularly commented on the farmyard rampancy of males" (1995: 164). Of course the skill of the abortionist is not always up to the task and some of the bondmaids succumb to the "shock and pain", dying from the bleeding (p.164). In the savage trope of women's blood that can be found throughout the text, Wind-in-the-Head almost bleeds to death in front of the appalled Han: "It was rich, relentless woman's blood, frightening to look at, even to women" (p. 194). These women do not have the dubious privilege of Spivak's "imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male", her scornful phrase for 'proper' marriage (1999: 307); they remain outside the nomenclature of the "good wife", thoroughly erased from a patriarchal historiography. The lack of volition, the violation leads to a much later anger /'you fight the sex'/ when it moves/ to the rhythm of penile/ scores, the Body discarded/for the Void/ *not even a* /counter in the Game of Wife/ (PuruShotam, 1993: 56).

Lim wrote *The Bondmaid* in the context of a deeply paternalistic state formation, where questioning the structure of government leadership, inevitably male, had already brought censure.³¹ It is in the context of such a background, which Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan have identified as Lee Kwan Yew's earlier narrative of "self-regenerating fatherhood and patriarchal power, unmitigated, resurgent, and in endless (self-) propagation, endlessly reproducing its own image through the pliable, tractable conduit of the female body" (1995:202), that Lim has produced an explicitly anti-patriarchal text. The pliable tractable conduit of the female body referred to is a conduit for future populations, wholly within the prison of legitimated passion "by a single male". While no claim could now be sustained for the resurrection of woman as commodity in quite the way that occurred in bonding, Lee has publically contemplated a return to concubinage or at least polygyny. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, in discussing an early

³¹ Lim was thoroughly castigated by an irate Prime Minister (Goh Chok Tong) when she rather mildly implied that she thought he was still too influenced by the Senior Minister (Lee Kwan Yew). Ong Sor Fen puts it this way "She was rebuked publicly by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for two articles [published in *The Straits Times* in 1995] in which she said that Singaporeans were becoming alienated from the government because Mr. Goh's promised people-oriented style was being subsumed under the old, top-down style of government" (1998: 14). It was in fact a fairly mild comment that contained less critique than some of her more ironically political short stories (1989). Ong also comments on the fact that Lim had to self-publish *The Bondmaid* because local publishers felt it was too explicit (sexually not politically). Refusing to "tone it down" she instead published it herself.

return to Singapore (from America) has argued that "Anxiety about the modernization of society seemed displaced on women: the Asian self had to be guarded against Western corruption through the preservation of women's traditional feminine qualities" (1996: 308). And in a later commentary, Jasmine Chan has stated that the current Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong "has openly endorsed the government's position on patriarchy" (in Edwards & Roces, 2000: 39). This position, Chan argues is one which endorses its (patriarchy's) rightness and relevance in a modern Singapore. Heng and Devan link the kind of Chineseness advocated by the ruling PAP (People's Action Party) to a type of "internalized Orientalism" (1995:207). This allows for "the definition of an idealized [civilised] Chineseness fully consonant with the ideas of a market economy" which in turn "supplies the mechanism of justification by which qualities deemed undesirable (and projected as forms of racial and sexual accusation) may be contained or excised" (1995:207). The anxiety about a corrupt west, Shirley Geok-lin Lim has noted, exists in the same space as the desire to partake of the benefits of western style capitalism. There is little in any of Catherine Lim's writing to show that she finds the neocolonialism implicit here problematic. Her concern, as the prologue of *The Bondmaid* indicates is with the lack of compassion that marks rampant capitalism. There would seem to be linked to this, however, a savage distaste for or at the very least suspicion of the paternalism characterising the Singapore government.³² Heng and Devan analyse this much more overtly, stating the "indulgence in the saving visions of a reactionary past", stages that past as the "exclusive theater of omnipotent fathers" and the modern state and nationalism as theatre for the "primordial paternal signifier" (1995: 202).

Alistair Pennycook has argued that, in spite of hints at a counter tradition (to the official, prevailing discourse), a closer reading of the literary output of a number of prominent writers in Singapore (including Catherine Lim) "suggests that in many ways it poses little or no challenge to the standard discourses"(in Chew and Kramer-Dahl 1999). Pennycook is referring predominantly here to earlier work of Lim's. It would however have, I think, to be argued that the sarcasm which imbues the adjectival

³² Some caution is needed here, Lim's overt attitude to the government remains (suitably?) ambivalent. She dismisses the altercation with the Prime Minister as rather minor, and has celebrated Singaporean success in an article about the rivalry with Hong Kong in unequivocally celebratory terms, implying an acceptance of press controls - "So we are a meek, acquiescent society used to government control? Well we can do without the noise and unruliness of your politics and your media, thank you very much" (Lim 1999).

choices of "primordial paternal" signification in Heng and Devan's critique is definitively reflected in the discourse of *The Bondmaid* where all males are portrayed as so deeply flawed. In this text marriage for women (and at times even for men) is shown (with one minor exception) to be at best stultifying, at worst ethically and personally compromising if not crippling. For women living outside the bounds of even this legitimacy life is more ghastly still. State fatherhood "as the exclusive theatre of omnipotent fathers" becomes, if reflected in the traditional institution of family and social relationships as portrayed in *The Bondmaid*, a somewhat terrifying prospect. John Yang, in an essay on *The Bondmaid* (2000:1) argues that Lim rather valorises the endurance of the few female characters who compromise with societal expectations in order to reach some level of security in the text. Each of these characters achieves a level of social acceptance by conforming to and surviving patriarchal excess. I continue however, to think that the weight of the text indicates that this is no achievement at all. Han's rebellion is certainly punished, but this is because the dominant forces remain too strong not because they should remain unchallenged.

Within the crippling confines of abasement and erasure which seem to constitute Lim's *unredeeming* (rather than saving) visions of a reactionary past, Han, the young bondmaid, is portrayed as capable of manipulating and managing her own destiny, refusing the position of passive victim. She even attempts to subvert the patriarchal hierarchy of heaven by empowering a despised and little known goddess to support her cause. "Together with the joss-sticks and two gift oranges, Han brought out a cleaning rag, for sometimes small jungle creatures ran over the goddess and dropped their dirt on her" (1995: 233). The goddess has been neglected and befouled and Han works to reverse this. Her entreaties to the indifferent Sky god have been ignored and so she seeks to reinvent her own deity, female and compassionate. She paints "in the eyes and ears, so long absent from the divine face. Heavenly dragons were brought to life by potentates dotting their eyes with a brush; this sleepy goddess might be roused by freshly painted eyes and ears" (1995: 233). In an inversion of roles, the completely disempowered bondmaid becomes the "potentate" who can restore supernatural "life". The goddess does awake, she listens to and supports Han. But in a scene of heightened, graphic violence, in a fight between the two gods, the goddess loses (Chow has said "tales of combat between various celestial beings" are not unusual in popular Chinese fiction, 1991:43). Initially Han and the goddess succeed in subduing the Sky God - "So

she availed herself of her secret blood and brought the jade image to the secret place. The Sky God screamed, "Not that! Please not that!" But the blood was already on his image" (1995:313). For a moment the oppressive maleness has been challenged, countered by secret woman's blood, by the patriarchal fear of woman. Menses, blood, woman is here fleetingly read for its power, even as Spivak attempted to reread and represent Bhubaneswari's inscription of her own body onto a patriarchal text. Women's blood, in the menses, is reinscribed. The abject (menstruation), the "unacceptable, unclean" of the "significatory process" (Grosz 1990: 86) is momentarily transformed from uncontrollable expulsion into potent text, powerful weapon.

In this dream scene, reminiscent of gothic excess,³³ the goddess castrates the god with Han's, derisively small, pen knife. Ironically it is this, her lover's gift, which enables the power of the phallus to be literally removed. The dismembered god flees howling, only to return fully restored and in a scene of surreal horror to rape and decapitate the fully cognisant goddess. Again blood flows; but this time it is not menstrual blood, not secret reproductive blood and it has no power to protect. The heightened, extreme horror acts in a way which is similar to classical gothic, the exaggeration focusing the disruption of the expected norms of civilised relationships, the excess holding troubling echoes, haunting traces of a possible, tangible experience which undermines easy complacencies. Newman in a discussion of the postcolonial gothic has argued that it is Janus-faced, at its "heart lies the unresolved conflict between the imperial power and the former colony" (1995: 70), a writing genre which can function both conservatively and subversively. In Lim's novel again the tension is not with imperial but with patriarchal power (and more disturbingly still, with matriarchal complicity); the horror, not a reaction against the restraints of stultifying Enlightenment reason, but an expression of the terror to which unrestrained power can lead. While this then has aspects in common with the excesses of the Gothic, it also has much in common with other non-european literatures which might draw on horror, on the disruption of the "unspeakable" to

³³ As mentioned in chapter two, the "Gothic signifies the writing of excess" and appears in the "awful obscurity that haunted eighteenth-century rationality and morality" (Botting 1996: 1). Botting places the Gothic as a distinctly European form of writing, linked closely to a reaction against "the progress of modernity" (1996: 2). Anne Williams argues for a relationship between the excesses of patriarchy and the Gothic stating that "Gothic narratives enabled their audiences to confront and explore, and simultaneously to deny, a theme that marks the birth of the Romantic (and modern) sensibility: that the 'law of the Father' is a tyrannical paterfamilias and that we dwell in his ruins" (1995: 24).

interject into and to challenge, dominant discourses. An example would perhaps be useful here. Zeitlin discusses the seventeenth century Chinese scholar, Pu Songling's, striking commemoration "of the many innocent victims slaughtered in the Qing government's 1663 suppression of the Yu Qi rebellion"(1997: 259). This tale is haunted by the ghost Jiuniang who "figures the violent, inexorable disjunction of the past, the victory of absence and loss. She cannot be reburied or resurrected, just as history cannot be corrected or undone" (p. 263). The text would seem to be using elements similar to the register of the gothic to interpellate the space of the 'true' story, to interrogate a political unspeakable, constructed against a very different (to that of the west) historical background. This sense that literary genres defined as western (gothic and so on) occur in texts uninfluenced by western histories, constantly interpellates itself into this reading. Isagani Cruz in a discussion of the 'Eurocentricity of Theory' has argued that "a coherent history of international literary thought, in fact, could be drawn using Chinese [literary] criticism as base and Western theories as corollaries" (1994: 29); a reminder that western theory is not the only way to explore or explicate text.

This is not though, in turn, to claim that Lim's literary antecedents are wholly, 'authentically' 'Chinese'. She would acknowledge English literary influences, indeed describes one of her earliest literary attempts as involving a eulogising of strawberries, a fruit she had neither seen nor tasted (Kassim 1989:16). And as the poet Wong Phui Nam cynically comments (on the Malaysian Chinese diaspora of which Lim was a part) "My own antecedents, as were those of the majority of Chinese, were at the outmost periphery of the then existing Chinese socio-economic order. The accretions of more than three millennia of history left them unburdened of the ancient classics... of poetry and letters, the fine arts and so on" (1993: 134). He does acknowledge even so, that the tradition of telling stories, linked to what he calls a "debased form of Taoism mixed with the veneration of ancestors and worship of household and other familiar spirits" was available (1993:134) and Lim herself would claim lineage as a Chinese storyteller. She has identified her storytelling antecedents in Wicks (1996: 27), and described herself as a Chinese storyteller at the 1998 Melbourne Writer's Festival.

The role of the storyteller is resonant throughout the texts studied here. Fadzilah Amin in an article on the 1997 Asian Women Writers conference states that the women at that conference, including Catherine and Shirley Lim understood the, "manipulative power

of stories, many of which made fun of men" (1997:8). Interestingly, Anne McLaren, in a very different context, describes the role of professional storytellers in the Ming period (1368-1644) in China, who were "frequently women, often blind and in many cases illiterate" (1994: 2), very much at the margins of their society. Yet rather than being mute their stories had a subversive power, because as one commentator of the time remarked, they could with some impunity "sully the inner chambers [of high class women] with salacious words and move the ladies hearts to the passions of spring. By such means the family honour is ruined" (McLaren 1994:3). The dissident possibilities of the oral stories, which allowed for a subaltern or at the least fundamentally disempowered group to be heard is reflected in the histories of others too. Isak Dinesen's re-presentation of the story of the 'Blank Page', depicts a "veiled, brown, illiterate, old woman who sits outside the city gates" as part of the "matrilineal traditions of oral story telling" (Gubar 1989: 306). The listing of peripheries - veiled, brown, illiterate, old, outside - contains both eurocentric assumptions about what locates one at the peripheries of society,³⁴ but also points to the extremes of the marginality from which stories can still be heard. Susan Gubar argues that such a history (that of storytellers) existed "before man-made books" and lets "us 'hear the voice of silence'" (1989: 306). Dinesen's tale also involves the trope of blood which is found in the stories of many other women (see Gubar 1989). In 'The Blank Page' this is the blood of the elite, of virginal women's blood whose proof of purity in the marriage bed can be framed and read through their bleeding. And in the story there is the other 'portrait', the framed blank page, into which can be read, onto which can be inscribed different and more socially unacceptable, perhaps even gothically transgressive, meanings. The strength of the telling of, the teller of stories, needs to be reinterpellated into any discussion of a silenced subaltern; into any reading of the blankness of oppression.

Spivak in her discussion of Bhubaneswari's effort to represent herself, points to the 'oral' (or in her case the personal letter) as a problematic resistance to subalternity, because it is outside "the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation. Most often it does not catch. That is the moment I call 'not speaking', distinguishing it from the general condition of subalternity where all speech acts exchanged in

³⁴ I recall Trinh's anecdote of a white female ethnographer and her assumptions about literacy, who overhears the following pitying remark, "that girl makes me tired with her everlasting paper and pencil, what kind of life is that? (Trinh 1989: 17).

subalternity are only accessible to oral history, or to a discursive formation different from the investigation" (1993: 306). The dilemma lies with the alternative of privileging the "unexamined mode of capturing living subalterns for the international book trade" (1993: 307). As I said earlier for me this remains unresolved. Has Lim as storyteller simply 'caught' the bondmaid's story, and in her telling, even in valorised written form, placed it beyond "the official institutional structures of representation", making it so much just a story³⁵ not a serious engagement with life and death issues? The question is finally unanswerable, I think, although my own position is that, while outside institutional structures, the teller of stories often kept alive a counter hegemony that could not be expressed in "official" ways.

Rey Chow's work, to return to a more modern Chinese context, also comments on the role of the storyteller in Butterfly fiction which "is defined as the latter day successor to a long tradition of colloquial storytelling that dates back to the Tang dynasty, when storytelling took its origins from a then-popular type of Buddhist sermon" (Chow 1991: 43). Butterfly fiction was reprinted in Hong Kong and Singapore. This is not to claim that Lim would ever have read any of it, although she does claim the "Cantonese melodrama era" as a source for her writing (Y. Lim 1999: 74). The description of the literature, in Chow, seems to me to reveal parallels with the way in which, at some levels at least, Lim has constructed *The Bondmaid*. Chow describes several examples of Butterfly fiction which are "tragic tales of love and self sacrifice" (1991:66). These love stories are designed primarily for the exhibition of women, "often tirelessly detailing suicides, the cruel and sadistic practices of the whorehouse...the macabre surroundings of graveyards" conjuring an atmosphere of "disease [dis-ease] and entrapment" (1991: 64). Chow states that the "visible 'crudities' of Butterfly literature constitute a space in which the parodic function of literature is not smoothed away but instead serves to reveal the contradictions of modern Chinese society in a disturbingly 'distasteful' manner" (1991: 55). She emphasises the juxtaposition and the incompatibility of the conservative didactic treatise and of the story-telling genre which inform the writing. This disjuncture allows for the creation of a tension, an excess in which subversion might occur through "repetition, exaggeration, and improbability" (1991: 65). Such

³⁵ "Associate Professor Singh also believes - with some justification- that fiction writer Catherine Lim, who was criticised in 1994 for a newspaper article on the PM's style of government would have drawn a different reaction, or perhaps no comeback at all, if her article had appeared instead in a learned journal" or in a literary text ('Rocky Road for Singapore Artist', 1998: 14).

literature refuses a complete "break with the past" and contradicts "the optimism of a liberated and enlightened China" (1991: 65). Given this brief synopsis, even leaving out as it does some of the more complex nuances of Chow's argument, it is not difficult to see here an explanatory power for Lim's text.

Such a view of *The Bondmaid* would not be shared by a number of critics. In fact the (American) *Kirkus Review* (1997: 1) refers scathingly to the novel as a "maudlin take on doomed love", a "sentimental melodrama" rather than "a searing indictment of hidden viciousness". *The South China Morning Post* ('Tortuous Life of a Chinese Slave' 1997: 12) states "It is amazing that Lim gets away with such over-the-top tosh, and the explanation has to lie in the fact that Han's story is only a little of what the book has to offer. Lim has come up with a deeply felt, superbly conveyed insight into Chinese life and culture". Rey Chow's discussion perhaps allows for a different reading of the seeming contradictions between these perceptions of *The Bondmaid* and my own. I would have to say that "over-the-top" as I agree the text is, it is also capable of producing forceful insights into a largely undocumented world, and the story of Han, as bondmaid/slave must remain central to that formation.

Both Chow and McLaren, describing different periods of Chinese writing, speak of the public positioning of heroic women based on their willingness to sacrifice the self for the sake of family or face (honour). McLaren argues that the Femme Fatale narratives of the Ming era, which presented heroines who "follow the dictates of their own passion and thereby bring about the ruin of their families" also contained a "suppressed feminist alternative, a 'subversive paradigm' " (1994:1), because, ironically given their didactic purpose, they presented heroines who "become less figures of iniquity than strong, passionate women with recognizable frustrations" (1994: 2). In *The Bondmaid*, Han too is constructed as a passionate and self-willed child-to-woman, one who challenges stereotypes of refinement and passivity, of a carping self-sacrifice; there is no preservation of decorum here except at the most superficial level. Where such demeanor does occur, in the matriarch and the wife of Han's lover, it is indicative of hypocrisy and superficiality not of admirable control and restraint (we are reminded of the Matriarch's pompous self-aggrandisement in the face of those forced to sell their children to her). At the end of the novel, Han feverish and distraught after her new born infant son is removed from her, contributes significantly to her own death by trying to rescue

(dreamlike again) the forgetful goddess from the predations of the sky god. She throws herself into the pool and is pulled from it by her lover, Wu, dying in his arms. George Landow in a discussion of Han's earlier dream scene with the goddess, comments that she contributes to her own tragedy, showing characteristic "drive and self-centeredness" when she "calculatingly repairs the shrine of the Forgetful Goddess" (1999: 1) praying 'only', selfishly for herself and her lover, not for all the others, both male and female whose suffering haunt her consciousness. This example is used to support the contention that Lim's text is complex because she has not idealised her central character. However both scenes could be read as a rejection of the stereotype of the good woman, the sacrificer of the self. In both the trope of sacrifice is inverted. In the final denouement, Han's death is not a selfless removal of the embarrassment and burden she has become (as would be the case in a 'good' woman's suicide) instead it is a refashioning of that compliant image so valorised, Chow would argue (1991: 57), in much traditional Chinese literature. Julia Kristeva notes with some surprise that even in her time a Chinese writer friend of hers could find no better examples to illustrate "her portrait of women in China than the stories of women who committed suicide"(1986: 94). In *The Bondmaid* Han's wilfully destructive gesture is re-formed as a passionate sign of autonomy, a refusal to submit to the vagaries and injustices of a life lived without the possibility of dignity or control.

And even the lowliest of women in the text are not only/always victims, "Bondmaids could hold their rich mistresses to ransom if they held their old men and young children in thrall" (1995: 148). Some extract cruel revenge for their treatment, "Hurriedly taking a spoon out of the covered basket, Chu as hurriedly scooped up the moist, warm freshly deposited blob and plunged the spoon into something in the basket. Han could almost see the bird's waste sinking into the pure whiteness of the freshly boiled rice porridge" (1995: 201). Chu is the old Master's bondmaid. When less helpless he had used her and had destroyed her sister. Her response now that she has some power, as he moves into a dependent senility is to degrade and dehumanise him, reducing him to eating excreta, the ironic juxtaposition of the "freshly boiled" pure white rice porridge, a rich man's repast and the "freshly deposited blob". She uses her ascendancy over him to debase him "She had it in her power to make him lower than a beast" (1995: 205). Chu though, while not only victim, is always victim for when the old man dies she commits suicide, not liberated but consumed. The text subtly acknowledges Jessica Benjamin's insight

that the "slave must grant power of recognition to the master" (1988: 54). The characters of Chu and of Han differ significantly in this. Chu can punish the old man, but her identity also dies with him, she has granted him the "power of recognition" on which is based her subjective sense of self. Han never allows this, never stops the struggle for a self beyond that assigned to her by social status. The scatology can be criticised as simplistically sensational or can be interpreted as conveying Lim's sense of 'unrefined' disgust but there is anger in the multiplication of shocking or disturbing image.

The complicity and/or submissiveness of some of the female characters in this work (Wind-in-the-Head cannot oppose fourth Uncle, the matriarch will not challenge him) do not result from a stereotyping orientalism³⁶ but from the perception of a monolithic patriarchy that dominated all lives. The text explores the psychic damage of this, refusing to valorize the sacrificial social function implied. In an inversion of the denunciation of a western construction of a cruel orient, however there can occur what Lisa Lowe calls a new celebratory orientalism which, she claims, leads a critic like Julia Kristeva to argue that "the Chinese woman is at once within familial and social relations and yet beyond those relations, and that her hysterias, suicides, and pregnancies are statements of her power, and examples of the ways in which the Chinese woman under Confucianism protests her subjection and subverts paternal authority" (Lowe 1991: 150). While Kristeva is clearly appalled at the oppression she perceives, the need to celebrate the 'Chinese Woman' in opposition to the west leads to a reading of suicide and pregnancies as protest or subversion which is difficult to sustain - she argues "woman is introduced into the phallic order; [but] as its waste product ... but in the long run, she will have symbolic premium as well" (1977: 84). And *The Bondmaid* too inverts these images so that Han's death is a challenge to the stultifying social order. A shrine is erected to her by her distraught lover, the little old man of the prologue (and the young Towkay of the book itself) who rejects his privileged place in society to tend the bondmaid's tomb. Given this, in Lim's text, pregnancies, hysteria and suicides

³⁶ Yuan Fang Sheng (1996) in an analysis of 'China Girls, Australian literary representations of Chinese Women' sees clear indications of an ongoing orientalism in the representation of Chinese women as it occurs in the west (Australia). Stereotypes of sexual depravity, refined delicacy or wicked power-seeking occur throughout the writing discussed. I would argue that while not dissimilar figures can be found in Lim's writing, the way in which such characterisations are explored precludes any easy labelling.

remain very much part of the cruel arbitrariness of the patriarchal order not tropes of viable resistance to it.

Jinhua Emma Teng in a discussion of the way Chinese women are constructed in the western academy argues, "New research on women in China ... overturns older stereotypes of the Chinese women as uniformly oppressed and unempowered" (1996: 133). Lim's text could in this framework be seen as pandering to a stereotype of the Chinese woman as victim and the Chinese male as barbaric which has been prevalent in western discourse (this in the context of Lim's later novel *The Teardrop Story Woman*, will be discussed more fully in the next chapter). However when a reading is placed against the patriarchal triumphalism of the PAP (The Singaporean People's Action Party) it can, perhaps, also be understood quite differently.

George Landow asks the question whether *The Bondmaid* is a postcolonial novel, arguing that it is only nominally so. Set in Singapore (when it was one of the Straits settlements and under British rule) the text confronts the abuses of a particularly situated patriarchy. Landow argues that Lim's emphasis on the identifiably Chinese nature of these abuses may make it difficult for those who wish to reconnect with the traditional, to do so. A further implication can be of a complicity with the colonial which confirms the disfunction of Other cultures. Uma Narayan, in the context of more recent examples of gendered violence (see chapter 1) confronts a similar issue and responds "given that these negative attitudes and stereotypes about third world communities are produced in a number of powerful institutional sites, I find it unlikely that the solution for 'Western cultural arrogance' lies in third world feminist silence about the problems women face in their national and cultural contexts" (1997: 135). The Anno Domini of the experience represented lies not in the colonial but in another and different historicity, in a different chronology that is impacted only marginally by the politics of colony. As such *western* stereotypes of and misrepresentations of Asian womanhood do not seem central to its construction. What is pivotal is Lim's compelling anger at the oppressions of a deeply patriarchal system and at the constructions of womanhood which allowed this to occur.

The overlay of middle class mores, agency and romance with which Lim imbues the story may not be authentic (in whatever meaning one can elicit from that disputed term)

but the imaginary space opens a possibility that not all oppression always and completely controls, that a bondmaid might have existed who did resist, did contain her world, wrest autonomy for a while, for a moment, a utopian instant in the bleakness. This subaltern is irredeemably silenced, just a fleeting, haunting memory, a memory triggered by the life and death of a real girl-child. As a person (rather than a character in a well-off woman's tale) she was a possession, living and dying unheard as had thousands before her. Yet she, strangely, required propitiation. Lim's re-creation is open to critique but the story itself, raises questions that cannot be silenced and faces an unsavoury herstory in a climate that would seek to elide it.

Chapter 4 Between Us

*Our toes stretch free, their bones
Not bruised or bound for lotus feet;
In different times we grew
To walk the ground with indifferent gait,
A quarter century dividing us less than marriage.*

*I have heard my father-in-law's women
Draw their knives. His mother said
To his wife, her son was young enough
To take another. What other wounds
You've counted, your head
Replaying reel by reel!
I have also seen you bait*

*Your mother by marriage:
You would not need your children
To feed you in your age.*

*She's been long dead –
Her knives you've seized to bleed arteries
Still – her death no remedy.
I should be thankful
You throw me no daggers,
But that we both starve
Choking on righteous dust,
You in your past, I in your presence,
Stitched up by gesture and obedience
To hang: two dumb dolls from history's cage.*

Leong Liew Geok (1993: 57)

Lim's *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998) begins with the birth of a child, a girl-child and with stories of the fate of other children, condemned for the "double sin of being born female and deformed" (1998: 3). There is a barely suppressed rage as Lim retells what happened to these babies, where compassion consisted in smothering rather than exposing them. But that was in the old country - "in the adopted country, fate was kinder". The text explores the savagely ironic kindness of the girl-child's continued existence, denouncing the patriarchal, but not the colonial system, that produced her.

Leong Liew Geok's poem reflects a similar anger as tension, as anguish; the re-enactment of a brutality that is not only or simply a brutality of men, indicting both the victim status of women and their sometimes brutal agency. This is written *not* against the primacy of the colonial nor the universal of women's suffering but makes specific women's oppression in ways that confront categorisation, the homogenisation of experience. The horror of the lotus feet and the complicity of women in the oppression of women, oppression even of the girl children, daughters and not strangers, are distressing. Leong Liew Geok's evocation of /toes stretching free/, implies whole histories of suffering and control and is more poignant (because so empathetically imagined, my toes inadvertently flex as I read) than clinical descriptions of an evil practice. But the violence is in the women's relationships, in the drawing of the "knives", the bleeding of the "arteries". Now such violence is no longer overt, it has become /stitched up by gesture and obedience/ but still leaves the two women hanging

like "dumb dolls" controlled, contained, continuing to be caged by the past in the distrust and stitched silence of history. Even the liberating telling of stories between women, from women to women can become somehow sinister, fragmenting, dislocating as in Nirmala PuruShotam's poem 'Unmoulding Women' which began the previous chapter - /Mothers' stories, continuing/Discontinuity from/Once upon a long ache ago/. The preceding line of the poem points to the enigma, the dilemma of critique /And you are feminists/Badged with the distinction/of Mothers' stories/. The badge both an identity and a label, a clasp that might grip painfully. My reading of Catherine Lim's *The Teardrop Story Woman* will be placed within the context of feminist and postcolonial feminist criticism, the specificity of text analysed within, contrasted to or illuminated by broader theoretical concerns.

The confronting image of the lotus foot recurs, although the diasporic stories in which it occurs are often from those of a different class whose feet were seldom bound. This overdetermined trope is rarely central, an exoticised 'other' even for the writers themselves, a compelling symbol of the crippling control of patriarchal excess. The physicality of the crippled feet, broken by the mother, the expected nurturer and protector, confounds, yet fascinates readers³⁷ in a parody of voyeurism, in the silenced suffering of the privileged (for often the crippled feet were a symbol of elite rather than of victim status). Lim in *The Teardrop Story Woman* describes Second Grandmother whose feet were bound:

She recalled her beauty, and the special pleasure she gave her husband, swaying towards him like a flower on its stalk, with nothing on except her silken doll's shoes, exactly as he wanted it. He would raise himself on his elbow to look at her, cackling with delight.

Ginseng. Rhino's horn. What were these compared to the power of tiny feet in doll's shoes, to enthrall and heat up old blood.

Many years before, when she was a little girl, her mother had said to the footbinder, 'Tighter! Tighter!', then turned to her to wipe the tears from her face and to promise, 'My little Gek Neo, when you grow up, you will be beautiful and please your husband.' Her mother must have visualised exactly this supreme reward for her sacrifice and pain. For even after her

³⁷ Kaz Ross argues "in the early twenty-first century, the footbinding shoe is again in hot demand" (2001: 311). The shoe becomes a commodity; as one collector has said, it is an "exquisite example of craft" which represents "a kind of discipline, suffering and resignation that we in the West cannot ever really comprehend" (2001: 330). Ross comments that this brings "us back to the comforting notion of something irrevocably 'other' about the Chinese" (2001:330).

husband had taken a third, and then a fourth wife, Lee Gek Neo remained his favourite (1998:12).

While the story of the Second Grandmother is subordinate in the narrative, the poignancy of her 'love' story, of the physical mutilation that confers status and desirability juxtaposes with the broader and yet more destructive romance of the novel's central narrative. The recognition of sick desire is held within a text that somehow retains and dignifies the woman's sensuality; which gives insight into the terrible need to be an object of male desire. By such objectification the mutilated body is protected from the greater mutilation of rejection and the poverty which would flow from it. The irony of being favourite (even after the third and fourth wives), the aw(e)ful link of sacrifice and pain with the 'love' of a "cackling" old man makes some sense of women's participation in/acceptance of a practice that the west has long regarded as exemplar of Chinese cruelty (Teng 1996: 121). Lim has no illusion about the abuse the lotus feet represent, and the younger generation of women whose /toes stretch free/ recoil from the disfigurement they embody:

One day, the child saw the small feet unshod for the first time and cried at their ugliness. Second Grandmother was sitting on a low stool and cleaning them with a piece of cloth dipped in hot water. The stale smell of the removed shoes and the sight of the mutilated toes and nails grown inwards into soft flesh hit her and raised a cry of alarm. She ran out of the room.

The generous, encircling arms, the voice upon which flowed a rich stream of tales and dreams, drew her, but the ageing, crippled body with the malformed hoofs or pig's trotters for feet...beat her back into a silent, cowering anger (1998: 21)

The earlier uneasy sensuality has become this freakishness, the golden lotus foot a despised pig's trotter; the remembered pink, desirable flesh a horror of nails grown inwards impaling the soft tissue in a travesty of desire. The girl's response is one of "silent, cowering anger". What is never really made clear, what cannot perhaps be clarified, is anger against whom. Feminist criticism explores the idea of the body as the site of inscription; here, encrypted on the vulnerable body of the child, the paedophilic overtones (the old man's sex stimulated by the tiny doll-like feet) create unease and revulsion. Elizabeth Grosz argues bodies are incised, "more or less marked, constituted as an appropriate, or, ... inappropriate" for cultural requirements (1994: 142). Here the child is deeply marked and through this becomes a desirable object.

Lim later links footbinding to other symbols of control. Mei Kwei, the central character in *The Teardrop Story Woman* and Second Grandmother's granddaughter, is courted by Old Yoong. He presents her with an expensive jade bangle.

'Here. Let me.' Old Yoong tried to fit the rigid circlet of stone over the bruised bones of her hand, pushing, shoving, tugging. The gift is hurting, Mei Kwei thought, as the pain brought tears into her eyes. *Tighter, tighter.* But her bones could not come more tightly together, to accommodate her hard gift. *Tighter, tighter.* The small bones in Second Grandmother's feet had yielded to the footbinder's pitiless, crushing bands before they could be slipped into the gift of the beautiful doll's shoes. The bones of her hand refused to be crushed and fought against the invading jade (1998: 133).

The bangle is finally, tortuously forced onto the small wrist, the binding is complete. The gift-giving has become an act of domination, the jade translucent, sensual yet cold, rigid, unyielding; a transaction that is as much entrapment and containment as it is pledge. The link of both affluence and pain in the woman's binding is again emphasised. Later Lim says of her character that she "would slip out of the greedy grasp of men all her life"; greed, affluence, dominance, ownership characterise Mei Kwei's relationships with men. The tie to a controlling patriarchy is also implied; old men with young women who are crippled by their gift-giving. The trope of the bangle as substitute social indicator of ownership is echoed in Hanifa Deen's *Broken Bangles* where she says (of some women in Pakistan and Bangladesh) "custom and tradition encircle their lives like the bangles they wear on their wrists" (Frontispiece, 1998). This is a circle of protection that is, as Lim too presents it, a circle of confinement and enclosure. The invasive violence of male domination is emphasised here and Lim will throughout the text interrogate what being a victim of this means.

The complicity of women in this oppression of women is evident in both *The Bondmaid* and *The Teardrop Story Woman*. In both texts adult women feature substantially in the construction of the central character's misery. The matriarch in *The Bondmaid* sits complacently in her mother-of-pearl chair, the sensual opulence, the ostentation of this a reminder of status to the impoverished women who come to sell their children to her; in *The Teardrop Story Woman* the mother, herself impoverished, is also however an oppressive presence, dejected, embittered, unable (as would be the matriarch) to defy the male members of the household. The mother's ongoing passivity in the text is

presented in clear opposition to the opening lines of *The Teardrop Story Woman*, which are scathingly confrontational. This choice of words challenges with its vehemence, the violence of tradition that frames its possibility; "[w]hen Mei Kwei was born, the midwife, seeing the despised slit between the tiny, quivering legs instead of the prized curl of flesh, shook her head and clucked her tongue" (1998: 3). The vulnerability of the "tiny, quivering legs" and the disapprobation of the clucking tongue are almost tactile evocations of the baby's inadequacy, *her* failure. That first line negates identity, the possibility of a self for the child. It is a reduction of the being to "a despised slit between the tiny quivering legs." The father's later nickname for the child - "smelly cunt" (1998: 22) at once figures the raucousness, the crudity of the Hokkien tradition (so different from the refined and feminised homogenisation of 'China' where the inscrutable oriental is cunning and unreadable not strident and bluntly crude - Yuang Fang Shen, 1996: 45) but also and more importantly emphasises the primacy of her biological sex and then degrades it.³⁸ This is not written against the centrality of a colonial experience nor does it imply any complicity on the part of the coloniser in such a construction. Rather it is located in the primacy of this historical and contextually non-western positioning of the female in opposition to the male, the "despised slit...instead of the prized curl of flesh". There is a similarity, though, here between a European and Chinese construction of female, which is difficult to ignore. Sidonie Smith eerily echoes Lim's text; in challenging Lacan's work Smith states that he "would reduce woman to the gap between her thighs, to an absence of access to the phallus as universal signifier" (1993b: 59). Two very different traditions come to a similar formation of female and this need not be dismissed as the west's desire to project itself onto the 'Other' nor as the 'Others' need to mimic the west.

In *The Teardrop Story Woman* internalisation of a sense of female inferiority is palpable in characters like that of Mei Kwei's mother who is beaten by the demands placed upon her and who bears an uncanny (though much more embittered) resemblance to the mother in *The Crocodile Fury*. She too is quiescent and overwhelmed.

³⁸ Poppi Smith points to the paradox inherent in the father's rejection, in that Ah Oon Koh's rebuff is more virulent than customary. As a child he was dressed as a girl to confuse vindictive spirits who might harm him because of his status as a beloved son. The humiliation of this experience has distorted his response to his own child. Smith argues that some of the venom of his reaction is because he fears women as "symbolically potent and powerful" (1998: 57), an argument which, in more general terms, Kristeva would support (1977: 84).

Ah Oon Soh was convinced that it all boiled down to the discharging of a debt: the wrong-doings of a previous life were being paid for in this one, through the pain inflicted on her by her entire family. 'My fate,' she summed it all up to Pig Auntie. (1998: 203)

The mother's lack of spirit is contrasted with the gutsiness of the Second Grandmother, who marches off on her crippled feet at the start of the story to inform the father of the birth of the girl, the one with the "despised slit" between her legs. The Second Grandmother, so viciously, vividly contained, ignores her pain to challenge the apathetic father. She takes on too, the village louts; refusing to be a passive victim. There is a layering of contradiction and ambiguity in Lim's construct here. It is the victimised mother who paradoxically keeps the family fed and clothed as the father slips more and more into opium induced stupor, yet she remains incapable of rejecting the status quo. The Second Grandmother, who romanticises the disfigurement which her tiny feet clearly represent in the text, contests the traditional denigration of the female, scorning the father's hostile disappointment (1998: 12). Ah Oon Soh's (the mother) despondency, unlike that of Yahp's mother/character, cannot be explained through the debilitating tendencies of Christian belief. It sits firmly within the explanatory power of a traditional fatalism ("the wrong-doings of a previous life"), a fatalism that infects her sense of autonomy and effectiveness. The Second Grandmother however is also 'pagan' but the debilitation which colours Ah Oon Soh's world impacts little on hers. She believes in her power to opportune the goddess, in her ability to influence both fate and the father's bloody-mindedness: the granddaughter is dressed opulently, defiantly for her name day, the grandmother organizes her own coffin, is tranquil in death (1998: 57). This complexity though does not obviate the women's sometime collusion with patriarchy.

Ketu Katrak argues that the Medusa-type figure, (in her [Katrak's] discussion of a text by Bessie Head, linked here to the complicity of the mother in the binding of the feet)"embodies the reality of women oppressing other women, a reality embedded also in patriarchal power structures where women internalise their oppression, and when they assume positions of power (such as mothers-in-law in Indian [or Chinese] tradition) they exert and abuse that power on younger women"(1996: 289). The feminist critic Helene Cixous may have reclaimed the Medusa, revelling in her power to transform, yet the riveting of women between "two horrifying myths: between the

Medusa and the abyss" (1990: 228), eurocentric as the image is, points to the unresolved dilemma which constitutes some at least of herstory - /I have heard my father-in-law's women/ Draw their knives/. The violence dispels any easy stereotype of passive victim. Yet the dysfunction evident cannot be ignored. This is an agency created from anger and frustration; spirals of oppression and repression /paterfamilies, where Female/Voice is sweet with Pink/ Miseries.../. Even this ironic sweetness is absent from Leong's and from Lim's writing. The hold of tradition, that choking on /righteous dust, /You in your past, / I in your presence/ continues to have power, to be the source of the writing against, much more so in these texts than does a peripheral and relatively amiable colonial overlordship (a position which in itself requires examination). Julia Kristeva argues that the antagonisms "reveal the wretchedness of the female condition, and the accumulation of unused impulses, capable of channelling themselves into merciless aggression" (1991:77). Cixous' re-appropriation of the Medusa, a positive of laughter, of energy and female potency is also a figure who can create paralysis (of both men and women) within the ambit of her gaze, compelling and formidable.

The footbound Second Grandmother is not paralysed, nor wholly controlled by her disfigurement, never only victim in this re-presentation, but she is cruelly, culturally marked and such marking, viewed as mutilation, can be perceived as a trope confirming the viciousness of the oriental 'Other' (from the site of the west). Dorothy Ko's recent discussion of the practice points to a distinct irony here. She contends that historically "footbinding became the terrain on which the ethnic and cultural boundaries between the Han Chinese and [their own] 'Other' were being drawn" (2001: 3). In fact she argues, "naked and unadorned feet were filthy attire, a properly refined and dressed foot separated the "civilized Chinese from their barbaric neighbours such as the natives of Jiaozhijz, modern-day Vietnam" (2001:5). So the foot-bound Grandmother, that so alien, marginal other of a eurocentric tradition is doubly marked as the centre, in a centre/other construct, of a differently situated historical consciousness, if one accepts Ko's contention.

In the creation of this alternative dialectic, the positioning of the women as only victims as has occurred in western descriptions of the bound foot needs to be addressed. Chilla Bulbeck in a discussion of the marking of women's bodies, has argued that many western feminists have perceived "clitoridectomy, foot-binding and witch burning" as

"all incidents of patriarchal control, cross-cultural control of women by men"(1998: 85). Ko argues that it is necessary to view the practice of footbinding at least as situated and as a complex not simplistically cruel response to historical circumstances, to counter the universalizing of women's oppression in reductive terms.

In the case of clitoridectomy (so often linked with footbinding as proof of an incomprehensibly barbaric 'Other') Kadiatu Kanneh points out that " 'Female Circumcision' has become almost a dangerous trope for the muting and mutilation of women - physically, sexually and psychologically - and for the women's *need* for Western feminism. Circumcision, clitoridectomy, infibulation, become one visible marker of outrageous primitivism, sexism and *the* Third World woman" (1992 in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995: 347). Renata Salecl in another discussion of clitoridectomy states "many cultures that perform" it "are not classical patriarchies" (1998: 30). Salecl asserts that initiation "through the cut in the body" is used to confirm "the subject's sexual identity" (1998: 32). Similarly Lim makes a clear link between footbinding (a breaking of the body) and a delineation of female sexual identity, "the small foot along with its little staggering dancelike walk...became the most erotic part of the female body" (Hong 1997: 45). Unlike Salecl (who implies that the practice she is discussing *can* be an almost benign (or at least not automatically malign) recognition of difference), in *The Teardrop Story Woman*, Lim clearly links footbinding to a sick male eroticism evidenced in the imagery of attraction which then makes the tiny doll's feet desirable attributes.

According to Jinhua Emma Teng though, the conflation of Chinese footbinding, with clitoridectomy (and this time, in the place of western witch burning - 'suttee') becomes the "triad of ['third world'] women's suffering" which is then "frequently used as an indicator of the pernicious character of traditional cultures, both by feminists and non-feminists"(1996:124). In such a context Chandra Mohanty argues the ubiquitous third world woman "never rise[s] above the debilitating generality of [her] 'object' status" (Mohanty et al 1991: 82). The moral probity which informs the voyeuristic scrutiny of footbinding (from the site of the west) has been recorded in the writing of western

women³⁹ travellers from before the end of the last century and has served largely as a confirmation of their (western women's) "moral and cultural superiority" (Stanley, 1997: 79).

Given that it is not the purpose of this thesis to explore historical nuances/interpretations in any depth, two issues touched on require further, if relatively brief, analysis: the positioning of the practice (footbinding) at a place from which the west can continue to feel superior and the positioning of the practice within a Chinese context. To address the latter first is a quote from an edict issued by the Jiaqing emperor in 1804, one and a half centuries after the founding of the Qing dynasty which states "costume is an important matter related to the tradition of the state and the mind of the citizens." There follows an order to root out any girls who should be found wearing Chinese style dress or "girls who even *follow* the Chinese *costume* of having their feet bound. Once you locate such unlawful youths, you must immediately impeach their parents, punishing them according to the legal codes for criminals *who disobey* government regulations" (Hung 1997: 354, my emphasis). Marie Vento argues that to "an extent, footbinding was considered a component of female attire or adornment and not a form of bodily mutilation, as the body was not viewed as an enclosed physical entity" (1998: 3). The word 'costume' as used in the edict supports such an explanation. Vento then stresses that correct "attire was regarded as the ultimate expression of Chinese culture and identity" (1998: 3). The *discipline* of women's dress is noted by both Vento, and Marni Stanley (1997) (in a discussion of the bound foot and the european corset), and its importance emphasised as a symbol of civilisation. To be civilised was to be, as evidenced through control of women's bodies, restrained, contained, confined. Elizabeth Grosz asserts that from a western perspective "only very recently has the body been understood as more than an impediment to our humanity. In the past the preferred body was one under control, pliable, amenable to the subject's will" (1995: 2). Ko has stated that in the Chinese cosmography "the boundaries between the body and the environment were sifting and permeable" (2001:8). Ko goes on to assert that since "adornment was the mark of womanhood, footbinding was the most *natural* adornment of a woman's gendered identity" (my emphasis, 2001:12). The body as adornment (or

³⁹ Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Meyers contend that "the situation of 'native women' was by far the most popular cause for white women to espouse; it was not rare for them to establish charitable institutions, providing a 'civilising' impulse for colonial society" (1994: 16).

as incised by it), the body as plastic, malleable, able to be moulded, is theorized in Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994). Susan Bordo offers a note of warning however, cautioning against the effacement of the material body in the emphasis on play and choice that becomes possible as the body becomes less a natural given and more a manipulable construct (Bordo 1997).

In *The Teardrop Story Woman*, Lim emphasizes the link Second Grandmother makes between her bound-feet and the tiny shoes she wears. When she tells Mei Kwei years later of her heroic trek to inform Ah Oon Koh (the father) of the birth of his unwanted daughter, she emphasizes his villainy with a spurious accusation: the father had, she said, shaken the bicycle he had been forced to ferry her home on "so hard that she fell off into a dung heap and ruined her best pair of shoes" (1998:8). Even though the shoes were actually "intact and safe at home" and the child knew that this was a story "for hearing only, not believing" (1998:8), the importance of the shoes and the abomination of the father's behaviour (exaggerated though this is known to be) is what is important. "Miniature peonies and butterflies, delicately worked in the finest silk threads of gold and red, sunk into vile excretia! A gentlewoman's badge of fine breeding and prestige dishonoured for ever!" (1998: 8). Ross in her study of the footbinding shoe argues "the foot and shoe were effectively inseparable" (2001:313). The girls and women decorated their own shoes and "poorly made shoes could turn a pair of 'lotus feet' into 'pigs trotters'" (2001: 313). The link of both shoe and foot with civility, even honour is clear. Ross goes further asserting that the feet (always concealed in their shoes) were "evidence of the attainment of high cultural (Han Chinese) achievement" indeed they were "cultural artifacts" (2001: 313). Ross' historical re-construction of the importance of the rarely separated foot and shoe is echoed in Lim's text. The shoes are precious, delicately embroidered, the symbols of peony and butterfly each carrying meaning for both the sewer and the viewer. The peony in particular was a symbol of good fortune. In an interview, Wang Ping who wrote the book *Aching for Beauty* (2001) has argued "The women found freedom and self-identity through foot binding. The embroidery rooms [where women would gather to work on intricate designs for their shoes] was similar to a book club these days or a support group... there was a very rich tradition of female bonding and female heritage throughout China and Chinese history" (2002: 1). In Shirley Geok-lin Lim's poem, where she too describes Ah Mah's bound feet

(Grandmother Lim), the imagery blends the horrendous and the delicately aesthetic. Grandmother Lim was a

Soochow flower song girl
every bone in her feet
had been broken, bound tighter
than any neighbour's sweet
daughter's. Ten toes and instep
curled inwards, yellow petals
of chrysanthemum, wrapped
in gold cloth (in Rutherford, Jensen & Chew, 1994: 219).

Here the lyrical discourse of flower song girl, of sweet daughters, of petals and the rich affluence of golden cloth contrasts with the terror of broken feet, bound tighter. But the cloth of binding and the cloth of affluence are inseparable. The textuality of the shoe is opulent, juxtaposed with the textuality of the foot, euphemistic flower, feminine folds wrapped in dainty bindings. Much later in *The Teardrop Story Woman*, Mei Kwei (or the narrator) comments, "Life is made bearable by the stories we save and tell" (1998: 235) and there follows the tale of a friend of Second Grandmother who sewed together scraps of cloth to make blankets, each piece telling a story. The tiny shoes, the materials from which they were woven and the groups of women who sewed them, also carried stories, not simply of pain and disablement but of desire and civility, of the ties that bind; reflecting not only the dysfunction of being /stitched up by gesture and obedience/ (Leong 1993:57) but also, as agents, scribing into their embroidery⁴⁰ something other than stultifying conformity. The suffering remains but is not reduced to an incomprehensible alienness.

From Ko's (2001) situated perspective, a further complexity is added to the reading of this trope. In the edict already quoted, are the implications of another imperialism, that of the Manchurian Qing dynasty over the Han Chinese, with footbinding as a trope of subversion and revolution! The bound foot is a form of *costume* that inscribes identity in a way which is forbidden. Footbinding as an emblem of civil disobedience presents us with all the problems of Spivak's argument of sati as a form of both agency under, and subversion of, British imperialism (more complex because it was the mother's 'choice' for the daughter who could not refuse). Spivak cites the comment of Ashis

⁴⁰ Of course, the 'classical' western feminist study of embroidery as subversion is in Rozsika Parker's (1996) *The Subversive Stitch*.

Nandy who maintains, "Groups rendered psychologically marginal by their exposure to Western impact...had come under pressure to demonstrate, to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture" (1999: 289). Such a formulation has the added dimension in this context that the colonialism rebelled against was not-european (in a footnote to this discussion Spivak wryly avers, "There may be something Eurocentric about assuming that imperialism began with Europe", 1999: 289). In her extremely complex discussion of sati, she acknowledges that to some extent the practice, initially, developed as a protection from the violation of the invader⁴¹. McLaren argues that it was with the "Mongol conquest of China in the thirteenth century that "householders became vitally concerned with keeping their womenfolk safe from foreign marauders. Foot-binding became the fashion" (1994: 9). Such confinement, recently has been interpreted as allowing an "innermost realm reflecting a female prerogative" rather than an indication of "the subjection of women" (1994:9). That the enforced segregation of women failed to ensure virtue, is shown, McLaren argues, by the rise in *femme fatale* literature which had the didactic purpose of warning against the "uncontrolled passions" of women who disdained social or familial containment.

In criticism, the western appropriation of 'Chinese women' has often implied a homogeneity which leads to the sense of 'them' "as a unified subject...thus the double fallacy of 'Chinese womanhood'" (Teng 1996:137). In this undifferentiating framework then, the "image of the Chinese women in [Western] literature from the 1970s and early 1980s was generally characterized by victimization" (Teng 1996: 133). This has the twofold tendency of both regulating and essentialising Chinese women's experience and completely erasing both difference and oppositional practice. Footbinding, while it occurred across classes at certain times, was more generally a signifier of status, of gentility and refinement and was never practised by certain groups at all. It was a practice which, while wide spread in certain periods, was also the subject of ongoing

⁴¹ Spivak refers to the eminent poet Rabindranath Tagore's admiration for - "The Jauhar [group self-immolation of aristocratic Rajput war-widows or imminent war-widows] practiced by the Rajput ladies of Chitor and other places for saving themselves from unspeakable atrocities at the hands of victorious Moslems" (1999: 300). Spivak is critical of the underlying ideology in the male writer's admiration for such actions, stating that such a response to the threat of rape, works in "the long run, in the interest of unique genital possession of the female" (1999: 300).

and sometimes influential *internal* criticism⁴². On the other hand a response like that of the French critic Julia Kristeva, which seeks to valorise Chinese womanhood remains just as dismissive of the "geographical, historical" and other differences that inform all societies. Her speculation about whether, even after feudal practice (the most vicious example of which was the bound feet) reduced most Chinese women to "mute objects or slaves of the patriarchal order", a unique "kind of maturity, a kind of intelligence, a calm, precise mastery does not continue to characterize the Chinese woman and distinguish her from the man" (1986: 84) is problematic. That such characteristics could occur (together) in certain women of any race is not remarkable, but the valorising positive stereotype of these traits, occurring as a representation of a ubiquitous 'Chinese woman' is disconcertingly condescending. Chow, while acknowledging Kristeva's " 'humble' gesture to revere them" also states that when "the other is Asia and the 'Far East', it always seems as if the European intellectual must speak in absolute terms" (1993: 33). A new Orientalism (as per Lowe's argument, see Chapter 3) can creep in; the 'Chinese woman' as unrecognisable Other, the remnants of the inscrutable oriental but much nicer.

Cheryl Johnson-Odim in a slightly different response also challenges the uncritical consignment of non-western women to unrelieved misery and inadequacy (courtesy of their unremittingly nasty oriental male counterparts). She argues (citing Etienne and Leacock), "Egalitarian relations or at least mutually respectful relations were a living reality in much of the world of precolonial times, which was far from the case in Western culture"(1991: 314). Clearly very differently balanced gender relations have existed in various regions of the world and universalising women's multiple experiences, resistances and oppressions must be avoided. But Johnson-Odim, while not denying that oppressive patriarchies have existed (other than in the west), could be accused in her turn of a flattening out of experience as the critique seeks to implicate the colonial in most forms of oppression. It can of course be argued for example that the

⁴² A thousand year history is enormously difficult to summarise or even to begin to comprehend. But it is clear that many factors contributed to its final popularity (of which the eroticism of the lotus foot was only one, see Hong 1997). And opposition was voiced; this was rarely an undisputed practice. Hong lists a series of prominent (male) dissenters including Cao Xueqin (1715-c.63), who wrote the classic *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1997: 49). However one commentator's reason for abandoning the practice was that it had been taken up by the lower classes and therefore had been contaminated, it was no longer a sufficient indicator of upper class refinement and superiority.

Minangkabau of West Sumatra "constitute the largest matrilineal society in the world" (Krier 1995 in Ong and Perletz 1995:51) and are a dominant presence in Negri Sembalan in Malaysia, where most of *The Teardrop Story Woman* is set (Ong and Perletz provide a complex and specific discussion of the sort of non-oppressive societies which, I think Johnson-Odim somewhat glosses here). And that women in all societies have resisted such oppression⁴³ is also evidenced in the stories told. In a Chinese context Lillian Ng's *Silver Sister* (1994) is a text which evokes the life of a 'comb up' woman who joins the "sisterhood" in the mid twentieth century, eschewing the male-dominated institutions of marriage, concubinage or prostitution. Comb up women often migrated to Hong Kong or Singapore, earning their own living, sometimes through very heavy physical labour (the construction industry in early Singapore was dependent on their back-breaking work). Many too became domestic servants, their black and white dress and combed up hair an ongoing symbol of their sisterhood. Ng however also searingly records the terrible poverty (for both males and females) that led to the choice her central character makes. She had this choice only because she was too ugly to be sold to a brothel like her sisters. Lim, in both *The Bondmaid* and *The Teardrop Story Woman*, asserts the complexity of the patriarchal oppression she narrates, but in none of these texts (Ng's or Lim's) is there an attempt to deny that this oppression existed. Whilst, then, there is a valorising homogeneity in Johnson-Odim's statement, this does not, however, negate her insistence that we should take care not to ignore the cultural differences (from a western analysis of patriarchy) which exist in the creation and enforcement of gendered norms and which have, too often, been elided in the universalisation of 'women's oppression'. Ketu Katrak argues that rather than idealizing " 'tradition' (often most oppressive to women)", it is important to problematise the so-called 'gains' of an, often collusive, colonialism (1996: 273). This is something, however, which Lim does not choose to do. As will be more fully shown later, she chooses rather to re-construct and to confront that traditional subjugation⁴⁴, the colonial is not a factor in the construction of this female repression.

⁴³ In discussing 'oppression' of Third world women, Uma Narayan's argument about modern forms of violence is particularly noteworthy. She suggests that " 'death by culture'" explains domestic violence when applied to third world women but is absent from explanations of "fatal forms of violence against mainstream Western women" who seem interestingly "resistant to such 'cultural explanations'" (1997: 84).

⁴⁴ Fan Hong in *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom* actually claims that women in China have often been more oppressed than elsewhere (her comparisons are not solely western). She links this to footbinding which she says, effectively limited women's participation in any production

In *The Teardrop Story Woman* Lim's artistic representation of a traditional society does nothing to challenge the perniciousness of the practice she delineates yet it provides a subtly different representation from the records or interpretations often extant in the west. As her writer's gaze objectifies Second Grandmother's feet, making them animal rather than human, deformed rather than erotic, she also avoids, as have few critics, both a smug superiority and a reduction of the Second Grandmother to the suffering her crippled feet undoubtedly exemplify. Embodying rather, feisty courage and comforting love, Second Grandmother (so overtly marked by subjugation) fiercely defends the vulnerable girl-child in ways which no other characters in the text do. It is she who tells Mei Kwei stories, who balances the excess of patriarchal rejection. "The generous, encircling arms, the voice upon which flowed a rich stream of tales and dreams" are only momentarily debased in the animal ugliness of the "pig's trotters". Mei Kwei continues, throughout, to call on the love of the Second Grandmother even after her death. The "rich stream of tales and dreams",⁴⁵ flowing into her, protect her from the emptiness of the mother. The love given has been "generous", encircling in a way which parodies and discredits by contrast the confining, possessive love of Old Yoong, symbolised by the rigid encirclement of the jade bangle.

Lim however engages with no overt historical explanation or contextualisation of the practice of footbinding. In contrast I have felt compelled to examine it situationally. In *The Teardrop Story Woman* the powerful trope of Second Grandmother's crippled feet is not explicitly contrasted with western experience. There is no sense of it as a practice of ritual significance, or of gendered initiation. There is no valuing of ethnic identity in a way which excuses depraved practice, no possibility of a cultural value-added here. Footbinding is portrayed as the disabling of women, but it was a disability from within which women may have been able to extract an imaginary, a romanticised, sexualised

beyond the home and exacerbated the woman's inferior status as "the property of men" (1997: 124).

⁴⁵ Poppi Smith rightly points also to the inadequacies of some of those stories and the child's disillusion with them. She quotes "Second Grandmother could get tediously repetitive talking about gift shoes and a gift hoard of diamonds, jade and gold that even the child knew to be non-existent" (Lim 1998:45, Smith 1998: 58). There is no idealisation of Second Grandmother, rather there is a recognition that from within the stultifying dimensions of her social world she marched along on her crippled feet and wrested from it a tolerable if contaminated meaning for her existence, and the weft and web of stories continued to sustain Mei Kwei throughout her life.

world (if such was all they had power over) - "she recalled her beauty and the special pleasure she gave her husband". The breaking and bending of the feet, as Lim represents it, need not have inevitably resulted in a crippling of the spirit. Such truncation of potential could occur more effectively in other less graphic ways, in the debilitation of poverty and tedium, the internalisation of denigration which characterised the mother's experience and was more destructive because it left the subject with little but embittered emptiness. The Grandmother's romanticisation and appropriation of identity as a sexual presence, even power, is not unproblematic however. Ros Ballaster in a discussion which links the Gothic and Romance genres states that "there is no easy recognition of the complexity of the relationship between sexual and political identity for women...sexuality is itself a displacement or substitution. To be free for women is then not to be sexual but to be free not to signify sexuality alone" (1996:69). In this sense of course neither Second Grandmother nor Mei Kwei ever become 'free' to create their own subjectivity, although Mei Kwei's gesture of release, of a taking hold of her own sexuality in the final scene of the book is a move towards a more complete autonomy.

Lim indeed, writes the central love-story of the text within a romance genre and Bridget Fowler has argued that throughout "its long history, the romance has both legitimated female subordination and spoken of the needs of women" (1991: 7). Such a need, to be valued and accepted, is written into the central character of Mei Kwei. As a child, she desperately willed her father to love her; and as a woman, she continually searched for something other than the artificial construct of the social contract and respectability of a marriage. This need for acceptance is explored in the following scene. The father in a small moment of tenderness takes the girl-child into his arms. He has largely ignored her but relents. She thinks, "Father, love me even if I am only a girl. She could not have enough of the warmth and snuggled even closer" (1998: 24). The father begins to thaw towards the child but then notices the teardrop mole near her right eye... "Women with teardrop moles condemned their fathers and husbands to ruin. Women's moles should be near mouths as promise of food, never near eyes signifying sorrow, if they want to be of service to men" (p.25). The father rejects the child, she tries to cover the mole and when this does not work, in a paroxysm of frustration and pain she paints a "multitude of teardrop moles around her eyes, in a mad proliferation of misfortune's omens" (1998: 26) and an accentuation of her own perceived monstrosity. This is not a

marking of the body, to alter it, to manipulate it to fit civilised, sexualised codes. It is a reading of the 'natural' body that further alienates it from the acceptable. In counterpoint to her rejection by the father, Mei Kwei grows into a beautiful woman lusted after by several powerful men and incestuously by her brother: "At almost nineteen, she stood above the surrounding squalor like a blooming lotus above its spawning mud ... In the ancestral country, emperors sent henchmen to scour mean streets for such a rare jewel" (1998: 87). The fairy tale element, the Cinderella-like potential of the story, is continually subverted though in this tale, where the rich man is old and venal, the socially acceptable young man limited and immature and the sensual white man is a priest. The exaggerated pathos of Lim's love-story contains conservative elements but is also transgressive in ways which require some analysis.

GraceAnne DeCandido of the American Library Association has described *The Teardrop Story Woman* as a "lush tale, set in 1950s Malaya" which will find "eager readers among the *Thorn Birds* crowd" (1999:1). This categorises the book as a popular, 'women's' read, almost a romance of the Mills and Boon type (which is rigidly formulaic) where the "heroine invariably finds material success through sexual submission and marriage" (Coward 1985:195). Cora Kaplan in her critique of *The Thorn Birds* has shown how this rigid formula, even in what she calls a politically conservative text, can be subverted. Kaplan argues that *The Thorn Birds* "confirms not a conventional femininity but women's contradictory and ambiguous place within sexual difference" (1986:120). It is she concedes both "a powerful and ultimately reactionary read"(1986:145) but one which allows for some interrogation of the construction of women's sexuality. Lim's *The Teardrop Story Woman* includes elements of both the conservative and transgressive in not totally dissimilar ways, though DeCandido's initial comparison was more clearly linked to the obvious melodrama of a shared narrative of forbidden priestly love than to any sense that either text could confront established norms.

In Lim's novel the portrayal of the French priest, Father Martin, is indisputably an example of high romance. He is attractively masculine, but also 'maternal', nurturing, protective in ways which do not characterise any of the male Chinese figures. He 'rescues' Mei Kwei twice, 'rescues' the dignity of the (albeit dead) female terrorist, and protects Tua Poon's adulterous wife from her enraged husband. He is funny and caring

with the children, a consummate, romantic hero prevented from finding true fulfillment by the dictates of his (only slightly perverse) faith. Lim does present an almost glossed awareness of the masochism possible in that faith through the figure of the self-scourging Uncle Jean-Claude. But the younger priest is uneasy with this and largely eschews such psychosis. He enters the priesthood mostly from a sense of filial duty and respect, repressing his own clearly sensual nature. The text abounds with examples of what Chow has called purple prose⁴⁶ (1991:160). An example of this is the scene in which the priest rescues Tua Poon's adulterous wife (she has no name), who has been tied naked, by her (Chinese) husband, for all to see in the town square. Father Martin pulls off his cassock and throws it over her. Mei Kwei, who is standing in the crowd, gazes "pale with the shock of recognition, at naked priest and naked girl - for the robe had fallen off her shoulders - his strong arms around her, her breasts crushed against him"; "the ripple of muscle, the strong protective arm around her, the contact of nipples" (1998: 225). These are stock phrases of a fairly lurid romance genre - although whether this genre is western or Chinese is difficult to discern.⁴⁷ The priest is muscled and protective, a walking stereotype of physicality and masculine attractiveness. In her turn Mei Kwei is conventionally, if sensually beautiful, recognisably 'feminine' in a highly conservative depiction of what that means. The priest imagines "Mei Kwei's smooth, tightly combed hair, loosened of its restraining combs and pins, shaken into similar abundance and passion in one dazzling moment; saw a flash of her beautiful white throat..." (1998: 231). The torrid reiteration of superficial physical attractions employs the unreflective lexis of an uncritical romance genre. Interestingly (as has been noted in most of the texts analysed in the thesis), the participants in this forbidden cross cultural and cross race love are both 'white': Father Martin is the "white priest" and Mei Kwei's skin too, is white "a flash of her beautiful white throat...", an implicit rejection of the western label of the Chinese as coloured (see Chapter 5 for a fuller analysis of this).

⁴⁶ Chow discusses the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly literature of early 20th century China in her book *Women and Chinese Modernity*, arguing that in these works "The staging of female traumas in a popular, readable form means that sentimental emotion, which had hitherto been hushed up" could be expressed (1991: 55). Melodrama is also a characteristic of this writing, as is the kind of gothic, horror referred to in chapter 3. Whether Lim has been influenced by this is moot here.

⁴⁷ Instances of 'explicit' sexuality are not common in Butterfly fiction, however. Chow in fact states that the "conservatism in Butterfly literature" appears "specifically in relation to the woman's body" (1991: 61). "The lovers' transcendence of paltry passion (yu) is the modus operandi of their relationship" (my emphasis, 1991: 70). Alternatively the elements of sacrifice by and punishment of the woman are very characteristic of this writing.

Some balance to the exaggeration of the romantic ideal however, is provided by the novel's end. Bridget Fowler in a discussion of the romance genre has stated "the 'wisdom' achieved at the end of the stories speaks of a patriarchal order that is natural and necessary, hence typically invoking an idealised model of existing social reality"(1991: 8) and in the final scene of *The Teardrop Story Woman* the priest and Mei Kwei do find sexual fulfillment in each other:

Father Martin continued to watch her in mounting fascination: this strange, rare, beautiful woman he had never stopped loving... He gave a gasp as he watched her rest one hand on the table and raise the hammer with the other, bringing it crashing down upon the jade bangle, which broke, with a small dull crack in three pieces. She laid the hammer down beside the broken pieces on the table and rubbed the freed flesh, slowly and lingeringly (1998: 326).

Yet the transgression of genre occurs multiply here, even though there are elements of requited love. The lovers cannot stay together and venal Uncle Yoong seems to have been a part of Mei Kwei's life after this scene. Mei Kwei has not given Father Martin either her closely guarded virginity or an 'almost' untouched sexuality. She has been a prostitute and her erstwhile rescuer from this has been, not the priest but the vain and controlling towkay, Yoong. The breaking of the bangle itself is charged with meaning. The sensuousness of the final phrases, of "freed flesh" which is rubbed, slowly, lingeringly is, in a way, Mei Kwei's gift to herself. The priest/lover is for a moment forgotten as the woman breaks the entrapment of the jade, takes symbolic control of her own life through her *own* actions. There is a dignity here, in the assertion of the woman's control and choice, which some of Lim's earlier narrative in this text signally did not achieve. And so, while there is reconciliation and sexual fulfillment finally in *The Teardrop Story Woman* and there is a moving 'dying in his arms scene' towards the end of *The Bondmaid*, Lim has contravened the happily-ever-after formula. Love fails to overcome the inequities of the patriarchal order, the lack in the "existing social reality" remains, unaffected by the feelings the two characters have for each other. Father Martin has patently failed to secure, for Mei Kwei, a better way of life, in fact has inadvertently contributed quite significantly to her downfall. This too partly vitiates the maudlin quality of some of the writing.

At times, however, the unrestrainedly idealised portrait of the white, European priest seems almost complicit with Father Martin's own belief in his rescuing mission. This is evocative of Spivak's potent phrase - "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (1999: 284). A list of such 'rescues' has already been cited and there is the example of his 'rescue' of Mei Kwei herself earlier in the narrative "he had plucked her from physical danger as surely as he would pluck her from the darkness of her pagan ancestor's ways" (1998:138). He succeeds in neither but this often seems more a function of the narrative logic of a doomed love story than a critical interrogation of the efficacy of the white man's saving or civilising mission. Lim's fervent opposition to the objectification of women in traditional society is somewhat undermined by her seeming elision of the question of "Imperialism's (or globalization's) image as the establisher of the good society" as "marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind" (Spivak 1999: 291). Lata Mani too declares, in a case of rare agreement with Spivak, that "a dominant story about colonialism and the question of woman is: 'we came, we saw, we were horrified, we intervened' " (1990: 35). In an ironic juxtaposition the emptiness of the term 'civilised' becomes evident. An example of this would be that in a colonial context, the *banning* of footbinding becomes synonymous with the empty signifier 'civilizing', in the civilising mission of the west (that is banning the practice negates the adjective barbaric and equates with civilised). In Chinese history the noun of the bound-foot is a synonym *for* the civilised (the disciplined good woman/wife, a trope for civilization itself).

Indeed the narrative excesses of Father Martin's idealised masculinity contrast definitively with the oppressive personas of the Chinese males, making them an effective Other to colonial benevolence and, perhaps, reflecting a similar kind of "internalised orientalism" attributed to the Singaporean government by Heng and Devan (Ch. 3). Ah Yoong is old, lecherous, greedy and conceited. Austin Tong is (viciously, negatively) effeminate, vindictive and irrational. The father is brutal, apathetic, opium addicted and parasitical. The brother, also a parasite, harbours ugly incestuous desires, is ineffectual, spoilt and destructive. And while the males of Mei Kwei's household are not portrayed as particularly powerful, this in itself contains an indictment. The father has the power to spitefully reject the girl-child, but is otherwise ineffectual and dependent. In some ways this combination of both the ability to reject and a prevailing impotence informs the text as deeply as does the power of the towkay (the patriarch

who possesses real power, the wealthy old man - old Yoong) before whom the father stands debased. Carolyn Steedman in her book *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) discusses a gentler sense of her own father's inadequacy. She describes a scene in a bluebell wood, where her working class father is confronted by a protector of aristocratic privilege - the forest-keeper. She recalls that her "father stood quite vulnerable in memory now. He was a thin man. I wonder if I remember the waisted and pleated flannel trousers of the early 1950s because in that confrontation he was the loser, feminized, outdone" (p.50). In Steedman the father leaves and completes the sense of absence and inadequacy in the British context of class relations. In *The Teardrop Story Woman* the father is a continual presence until his death but his presence is also a persistent gap, a debilitating lack which constantly intrudes onto the two central women in the household. Poverty and hopelessness complete the circle of deprivation to defeat both father and mother, but it is the father who is most completely brutalised in the process. In this way maleness links to class and wealth as indicators of dominance (and impotence) and more complexly again race itself is added as a factor. Lim does not explore colonial complicity in the father's debasement. As an opium addict he is weak rather than exploited by indifferent and ultimately destructive colonial, economic interests.⁴⁸

It is in the presence of, and Mei Kwei's attraction to, the white priest that the colonial and therefore Lim's postcolonial response to this most fully inserts itself. While highly critical of Chinese patriarchy the text remains tolerant of western paternalism. The *ang moh koois* (red-haired devils⁴⁹) appear much more consistently throughout this text than occurred in *The Bondmaid*. Both Japanese and British imperialists are portrayed but the Japanese are seen almost exclusively in terms of sexual threat whereas the British have a more complex relationship with the local people. When the Japanese leave, the women of Luping take off the bands that flattened their breasts and hid their sexuality

⁴⁸ Opium concessions were granted by the British colonial government in parts of Malaya (D.R. SarDesai 1989: 152).

⁴⁹ Lim in fact is at pains to point out the racialised othering by the Chinese in this text. There are *hwan kooi* (Malays), *keleng kooi* (Indians), *Ang moh kooi* (Europeans) – devils (kooi) all (1998: 104), what she later calls the "ancestral prejudices that made devils of other races" (1998:252). Nirmala PuruShotam argues though that the division of the races that resulted in the (later) official designations of race in Singapore can also be linked to British Orientalist discourse, common to the colonial regime (1998: 30-31).

'Don't throw away those bands, we will need them again,' said one of the women cynically, meaning that the Japanese oppressors would be replaced by the British, now entrenched in the country. Yellow dwarfs with their trousers open were less dangerous than white giants with crowbars for penises. One devil for another; what was the difference? Soon little *kopi susu* would be running all over the country in various shades of milky coffeeness, testimony to colonialism's rampancy in hot climates.

'No, no,' said another woman. 'Let's be fair. We have no fear. The British are the people's protectors, not their oppressors.' (1998: 37)

Again crudity prefigures Hokkien speech (so unoriental). Yet of interest is less the blatant references to male anatomy, than the racial stereotyping it reflects. The Japanese are, in an interesting inversion of western arrogance, themselves "yellow dwarfs" from the perspective of the bigger and apparently white(r) Chinese protagonists. The whites⁵⁰ are giants with all the attributes assigned to such status, the oversized sexual organ almost a parody of the western sexual construction of the animalised black male, bigger and therefore a threat to their erstwhile counterparts. The concerns about hybrid *kopi susu* "bearing testimony to colonialism's rampancy" is curiously undermined by the almost platitudinous response, asserting the benign nature of the British as the people's protectors. The racialised othering of the British is undermined in this construction. The Japanese remain oppressors "yellow dwarfs with their pants open" but the British are reconstructed as protectors, the excess of "crowbars" and "colonial rampancy" subsumed in the rationalising discourse of "be fair" and "no fear".

Another scene allows for tepid criticism of the officious British. Here the foreign (French) priest confronts British authority in full purview of a crowd of predominantly Chinese townspeople. The incident involves the display of the bodies of four insurgents. The priest is outraged. The conflict settles on the body of the fourth terrorist, a young woman with her bloodied breast exposed "Father Martin thought of the dead woman, her hair cut short like a boy's, her small frame no bigger than a child's, strapped to the plank of wood on the ground, her mud-caked khaki shirt ripped open to expose a large bullet-hole in her left breast" (1998: 174). The dehumanisation of the 'terrorist' becomes entwined, confused with Father Martin's protective mission. He is concerned with the woman's exposure as woman, somewhat bizarrely since she is dead

⁵⁰ Significantly, perhaps, the term white jars with the speech context here where westerners would almost inevitably be Ang Mohs (red haired), ghosts (as in dirty and tricky rather than pale?) or simply hairy barbarians.

and the same compunction is not shown toward the male bodies. However while there is momentary conflict with the (only slightly) pompous British (the soldiers just doing their 'job'), there is little engagement with the complex political issues which are almost incidentally alluded to. The scene risks becoming merely a sensational backdrop to yet another display of the French priest's compassion. The watching Chinese are made voyeurs who revel in the melodrama of the conflict - the idea of a fight between "two *ang mohs*, one a proselytiser for the foreign religion and the other a member of the governing elite, was especially gratifying" (1998: 98). The nomenclature itself is British, the bodies belong to terrorists not liberators. Lim remains compassionate but uncritical, more concerned to record the priest's defence of the dead woman than to explore the grievances that may have led to 'terrorist' acts⁵¹.

Yahp, in *The Crocodile Fury* deals with a similar time in Malaysian history, yet while her approach also contains some ambivalences, it produces a very different reading. The frustration, the crocodile fury of reaction to the patronising British colonial presence implies a greater empathy for the complexity of the struggle for autonomy.

My crocodile is not one for cursing. His fury starts out slow, that boils and bubbles, and hitches its back against the weight of all the jokes and jibes, the petty slights and discriminations accumulated over the years; all the back-bitings, jealousies and injustices involved in the scramble for favour, the aches of being owned body and soul.... The croc doesn't burn up the past, he sifts through it like a treasure. His fury always comes as a shock, even when one has been waiting for years. (1993: 124)

The crocodile fury here is the fury of the downtrodden lizard boy, the fury of the humiliated breaking out to hitch "its back against the jokes and jibes, the petty slights and discriminations". It is the burning of the dispossessed and the derided, the fury against being owned, "body and soul". The patronization, which in Lim's text is only mildly pompous, becomes in Yahp a weight of "jokes", of "petty slights and

⁵¹ Ironically members of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) (who later became insurgents and were largely formed from the Chinese diaspora in Malaya and Singapore) were armed and trained by the British in the Second World War to act as guerillas, resisting Japanese imperialism and playing a central role in the liberation of Malaya and Singapore (Kelly 1993: 90). In Singapore members of the MCP, in January 1946, were given medals by Lord Mountbatten and lauded as heroes (Turnbull 1989: 223). The MCP was a legal political party from 1945-1948, when it began anti-British activities and was banned. The communists objected to the Malayan Union, supported by the British and proposed in 1948 which limited full participation in government of the non-racially Malay inhabitants of the peninsula (Turnbull 1989).

discriminations" which result in a slow burning rage. Lim's text alternatively presents a benign, and often romanticised male coloniser, a saviour of brown women from brown men. At this level it becomes, as did the novel to which it has been compared in a different context - *The Thorn Birds* - conservative and unreflective. As the British soldiers roll into Luping, the Malaysian town in which *The Teardrop Story Woman* is set, the only comment is rather that the "terrorists had gone too far in their campaign of terror and had alienated even the most sympathetic of the townsfolk; they had taken to murdering innocent people, including women and children" (1998: 86). The reasoned repetition of possible British propaganda contrasts with the overheated invective of the terrorist response - "Running dog. You who stoop to lick the white man's arse" (1998: 269). The discourse of reason is again implicitly set against the overemphatic lexis of irrationality, those who are British-influenced clearly employing the more authoritative code.

Lim's text then contains elements of both the conservative and the transgressive. Her account of women's oppression though, while occasionally succumbing to the lures of melodrama, creates vivid images that can make one rethink stereotypical paradigms. The Second Grandmother provides a portrait which defies simplistic readings of her suffering and victim status, the mother, while almost stereotypical victim is also economic agent, Mei Kwei is both hackneyed romantic beauty and a woman caught in a turmoil of historical conjunctures. These are characters who do not fit homogenised responses to 'third-world' women's oppression. However this diversity of characterisation in no way diminishes the materiality of that oppression and its blight on women's lives. In her emphasis on women, Lim shows little interest in linking their oppression to the complicity of the colonial. In this her interests and their textual expression do not, therefore, match neatly with the eurocentric critiques of much western feminist literary criticism, still less with the importance placed on this complicity in a great deal of postcolonial discussion.

Furthermore, where should the dividing line between insider and outsider stop? How should it be defined?... What about those with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities? (Trinh Minh ha 1991:73)

Until the last several decades scholars in the humanities did not pay much attention to personal narratives (Sidonie Smith 1993: 392)

By questioning the relationship between the textual and the referential self, they thereby come at 'difference' and its relationship to the category woman... (Liz Stanley 1992: 89)

Shirley Goek-Lin Lim's autobiographical publication, *Among the White Moonfaces*, appeared with two different subtitles. The first belonged to the book I purchased in Singapore (in 1996, the year of publication), subtitled the *Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*. The second seemed to appear later (although still in 1996), in American reviews and the subtitle had become, instead, *An Asian-American Memoir of the Homelands*. I continue to prefer the first, perhaps because it points to a continuity into the present of a specific identity. The legitimacy of the second cannot be disputed, as Lim has lived much of her adult life in America, yet it seems to emphasise a Northern perspective which diffuses specificity. The main title itself contains ambiguity. I can find no overt reference to it in the text, but western readers I've spoken to have assumed that it refers to Lim's life among 'whites', a colonial western move that picks up on the word white and sees it as 'us'. While this may be the dominant reading, reference is also to that evanescent but evocative Nyonya heritage and the absent mother who became rounder with each baby, and whose "peranakan female face"⁵² was fair and glimmered "like a piece of new silk" (1996:31). This issue of 'naming', its complexities and ambiguities, is important to Lim and will therefore provide a frame for the following discussion of her book.

⁵² Peranakan in Malay means those "who were born locally" (Chia 1994: 8), it is a phrase often used interchangeably with Baba/Nyonya.

Lim explains, in her prologue, the circumstances of her own naming. The patronymic, the family name which is socially most important and which appears first, is drawn in Chinese with "two figures for 'man', a double male"(Lim1996:16). Geok is the "Hokkien version of that most common of Chinese female names, 'Jade'" (p.16). Lim points to the optimism of that name as jade is the most treasured of stones and yet, she states, the commonness of that name birthed her into a "culture so ancient and enduring 'I' might as well not have been born. Instead 'we' were daughters", generic rather than individual (p.17). In addition she was given her personal name. In order not to be confused with "Geok Lan, Geok Phan...or any other Geok", she was called Geok Lin (p.17). To this already complex naming was added something else, for she was always "known as 'Shirley' to everyone. 'Ah Shirley', my aunts called me" (p.17): Baba (her father) had loved Shirley Temple in the movies of the 1930s, and both the girls had dimples. Lim says of this name and its strangeness: "I'd like to think this presumption was less colonized mimicry than bold experiment" (p.18), an intimation of the wish for her "despite everything his heritage dictated" to have "a life freer than his own". Later she would also take a baptismal and confirmation name - Agnes and Jennifer respectively. But only Shirley stuck: the Baba's version of the beloved girl-child, surrounded by a "Hollywood halo" (p.19).

Lim's introduction of herself contrasts vividly with Catherine Lim's bitter introduction of Mei Kwei in the first chapter of *The Teardrop Story Woman*. In *Among the White Moonfaces* there is tenderness in the father's response to the birth and naming of the girl-child, a tenderness that belies homogeneity in the Chinese male response to the birth of a girl. Yet in Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's poetry lies an echo of Catherine Lim's anger. She tells of the birth of a daughter (rather than of the wished for son), /They say a child with two mouths is no good.../In the slippery wet, a hollow space,/ A slit narrowly sheathed within its hood./ No wonder my man is not here at his place/ (1989:17). Both writers use the derogatory, the debasing 'slit', signifying gap, cut, threat - "two mouths", "narrowly sheathed"- descriptive of daughter. Both writers have noted absence where the father should be. And issues of gender and sexuality are clearly central themes in *Among the White Moonfaces*. While Shirley Lim does not depict patriarchy with the virulence that has characterised Catherine Lim's representation of it, she is still intensely aware of the implications of " 'I' might well have not been born". Collectively, within the experience of extended family this may have been accurate, yet

her tender, troubled relationship with her father complicates and qualifies any easy sense of intractable patriarchal hegemony, as will be discussed later.

This discourse of naming also points to the factual hybridity of Geok-lin Lim's experience of colonisation. Her response to this will also be considered later via Homi Bhabha's (1994) somewhat celebratory delineation of the term. What is not raised in this naming is the sense of uneasiness and exile that would come to Lim as she approached adulthood and which was linked to her relationship with the newly forming independent Malaysia and its bumiputera policy.⁵³ This is part of yet another uneasy hybridity which impacts deeply on Lim's life. Something of this tension is intimated in the first of the two subtitles which names Lim as Nyonya⁵⁴ and which is later dropped for a final hybridity, that of the Asian-American; Trinh's "hyphenated" identity implying both a joining and a parting. The first (Nyonya) and last (Asian-American) of these dualities of cultural experience are linked to issues of colour/race which impact on Lim's perception of self. And finally threaded through this is the way in which language links to the construction of that self in the writing of a life.

Stanley suggests that most "auto/biography" is or has been "concerned with 'great lives', and these are almost invariably those of white middle and upper class men who have achieved success according to conventional - and thus highly political - standards"(1992:5). This canonisation of a particular form of autobiography then leads to what Leigh Gilmore contends is the labelling of "what women write" as belonging to "some homelier and minor tradition" (1994: 2). This tension between the social 'value' of the subject links to an anthropologising of these 'minor' texts particularly if they have been produced from 'outside' the metropolis. These critics have emphasised the andocentric nature of the canonical texts in the genre and challenged the validity of such

⁵³ An extant policy to protect the rights of indigenous Malays and to redress economic imbalances among ethnic groups. Suryadinata notes "benefits under article 153 should be reserved for 'the natives of Malaysia' "(1997: 82) and "adherence to Muslim beliefs is a component of bumiputera status" (p.87).

⁵⁴ The Babas and Nyonyas were Chinese settlers "whose first ancestor[male] married, or made a union with, a local woman of the *pre -islamic* era." Generally they spoke little or no Chinese but rather a creolized (Baba) Malay. More immediate ancestors would have attended English schools, although some earlier forebears, if they were prosperous, would have had tutors teaching them the Chinese language at home, and some would even have received education in China. "A Baba is a Straits-born [Malacca, Penang or Singapore] Chinese but a Straits-born Chinese is not necessarily a Baba" (Chia 1994: 10). Their pre-islamic arrival is not accepted by all historians but indicates the perception that they arrived quite early in Malaysia's history.

valorisation. Sidonie Smith in her discussion argues that non-canonical autobiography can historicize identity, "the autobiographical manifesto implicitly, if not explicitly, insists on the temporalities and spatialities of identity and, in doing so, brings the everyday practices of identity directly into the floodlights of conscious display"(1993: 160). Smith also argues that critique in "this instance is motivated by the autobiographical subjects' desire to contest dominant discourses" (1993: 161). In delineating some theories of auto/biography, these three critics challenge the dominance of one particular group as representative of the genre and thus provide a pathway for the 'inclusion' of other lives and life-story telling, from the non-western arena.

Constance Singam in a discussion of autobiographical writing and feminism in the Singaporean feminist journal *Awareness*, states that feminist "autobiographical writing reveal an exploration or journey for meaning in a woman's life" (1998: 44). In an earlier discussion of *Among the White Moonface, Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* (subtitle noted) Singam argues that "as with most autobiographers before her, Lim uses self-writing and self-portraiture as a means to self-knowledge and as a form of cultural critique against the prevailing discourses which have prescribed woman's self-hood"(1997: 30). Singam focuses on the development of a subjective knowing of the self as a feminist project, rather than focusing on a social delineation of (and acting out of, in a social context) feminist principles. The emphasis in the particular title noted accents Lim's feminist identity and places it within the writing which Smith (1993) analyses in terms of manifesto (my interpretation of which is works that are consciously or overtly concerned with feminists issues or interpretations). Phyllis Chew however, questions the depth of the feminism explored in Lim's text arguing that it largely omits the numerous political, social and economic issues which front the feminist horizon in either a Singaporean or Malaysian context. And while Lim records the violence and polygamy in her own family, these "do not appear to be issues of contention or reflection in her understanding of her mother" (1997: 39). Chew is of course pointing here to the actuality of domestic violence that scars so many lives and to Lim's seeming gloss of this in terms of her response to her mother's actions and choices. Singam reads the text differently, contending that "like many feminists before her, Lim recognises her role in the construction of particular views of 'self' and her writing is characterised by an increasing self-confidence of women" who, she quotes Sidonie Smith here, have "defied 'oppressive cultural identifications'" (1997: 29). Lim does, as Singam has noted,

perceive herself as resistant, calling for "women of all colours to jump the fences of gender, race, class, nation and religion, to help rescue ourselves from an empire of darkness" (in Singam, 1997: 34). Chew however, argues that Lim is more involved in a "personal reflection of the making of a writer and an Asian-American migrant" rather than in a fully engaged, if personally inflected, analysis of the "social and cultural revolution" occurring in "an exciting period of historical change" (1997: 38). Chew ends her review with a lament that "While we may go away remembering the many white moonfaces, we do not go away with any worthwhile memories of the Nyonya feminist" (1997: 39). Clearly there are different perspectives here on what is appropriate in the naming of a feminist. American reviews of *Among the White Moonfaces, An Asian - American Memoir of the Homelands* (with the subtitle erasing the Nyonya feminist altogether) echo, if they note it at all, Singam's laudatory reading of Lim's feminism rather than Chew's cautious one.

Lim herself problematises her relationship with feminism. In *Against the Grain*, she says:

The irony of my present feminist state is that it owes as much to Confucianist patriarchy (a father determined to keep his family together), Roman Catholicism (nuns who offered another model of woman as unmarried and professional), and colonialism (a political system that produced a counter mingling of radically different races and cultures) as it does to Anglo-American feminist theory. However, 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 (1994: 37).

The disruption and displacement of these continual upheavals have allowed her space, a breach in hegemony, so that each system "oppressive alone, became interrogative and subversive in the matrix of multiculturalism" (1994: 38). This coming to feminism via the multilogic of cultural upheaval, far from the centre of Anglo-American theory has given her too a sense of critical distance. Radicalism, the ability to break away from the assigned, stultifying social role and place, has occurred in the interstitial space in the disruption that is part of the epistemic violence of colonialism. But of course, as in all the other texts studied in this thesis, there are also other major forces which impact on this construction of the self. It is not a simple binary of colonial and other culture. Anglo-American feminist theory comes somewhat later to this equation and is viewed

cautiously, noted for both its enabling of a community of women and its tendency to elide exclusions or to dominate relationships "the relation between the Asian woman and Anglo-American feminist theory must continually be interrogative and provisional as long as it remains a relation of unbalanced power, with the Anglo-American's formulating theory and Asians consuming it" (1994: 41).

Textually, *Among the White Moonfaces* is marked by gender, colour and hybridity in ways which explore a multiplicity of identities and positionings. Gender as asocial construct of the feminine is a site of difference, privilege and exclusion. Lim's poetry echoes her feelings of exclusion:

Tonight I will think of my uncles.
For once I will walk with their spirit. ...
What fun my uncles had, springing
knives, fighting, using their
full confident voice.
This morning I sang with the car windows up,
letting my voice go its natural length.
What a revelation to hear my voice
as it is, booming in natural rhythm.
Did my uncles always speak in their voice?
Did no one tell them to be quiet,
be gentle, be soft, to whisper,
to hush? I with seven uncles
am forbidden to walk their path.
Tonight I'll speak like my uncles,
I'll tell those who taught me to be
a girl, I'm not, not, not, not, not (in Rutherford, Jensen & Chew, 1994:
219).

This reflects Lim's sense of herself as outsider in a house often full of or dominated by men. She is excluded from her uncle's easiness with their own noise; ease with their intrusion into the world, an intrusion which is not one because they are the world. As a child, in *Among the White Moonfaces*, she has portrayed herself as fierce in her need to be included in her brothers' boisterous games, to prove herself, in her body, to be able to live the world physically, as they did. She resists being boxed into a particular category of what girl means yet her brothers have defined her sense of the feminine; to "be a girl, as I saw from their mocking distance, was to be weak, useless, and worse, bored" (1996: 50). When her mother left them (Lim was eight) the "world was free. Once home from school I was an unshackled animal and followed my brothers and

cousins as they ran through the streets. I was always a little behind them; they were faster and impatient with me. But I was persistent" (1996: 81). She was also often excluded, shut out, an unacceptable intruder into their world, but their sheer animal exuberance constantly drew her. In this poem too the emphasis is on the (allowed) physicality of (normally male) voice, its spatial rather than just normatively temporal presence, in going /its natural length/, /booming in natural rhythm/. The question /Did my uncles always speak in their voice?/ carries the *their* which upsets my computer; ungrammatical, a speculation that holds all the artificial narrowing of the girl child's world, for no one *had* ever told them to /be quiet,/be gentle, be soft, to whisper,/to hush/. It also implicates the collective force of an inclusion, all 'men' together.

In a review of Lim's *Modern Secrets* Terri-Ann White gives this particularly evocative insight: "Her poems have poignancy, a strong sense of loss: a sense of remaking on someone else's terms" (1990:91). This sense of remaking on someone else's terms permeates Lim's work. The need to reclaim or to gain control is central to much of her writing. The "terms" however are ambivalent. They are the terms of a Chinese household in which the girl-child was not meant to put herself forward yet in which as the (motherless) only girl among eight boys there was a slackening of controls, of the rules that would normally have governed her existence. In the poem about her uncles, Lim captures the distance between *their* male place in *their* world and its silent or hushed opposite, the very different expectations that impinge on her. The loudness they are allowed contrasts with the circumspection expected of her or at least of the female. Lim implies no acceptance of such strictures, just an understanding, and resentment, of their power. The autobiographical text never leaves one with the impression that her narrative persona ever complied/complies with such positionings; rather there is a constant struggle to reject the gender conventions that seem so stultifying, to remake her - self - on her own, rather than "someone else's" terms.

Lim acknowledges her paradoxical privilege however. It lay in her father's love of her as his only girl, at least until she was almost grown - "Father worried about me more than the boys" (1996: 85). Yet across the years even as she feels his tenderness, she also recognises her own uneasiness with this. Her angry stepmother had accused the father of unnaturalness and Lim is never able to forget it. The relationship is also characterised by violence; the violence of beatings that "raised welts" which "were

deeply grooved and bloodied" so that she hated him (1996:58). This violence, Lim recognises, probably drove her mother away (she "lost two teeth to his fists", 1996: 79), although her own ambivalence at her mother's abandonment is never wholly assuaged by this rational understanding of a compelling cause. Rather she states, in spite of all this, because "my father loved his children, I have kept faith with him ... The bond I sewed tight between my father and me was illicit. In a Chinese family, perhaps in every family, daughters must be wary of their love for their fathers" (1996: 57). This tension in the love of a child for a parent, particularly a father, tainted as it was by the step mother's poisoning perception of aberration, provides a complex portrait which balances any too easy homogenisation of the way patriarchy may have worked in a Chinese family.

Lim is, paradoxically, both a much loved and much neglected child who for many years thought of herself as a Shirley Temple. Shirley Temple therefore must have been "an untidy child, burnt brown, with straight black hair" (1996: 17). This conflation of colour and identity is evident throughout the text. Her later construction of herself as 'coloured' or as Other in this total context is revealing. Richard Dyer in his discussion of the construction of whiteness as a racial marker states that:

it has been customary in the West to call the complexion of Chinese or Japanese people yellow, yet it is by no means clear that their complexions are so distinct from that of white Westerners; it is generally the shape of the eyes that determines if someone is 'white' or 'yellow'. (1997: 42)

Lim's focus on her own colour is that of someone *burnt* brown suggesting more a pre-empting of gender, the implication that she is a tom boy. She repeats the same phrase in a much later description of her grandfather and later her ageing father. Women rather are generally fair, even the somewhat threatening servant Ah Chan is "doughy-complexioned" (1996:33) rather than 'coloured'. Lim's difference from the Shirley Temple for whom she was 'named', is the contrast of an "untidy child, burnt brown, with straight black hair" with a child of "golden hair, blue eyes, Mary Janes on her feet" (1996: 17), a child she only actually saw much later. The Mary Janes, perhaps even the goldenness, bespeak privilege rather than race, an echo of Yahp's portrayal of the rich man in *The Crocodile Fury*. Susan Willis (1990) discusses the iconisation of the Shirley Temple figure seeing it as part of commodity fetishism, the commodity of being almost white, consuming enough of the material goods to be perceived as culturally

acceptable. There is perhaps an element of this in Lim's father's preoccupation with the trappings of the colonial imports but Lim's experience of this icon is very different. When she does realise that Shirley Temple is white, she chooses to perceive it as a symbol of her father's wish, not for whiteness or golden curls but for something 'better', freer for his girl-child. That this might have involved the better things full participation in a consumer society seemed to provide is not fully examined (but given that there were times he could not feed his children adequately this too might well have been the case), but that it involved a wish to be whiter is not at all evident. The horror of a full but not wholly successful participation in consumerism as an act of racial negation is graphed rather by Toni Morrison in her book *The Song of Solomon* where the character of Hagar sees the rejection of her lover as the rejection of her overt 'blackness'. The consumption of the 'gifts' of white production becomes a way to be more acceptable, to be closer to 'white' with inevitably tragic consequences. In Morrison's text, race equated with colour is paramount in the construction of the self. This occurs in the context of a North American value system which measures black acceptability "in terms of how closely an individual's skin and hair colour approximate to the white model" (Willis 1990: 82). In neither Beth Yahp's, nor Catherine Lim's, nor here in Shirley Lim's writing is this evident in quite the same way. In these texts eyes and hair rather than inherent skin colour are markers of racial difference. And that racial difference itself is far less, than in the North American context, an *early* marker of identity, in that the communities within which the sense of identity was constructed had not interiorised, to any great extent, a sense of themselves as coloured (nor really as 'native'). While this is not overtly explored in the writing, anecdotally my own sense is that such communities, if they applied racial markers of colour at all would have perceived the Malays and Indians as 'coloured', not themselves⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ Working as a secondary teacher in a community school in Singapore for a number of years, I was speaking to a colleague, a Chinese teacher, one evening at a school function. I had seen the small daughter of two Malay teachers toddling about and commented on her engaging antics (or some such inane remark). I remember more vividly the response than the comment that triggered it, my companion said that the child must have some Chinese blood or she could not be as fair as she was (I am certain my comment made no reference to colour in any way). My own students were not particularly interested in my skin colour (pinkish incidentally not white) but in the red tinge to the very dark brown hair of my youngest daughter and the variegation of hazel eyes, 'cher [teacher], your eyes are scary, not one colour, lah'. I include this because I think western arrogance too often homogenises constructions of race and appropriates the guilt of racism to its exclusive bosom.

Dyer looking at the construction of the colonial and white, from the site of the West, argues, "What is involved is not the ascription of racial inferiority, much less evil, to non-whites but their not being deemed subjects without properties. They are particular, marked, raced, whereas the white man has attained the position of being without properties, unmarked, universal, just human" (1997:38). Dyer of course is aware of the paradox of the western representation arguing, "white identity is founded on compelling paradoxes" (1997: 39).⁵⁶ But it is the claim (often unconscious) to a representational humanity that, here, comes in contact with another representational/ideological system which has also created a hegemonic perception of itself as the centre of what it is to be human. Wong Phui Nam's acknowledgement of the liminality of his migrating ancestors' access to the existing "Chinese socio-economic order", must still concede that the "accretions of more than three millennia of history" which left his own kin "unburdened of the ancient classics ...of poetry and letters, the fine arts and so on", was part of a known and impossibly ancient (in western terms) continuity of 'civilisation' (1993: 134). The Chinese naming of the Other is redolent with a denial of the humanity or at the very least the civilisation of 'devils' and 'barbarians'.

But to return to a western context, Spivak takes this further, arguing that 'chromatism' in the context of U.S. anti-racist feminism has taken hold:

When it is not 'third world women,' the buzz-word is 'women of color'. This leads to absurdities. Japanese women, for instance, have to be coded as 'third world women!' Hispanics must be seen as 'women of color,' and postcolonial female subjects, even when they are women of the indigenous elite of Asia and Africa, obvious examples of Ariel's mate, are invited to masquerade as Caliban in the margins. This nomenclature is based on the implicit acceptance of 'white' as 'transparent' or 'no-color', and is therefore reactive upon the self-representation of the white (1999: 165)⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ "White identity is founded on compelling paradoxes: a vividly corporeal cosmology that most values the transcendence of the body; a notion of being at once a sort of race and the human race, an individual and a universal subject; a commitment to heterosexuality that, for whiteness to be affirmed, entails men fighting against sexual desires and women having none; a stress on the display of spirit while maintaining a position of invisibility; in short, a need always to be everything and nothing..." (Dyer 1997: 39).

⁵⁷ Edward Said explains the allegory of Ariel and Caliban in this way "How does a culture seeking to become really independent of imperialism imagine its own past? One choice is to do it as Ariel does, that is as a willing servant of Prospero; Ariel does what he is told obligingly, and when he gains his freedom, he returns to his native element, a sort of bourgeois native untroubled by his collaboration with Prospero. A second choice is to do it like Caliban, aware of and accepting his mongrel past but not disabled for future development. A third choice is to

Yet in a text like Shirley Geok-lin Lim's (ironically, given the contexts both Dyer and Spivak have indicated), the naming of herself as coloured jolts. This is because such naming comes only in the hyphenated actuality of a North-American experience. For Yahp, racism in Australia is expressed in the elision of identity, the absorption into an all encompassing Asianness which results in the invisibility of the individual. Ien Ang's comments, in her response to Felski's 'The Doxa of Difference' are insightful here. She notes what she sees as Felski's insensitivity to the reality of racism: "the fact that whether or not one is 'white' in the (western) societies we live in does make a difference to our experiential worlds... our respective experiential worlds are not easily reconcilable and mutually translatable into one another's discursive practice" (1997: 61). In the context of the texts studied here being 'coloured', 'non-white' or disappearing into a racialised and undifferentiated mass, occurs in the site of the west.⁵⁸ The division of white/non-white might discursively appear in other spaces, but for the writers here it is not interiorised until they themselves are situated in the west. In this then the lack of anger at the colonisers from Catherine Lim's perspective may be partly explained by her distance from the experience of expatriation. The affect of 'white' as superior, as norm is not altogether elided, of course. The slow burning of the Crocodile fury occurs against the petty slights of the coloniser in situ and Geok-lin Lim in *Against the Grain* and *Among the White Moonfaces* is critical of colonial governmental and educational racism. She quotes from Aime Cesaire's critique of colonialism claiming its veracity as descriptive of the experience of Malaya as well: "Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses" (1994: 35). Significantly though, this is one of her few references to the social and political domination of the British. Her auto/biographical emphasis concentrates on the anomalies and injustices of the English inspired education system rather than "forced labor,... rape, compulsory crops". Her emphasis also is not on an internalisation of an inferior non-white status (though time spent with the nuns allowed

be a Caliban who sheds his current servitude and physical disfigurements in the process of discovering his essential, pre-colonial self" (1993: 214).

⁵⁸ Ang actually argues that the construction of what she calls antipodean whiteness is different to "(post-) imperial British whiteness or messianic, superpower American whiteness (2001: 189), but she also argues that "to be 'white' [which is not a biological category] signifies a position of power and respectability, of belonging and entitlement, but who is admitted to this position of global privilege is historically variable" (2001: 188).

for some speculation about this) but rather it is on the alienation which occurred for populations who "lost their original languages and became largely monolingual English-speaking" (1994: 35).

Language then becomes an increasingly confusing racial marker. The sense of self/not self as part of autobiographical writing is also of interest from the perspective of language. Eugene C. Eoyang has argued that it is not coincidental that "English is the only language in the world that superannuates the self punctuationally by capitalizing its first person nominative singular reference: 'I' " (1994:97). He also makes the point that "the concept of the individual self, as a separate, privileged entity set apart from the community, is a fairly recent development, even in the West" (1994:98). Eoyang emphasises the interrelationships, particularly in terms of family, which characterise Chinese languages, in "other words, your cousin who is the daughter of your mother's sister and younger than you has a different label, a different term of address, than a cousin who is the daughter of your father's sister and older than you" (1994:99). He later goes on to add that in "this welter of relations, it would be hard to conceive of the self as separate". This complicates Lim's sense of the girl-child as significantly defined by a collective "we" rather than a capitalised "I", as the permutations of this linguistic construct would impact on males as well. Eoyang links a discussion of the "Confucian notion of self as an interstice in an elaborate network of human relationships" which is more closely aligned to Roland Barthes' sense of text as a network "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages...which cuts across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (1994: 109).

Lim's own relationship to the Chinese language is a complex one which does not easily fit into binaries of mother/other tongue. Although living the first years of her life in a household of predominantly Hokkien speakers, she says, "I grew up afraid of Chinese speakers, having been taught by the British that they were unpatriotic, brutal and murderous. A Malayan child, I understood Chinese identity as being synonymous with Chinese chauvinism" (1996: 70). The conflation of language with attributes and the internalisation of the British hatred for the communist insurgents is suggestive of Catherine Lim's portrayal of the 'terrorists' in *The Teardrop Story Woman*. Geok-lin Lim shows greater awareness of the manipulation involved in this British representation of a self-interested perspective, but still acknowledges that she cannot wholly shake that

influence compounded by her own experience of and ability to believe in "Chinese chauvinism". This is placed even further back in her consciousness than colonial influence in that she "heard Hokkien as an infant and resisted it" (1996:27). Her mother's tongue was not Chinese but Baba Malay: "In my infant memory my mother is never a Chinese woman in the way my aunts, speaking in Hokkien, will always be Chinese." Her mother spoke a type of pidgin or creole Malay, which however was never a language of education. It was only a public language in so far as it was a language of the bazaar and home. It is part of her identification of herself as Malay but the language her mother spoke was, again, not quite Bahasa Malay, the official Malaysian language.

Lim's Chinese father was himself trilingual, his "Senior Cambridge education and Queen's scouts training made him comfortable with British regulations and procedures. His Straits-born Malay fluency added social amiability and grace; and his Hokkien descent gave him access to masses of illiterate Amoy kinsmen fearful of British and Malay laws that had been crafted to make them illegal immigrants" (1996: 86). The very issue of language becomes pivotal here; the use of the coloniser's English a curiously complex one. Hokkien was more often than not the Chinese spoken by the immigrants, yet Lim's first memory of language is of English or of the Malay-based Baba dialect which was her mother's tongue. Hokkien remained a language of the household that she never fully mastered or, paradoxically, felt at home in. This experience differs significantly from Sidonie Smith's discussion of the multilingualism celebrated in Gloria Anzaldua's "autobiographical manifesto"; she quotes her (Anzaldua's) challenge to the Anglo reader:

The switching of 'codes' in this book from English to Castillian Spanish to the North American dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language - the language of the Borderlands. There at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalised; they die and are born. Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel we need to beg entrance... (1993: 175-6).

The defiant bastard language is also a language of solidarity and pride "we Chicano's" have identity, there is no need to "beg entrance". The "language of the Borderlands" literally at the border of the neocolonial and English-speaking USA, and figuratively

marginalised, this language becomes both play and power. The 'code' switching becomes a challenge to the disabled monolingual reader who at "the juncture of cultures" is disadvantaged; who needs to exchange debilitation for a new vitality, the invigoration of the *mestizas*. This reflects something of Homi Bhabha's rather laudatory discussion of hybridity and contrasts with Lim's construction of a similar experience.

Bhabha denotes the hybrid metaphorically linking it to a stairwell or passage between two distinct spaces:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. The interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (1994: 4).

Bhabha's sense of the hybrid is not so much of the biological and genetic conjoining of two distinct but reproductively compatible species to produce a divergent but fertile and vigorous subgroup, but rather of a "stairwell" a passage between difference that produces a dis-similar knowledge, a slightly skewed perception of the world that dis-integrates or at the very least disturbs complacent polarities. "The interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility" implying potent opposition to the hierarchies that designate identity so "that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its [the colonial] authority - its rules of recognition" (1994: 114).

The hybrid overlays which, Bhabha argues, can be so full of creativity, energy and challenge also in Lim's case however create stultifying gaps between people and are often a source of confusion and isolation, and in perhaps another reading of the hybrid, a possible conjoining into sterility. The hybridity of Nyonya/Baba culture has led to its inclusion as social and literal museum piece,⁵⁹ its vibrancy and energy superseded by the stronger, 'purer' Malay and Chinese cultures. Lim explores her outsider status from a series of positionings that define and constrain the possibilities of her experience,

⁵⁹ In Singapore there is a fully furnished peranakan house set up as permanent display at the National Museum, where exhibits of the distinctively ornate furniture, dress and ceremonial accoutrements of the Baba and Nyonyas are 'preserved'.

daughter and Chinese/ Nyonya being constitutive of the early section of the text, then British educated and English speaking, finally hyphenated and migrant, the self constructed is constituted by all and none of these. Lim says of her child-self: "Chinese- speaking Malays called me a '*Kelangia-kwei*' - or a Malay devil- because I could not or would not speak Hokkien. Instead I spoke Malay" (1996: 28), the Baba Malay spoken by assimilated Chinese. Yet poignantly, ironically, she cannot speak it now, remembering only a "waterfall [of language] whose drops showered me with sensuous music" (1996: 29). This 'Malay' identity that contains so little of language in it, later, so brutally seems also to reject her. In the riots of May 13th, "we learned that streets of Chinese shophouses in Kuala Lumpur had been burned down and hundreds of Chinese killed. Later estimates placed the number at two thousand massacred"(1996: 207). This has recently and eerily recurred in the 1998 riots in Indonesia where the Chinese have again become targets of disaffection⁶⁰. The sense of exile that pervades Lim's work comes from the perception that in "Malaysia, I would always be of the wrong gender and the wrong race" (1996: 204), and she may have added, of the wrong language.

Lim charts her, sometimes difficult, identification with English; she calls herself "an Anglophile freak" which distances her from her Malay identity (1996:206). She challenges a silent interpretation of this, arguing against unvoiced accusations of collusion with the coloniser: "So I have seen myself not so much as sucking at the teat of British culture as actively appropriating those aspects of it I needed to escape that other familial/gender/native culture that violently hammered out only one shape for self. I actively sought corruption to break out of the pomegranate shell of being Chinese and girl" (1996: 104). The hostility of word and phrase "sucking on the teat of British colonial culture", "corruption", points to the pain and violence of the stairwell in which

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch states "the best estimate of the human and property toll is 1,198 dead...untold numbers injured; widespread rape", although the article does acknowledge the Indonesian claim that accusations (of rape) have not been verified. However it is difficult to dispute that the "impact of the May [13-15] terror has been incalculable. Tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese have left for Singapore, Australia, Hong Kong and elsewhere" (1998: 3). Another article quotes a Chinese shopkeeper saying "We are always the scapegoats...people tell us to leave, but we have nowhere to go. We are Indonesian, but people don't recognize us as Indonesian. So we have no country, no home, no guarantee of our future" (Mydans, 1998: 1). Ien Ang cautions that the creation of "The Good Chinese Self" opposed to the "Bad Other" can be the response of a "self- absorbed and self-righteous transnational Chineseness" with which she does "not wish to identify" (2001: 67). She does not imply though that the issues should not be discussed, but that they should not be self-righteously simplified.

Lim's hybridity has placed her. Far from emphasis on the skewing of colonial meaning, agency comes from appropriation, allows for an "escape" from the violent hammering of the familial, the gendered, the native and this too is inflected in her poetry. She evokes her sense of a community betrayal when she writes:

Will you sell me, also, down the river
of nationalism, my sometime brother,
who know your accent, can speak your poetry?
Your family and mine, croaking, drank from the same well (1989: 96).

Yet in the act of appropriation of language, of identification with colonial power, in the forming of the oxymoronic alien/m/other tongue, there is also a rending betrayal –

I have been faithful
To you, my language, ...
Before history and all
It makes, belonging,
Rest in soil,
Although everyone knows
You are not mine.
They wink knowingly
At my stupidity –
I, stranger, foreigner,
Claiming rights to
What I have no right (1989: 30)

Two infidelities, two exclusions, the hyphenated identity fraught with hurt. Lim talks of her exile, a rejection by the 'homeland' of the Nyonya in one of the two possible subtitles in her memoirs.

Revathi Krishnaswamy questions, though, the angst of what she calls "the inflated claims of upper-class professionals whose emigration fundamentally has been a voluntary and personal choice" (1995: 128). Her concern is reflected in her interrogation of the use of terms like 'diaspora' and 'exile' which "are being emptied of their histories of pain and suffering and are being deployed promiscuously to designate a wide variety of cross-cultural phenomena" (1995:128). Lim is not unaware of her privilege, yet her sense of injustice, of the potential for only a secondary status in the new Malaysia is still quite raw. That this status is based on racial grounds rather than in a meritocracy grates against the epistemological expectations (if not the actual practices) of both a British and Chinese educational system (although she does give,

somewhat grudging, recognition to the pragmatic and social reasons for the focus of what she calls “Bumiputra privilege”, 1996: 209). Yet it is also interesting to note the gloss which seems to occur when the Chinese are the subject of ethnic violence. In Lim's text the “almost 2000 Chinese killed” in the Malaysian riots, when, incidentally, she first made her decision to leave, may have become subsumed in a later economic success story; the ongoing disadvantaging of Chinese Malays become just an “inflated claim” to injustice by a jaundiced wannabe elite. But the terror such violence could invoke in the young Chinese “Kelangia Kwei” (Lim as a Malay devil in her Hokkien household) should not be too easily dismissed. Lim recalls the conversation she had with Miriam, the “daughter of a Scots mother and a Malay aristocrat” whose wealthy background would have separated her from “Malay poverty and dispossession” and in an “earlier age”, as an aristocrat, from a “parvenu” like Lim herself. This spokesperson for Malay rights states to Lim, “We Malays would rather return Malaysia to the jungle than live with Chinese [economic] domination” (1996: 208). Lim's response is poignant:

Listening to Miriam's unrestrained words, even as I swallowed the humiliation of my position – to be informed that I was not an equal citizen, that my community was a ‘problem’, and that race massacres were an appropriate way of dealing with that problem – I rebelled against the notion I would have to submit to such attitudes. Sitting dumbly before Miriam, I thought I might never return to Malaysia (1996: 209).

In an interview years later, when Lim is discussing her reasons for writing *Among the White Moonfaces*, one of her most potent motivations was to reveal the anguish of that experience, an experience she feels has never been fully explored. She states, “I strongly believe there is a political history in Malaysia that needs to be written down and that I come from a community which has been silenced: Chinese Malays” (Sook C. Kong, 2000). The ripping violence and betrayal of that explosive event, the young woman's bewilderment at the thought that “race massacres” could be an acceptable “way of dealing with that [Chinese] problem”, does not seem a constructed victimization, but rather contains a question/an accusation which the young woman's later self needs to speak.

The expatriation/exile that resulted placed Lim in a somewhat anomalous position. The merit she wished acknowledged is valorised in the hyphenated identity of the Asian-

American⁶¹, a term to which Spivak refers rather contemptuously, linking it to Kant's "absurd" naming of Australian 'Aboriginals' - "(Neuhollander, no more absurd than the modern hyphenation of the migrant)" (1999: 27). But in this hyphenated world she has gained a place as "representative Third World", if not intellectual, then writer. Mary Eagleton places Lim among the 'stars' whose names figure highly, "filtered predominantly through the educational and publishing institutions of the United States" (1996: 13). Lim herself examines the ambiguity of this type of positioning. She states, "So I have permission to speak as and for a minority; not as an *individual* which is an ideologically majority construct in the United States, but as a *re-presentation* of a minoritism of specified color and race" (1994: 31).

Lim describes her edgy sense of gratitude, "*utang na loob*" (obligation, the bonds of reciprocity) when "white feminists recognize me" (1994: 32). In *Among the White Moonfaces* she states:

My move from a community college to the University of California in 1990 was highly unlikely. Scores of minority scholars gleefully congratulated me, seeing my move as a belated admission in U.S. higher education of the significance of ethnic and postcolonial literary studies. My response to such jubilation was knotted with skepticism, scraping against insinuations of inequality (1996: 320).

This echoes Deepika Bahri's concerns about a particular type of institutional positioning from which "such subjects are to speak *as minorities*; they are to *represent* their communities and the victimization suffered by them in individual voices; their texts are to be used, often solo, to 'inform' students" (1995: 73), the "scraping insinuations of inequality", that condescending 'allow' one to speak for, or rather, in a parody of representation to speak *as*. This links to Chakrabarty's (refer to Ch.2) concerns about anthropologising belief systems – here, rather than the quaint ways of the 'jungle natives', is a project of "information retrieval" from the urban wilderness of minority otherness. Bahri emphasises the "solo" use of the single text to "inform students". This places these texts outside of any meaningful intertextuality. Lim is aware of this and has been implicitly critical of the "solo", token text read against an almost wholly

⁶¹ Interestingly Lim, in that same interview with Sook C. Kong (2000), has discussed the choice of a hyphenated identity. There she states that she opposed the use of the hyphen, but was overruled by her publisher, The Feminist Press, because it was 'grammatically correct' to use a hyphen when Asian American was being used as an adjective.

inappropriate background. Lim, in her interview with Kong (2000) intimated that she was asked to write *Among the White Moonfaces* from that minority position, from the position, for the American market of the hyphenated Asian-American. Ali Behdad has argued that the “discourse of authenticity plays a crucial part in perpetuating the benevolent Third Worldism of the academy” (2000). It is in the name of this that “the positions in the so-called postcolonial and minority literatures have been consistently filled by ‘natives’ while those same individuals are being excluded in other fields” (Behdad, 2000). The irony of course is that one of the reasons Lim left Malaysia is that she perceived herself as a second class citizen precisely because she was not, officially, a native.

In her earlier text, *Against the Grain*, Lim too is deeply critical of certain forms of feminism, arguing that some white feminists “claiming to speak for postcolonial women, offer a discourse that takes only more white and privileged women - Olive Shreiner, Jean Rhys, Isak Dinesen, and Nadine Gordimer - as women's voices from the Third World. The eurocentric view prevails over and above feminist critique” (1994: 42). This contrasts somewhat with Ahmad’s concerns about the artificial construct of postcolonial writing as “non white, not Europe” and yet contains echoes of Ahmad’s clear sense of a (non white, not-Europe) literature constructed as always somewhat ‘less than’ the ‘properly’ cosmopolitan.

All this places Lim squarely in the debate that now surrounds the ‘representative’ ‘third’ world intellectual. Revathi Krishnaswamy is somewhat sceptical about the ‘pain’ of this. She comments “Once they find themselves in the belly of the metropolitan beast, immigrant intellectuals indeed do face the grim facts of racism and Eurocentrism. For most, however, what Bharati Mukherjee calls ‘loss-of-face’ meltdown rarely involves floundering around among disempowered minorities” (1995:133). Sangeeta Ray and Henry Schwarz (1995) qualify Krishnaswamy's scepticism, pointing out that many ‘postcolonial intellectuals’ have to struggle to resist their ongoing marginalisation a position which Lim charts in anguished detail.

Lim’s writing of this margin is largely coupled with her experience first as a teacher in a community college and later at a more prestigious university. At the college she was conscious that her position was earned on the “backs of black, brown and working class

activists” (1996: 260). Even with the awareness (that she was the beneficiary of “civil rights redress”, 1996:260), she is also aware of the distance between “her townhouse and the college”, she has tenuous “entry into U.S privilege” and her students are and will most probably continue to be “denied that entry” (1996: 260). She explores her discomfort with the privilege of her position but finds no easy answers to her increasing intolerance for her noisy, exuberant, largely Puerto Rican, neighbours. When she moves to teach at the University of California she does not share the “jubilation” of “scores of minority scholars” but rather faces a different construction of herself: “It was not my gender that got in the way but my nonwhiteness. Every semester with each new class, my first challenge was to make my white students take me seriously as a mind and a mentor” (1996: 322). While, then, Deepika Bahri’s concerns that writers and intellectuals like Lim become “victims in proxy for the truly silenced others who do not have access to the means for cultural production”, this is not, at least in Lim’s case a position she has vied for, it is one that is fraught with scepticism, the discomfort of “scraping inequality”. She is aware of the fragility of her position and its implicit contradictions. She does not equate, however, the condescension she experiences with the material pain and violence to which those who are “denied entry” are subject. She does not presume to speak *for*.

Lim eventually returned to Malaysia and reconciled with her mother. She says, ‘the dominant imprint I have carried with me since birth was of a Malaysian homeland. It has been imperative for me to make sense of these birthmarks; they compose the hieroglyphics of my body’s senses’ (1996: 347). The need is to tell the stories of Baba and of her mother, of place, because for too long she has felt “an absence of place, myself absent in America. Absence was the story my mother taught me, that being the story of her migrant people, the Malacca *peranakans*” (1996: 348). But, also, she says, her mother taught her that “home is the place where our stories are told”. In the telling of and the listening to her own stories, Lim sees herself as finally “moving home”.

Orange

*is red is passion is pain
underscored by yellow is what the white
man calls me is red is woman is blood stain is
yellow is hope and sun in the dance is red is birth
is the death of the virginal is the blood that drives the
flag bloodsea of my land ...is red cheongsam is hongbao
is not pink nor green is yellow P-
people with jaundice* (Grace Chia 1998: 96)

The idea of otherness and of othering is central to the theorising of the postcolonial. The binaries of white and non-white, of Europe and Ahmad's not-Europe, have characterised debate in the field. The creation of categories – third world women, women of color, hybrids and hyphenated identities, have been constructed in opposition or complement to the old or new colony. In later literature the necessity for oppositional binaries, for hierarchical paradigms has been more consistently questioned. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome (developed much earlier in *A Thousand Plateaus*) is being explored in the context of new definitions of what imperialism means. As Bill Ashcroft explicates this, in the context of what he continues to call the post-colonial, "the rhizome describes a root system which spreads out laterally rather than vertically, as in bamboo, which has no central root but which propagates itself in a fragmented, discontinuous, multidirectional way" (2001: 50). In this way the hierarchies of branch and trunk, the binaries of centre and margin themselves become fractured and "filiative", rather than hegemonic unities and centres. In the texts explored in this thesis, both constructions occur: the "Manichean binaries of self and other, colonizer and colonized", and the more rhizomic structure in which the imperialism operates through "an invisible network of filiative connections, psychological internalisations and unconsciously complicit associations" (Ashcroft, 2001: 50). The move away from the binary as a predominant trope of postcolonial critique, with its clear divisions of centre and margins, of North and South to a more fractured, "lateral and intermittent" construction of the emanations of power may allow for more complex readings of the interaction between the imperial impulse and the resistances to it which occur. Neither construction though, quite fits with Ahmad's

much reiterated sense that, at times, neither of these, the imperial or resistant, is highly significant to the experience being explored.

In her poem 'Orange' Grace Chia plays with the colours that construct her life and also subverts such construction. One is aware she is not these colours, she is both intimately engaged by and with their wonderous evocativeness and distanced from the labels such evocations can elicit. She directs attention to the outsideness, even inanity of /yellow is what the white man calls me/, is deeply sardonic in her choice of the phrase /people with jaundice/. There is a dismissiveness and an ironic appropriation that takes this clearly facile view and transforms it into part of the complexity of the colour orange, rich and vibrant and many things, other than the pathology of jaundice, because yellow is sun and hope and dance too. Orange also contains red, blood and woman, stain and birth, linked to nationality in a flag and to ethnicity in the cheongsam and hongbao (one sensual and the other a symbol of prosperity). In this way, (and perhaps because of that very possibility of prosperity) the sense of a third world or of a woman of colour is subtly skewed and partially interrogated. This shift and interrogation, no matter how partial, is characteristic of the writing examined in this thesis. In the poem are the threads of the texts: there is something arcane (not supernatural but magical) in /hope and sun in the dance/, a kind of ordinariness in the cheongsam and the hongbao, in dress and present that yet links to the colours Chia sees as constructing her world, colours that are lyrical, transformative – red blood as both stain and woman, red as passion and pain, implicit with threat and with life (birth). The colour yellow /yellow is what the white man calls me/ is subject of profound derision, this margin, an underscoring in the richness of orange is one she is not prepared to accept (I can almost hear the – yeh, *right* – in the young voice) and it reminds me yet again of Ahmad's much earlier critique, where he said of the experiences written about in Pakistan, that the white perception (the colonial imprint) was only a part of people's concerns, sometimes not a very big part. Chia's poem provides a link between red pain and the yellow imposed by a eurocentric imaginary, but then subsumes this in orange and in the arcane and ordinary aspects of this world.

In fact yellow as a colour "the white man calls me" is largely missing from the worlds of Catherine Lim's three novels. In these novels, it is the character of idiot or madwoman who reveals an almost complete liminality, a profound distance from any

centrality of experience or community. These texts denote a position of abjection that serves to interrogate social constructs of what constitute a valuable humanity, the parameters of acceptability and of what establishes the dimensions of norms and centres (the antitheses of the margin). Insider/outsider status is not based on colour (nor on colonial or neo-colonial) constructs in this instance.

Each of these texts has, as I've already stated, a character who is an 'idiot' or a 'madwoman', characters who are situated overwhelmingly outside; the most totally marginalised of any in the novels. In *The Serpent's Tooth*, Lim's first novel, there is a description of the 'idiot one':

'I have four uncles,' Michael said, holding up his hand, four fingers outspread. 'Three of them are all right, but one of them is not so clever, and cannot earn any money. But he makes me laugh and he catches birds and grasshoppers for me and carries me on his shoulders. He is my favourite uncle.'

'He's not our uncle!' protested Mark and Michelle. Michelle giggled, Mark was angry. 'He's only Grandmother's adopted son. Adopted means not real. She adopted him because if she didn't, he would die (1982:15).

The one child enjoys the simplicity of the 'not-right' uncle, his ability to make him laugh; the other children vehemently disavow him. The tension is created between Michael's capacity to show and feel compassion and Mark's anxious but highly lauded over-achievement which is implicitly linked to his inability to accept this uncle's difference or to see his value. Mark's nervous inflexibility is contrasted with his brother's more relaxed and responsive engagement with the world. In this text, which uneasily questions the competitiveness of a modern Singapore, the figure of the 'idiot one' is somewhat facilely linked to more traditional values through the figure of the 'superstitious' mother-in-law. It is also connected to a valorised idea of nature, the 'idiot one' catches birds and grasshoppers in ways that would no longer usually occur in a highly urbanised environment. The implicit opposition of the traditional and the modern is of interest. A 'westernised' Singapore, and a relatively cosmopolitan central character (the mother of the children) stand for a lack of compassion not evidenced in the traditional figure of the grandmother (who is a constant source of irritation to the younger woman). The discourse of modernity, of progress reveals a hollow angst at its 'centre'. This is a discourse repeated again at the beginning of *The Bondmaid* where, in the name of capitalist progress Han's shrine is torn down. The old caretaker, Han's

lover we later find out, is now a wizened, perhaps mad old man whose story is obliterated in the act of development. The opposition between the demands of modernity and the demands of the traditional are less clear-cut here. Within either social system, the needs of the mad or the 'abnormal' will be, Lim implies, largely ignored, their stories erased.

In *The Bondmaid* too, the figure of the literally silent idiot, abnormal and outside is repeated. Spitface is both physically and mentally disabled:

Left in a refuse heap as an infant, he had never left it, carrying around the utter dereliction of body and mind. His mother had been evil in another life, he had been evil in a previous life, his mother had slaughtered too many chickens when she was pregnant with him, and screamed to the goat's head, hanging on an iron hook in the butcher's stall and swinging to leer at her, which was why he had goat's eyes. Squalor, deprivation, hideousness - Sky God's rampage of fun did not end there. The god gave him a loving heart as well, which forever condemned him to loneliness for nobody would love him back (1995: 79).

The proliferation of 'superstitions' which explain Spitface's birth, the abjection of rubbish heap and refuse, of the putrefaction which informs his existence is contrasted with his ability to love selflessly. Much like the uncle in *The Serpent's Tooth* Spitface gives an unconditional loyalty, he is always there for the bondmaid Han, even though she is not always kind to him. He is lower than the totally disenfranchised servants, ordered about, the only one at their beck and call. Unlike the idiot uncle in *The Serpent's Tooth*, Spitface does not provide an easy valorisation of a more compassionate age (where the idiot uncle was taken in because he would die). The emphasis on refuse and abjection proliferates in Lim's descriptions of Spitface. He is the object of Han's childish cleverness and cruelty - "The children wanted to put ants in Spitface's trousers" and they do so with a vicious glee (1995: 69). It becomes indicative of Han's developing maturity that she can later perceive some commonality with the wholly marginalised 'imbecile'. Hearing another bondmaid, Chu, tell the story of Spitface's birth, later she thinks "We poor fools, we all... Two bondmaids, one imbecile, one senile old man - all mutilated in their own ways"(1995: 155).

The centre in such a cultural context consists of the towkay and tai tai, the wealthy family around whom the story circulates (and yet Lim complicates this, making the old

towkay both morally bankrupt and totally vulnerable in his senility – mutilated in his own way). However, in one scene Li-Li, the young master's wife and representative of social pre-eminence, begins to dispense ang pow to the bondmaids (Ang Pow equate with hongbao, red packets of money symbolic of prosperity, the red of gift-giving in Chia's poem). Spitface, seeing the group, wanders in and waits his turn. "There came a start from Li-Li and a little shudder of aversion... Choyin looked again at Li-Li, now positively pale and pressing a handkerchief to her mouth, then at Spitface, as unkempt-looking as ever, his eyes grotesquely protuberant, his teeth horribly discoloured" (1995: 271). Li-Li has known Spitface since childhood and so her hysteria is puzzling to those around her, until the sycophantish Choyin discerns Li-Li's hand delicately placed on her stomach, protecting a possible pregnancy from the contamination of Spitface's abjection. The generosity which the ang pows are meant to symbolise becomes subsumed in the petty cruelty and irrationality of Li-Li's reaction. The centre and its margin here owe nothing to the colonial. This is not an outside constructed in "an oppositional relation to the colonial centre" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 53), this occurs within the hierarchy of a society only minimally engaged with a colonised world. And, while Lim would acknowledge women's greater capacity to be perceived as abject (she recounts in *The Bondmaid* the belief that menstruation is contaminating like Chia's /the stain of blood red/ (1998: 96), she does not in this case emphasise the abjection of the feminine in Creed's sense of the term (see Chapter 4) as much as she concentrates on the abjection of the wholly marginal, those beyond the pale of the material protections which serve to shield people who have power or have the social influence that comes with wealth. She leaves us too, in little doubt as to whose mutilation, whose moral vacuity is the greater.

In *The Teardrop Story Woman*, the character of the Mad Temple Auntie is arcane, representative of the uncivil, uncivilised. She is a travesty of the "good and proper" body that should be woman. She is

the town's best example of failed womanhood who was allowed to stay in an outbuilding of the Kek Lok temple only because many years ago she had been struck dumb by a wrathful deity for some transgression and had to spend her the rest of her life in atonement. Mad Temple Auntie, with her pathetic bulging eyes and slack, grinning mouth, ought to strike fear into young girls' hearts. Even the rapacious Japanese soldiers had avoided her (1998: 105).

However for the principal character Mei Kwei, Mad Temple Auntie, who remains outside both the centrality and the petty cruelties and inanities of a socialised existence, is a source rather of comfort and support. Protected, by her abjection, from the predations of males, “even the rapacious Japanese”, she lives an alternative to the rigid prescriptions of the proper. It is the mute Mad Temple Auntie who continues the tenderness of the Second Grandmother after Second Grandmother’s death. When Mei Kwei is distressed, it is she who provides comfort: “Uttering little cries of affection, she cradled the girls head in her arms, and rocked to and fro” (1998: 147). She dances rather than speaks her fury at the girl’s distress, in arcane patterns she fights and defeats the foe and then in a somewhat mawkish symbolism produces the filched (operatic) diadems of the Sun God-King and the Moon Maiden, which Lim imbues with romantic relevance. The speechlessness, the utter subalternity, is revealed as empowered and empowering in this single context, her muteness transmuted in the communication of performance; the telling of stories through the body.

The holiness of Mad Temple Auntie was more to be inferred than witnessed; people seeing her greedily awaiting meal-times and grabbing at food brought by worshippers...

The matted hair, the smelly clothes – was of the kind associated with slovenliness rather than sanctity...[yet] the chastisement[the muteness] was in reality a protection, for the woman was possessed of deep truths which could never be uttered; ... the dumbness, moreover, disappeared on certain feast days of the gods when she stood at the altars and screamed out the most direful predictions (1998: 112).

Julia Kristeva in the *Powers of Horror* links the abject to the sublime, seeing abjection as that which “disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982: 4). In a gentle way, the character of Mad Temple Auntie challenges the controlling social strictures and boundaries which threaten to engulf Mei Kwei’s life. She is not however linked to a kind of evil, which Kristeva’s definition intimates, but is fully peripheral to the social world of the town and as such constitutes a kind of threat. She does not conform, nor can she value or even recognise the value of conformity to the rules and boundaries that create the safety of an inside. She, therefore, can hold anarchy within herself, a self which does not require the mediation of cultural norms and social niceties. In this context muteness becomes both chastisement (by the gods) and protection, a protection against truths that others cannot know because they are too

full of arcane power. Mad Temple Auntie because of her difference is both repulsive (lice-ridden) and fascinating to those who view her from a distance; to the beautiful but also not wholly conventional Mei Kwei, she is a friend. The character of the Mad Temple Auntie points to a sense of something that encompasses the grotesque, those whose physical and/or mental difference, labelled disability, makes them almost totally peripheral but who can also become holders of either implicitly spiritual, or at the very least ethical, values. The challenge of the 'freaks' (in an almost 'carnavalesque'⁶² move) is a challenge to the controls and compromises that seem to constitute civilised/acceptable/socially inclusive behaviour in these texts.

Laura Donaldson in her discussion of Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's reading of *Jane Eyre* cites the elision of the madwoman Bertha as native, accusing such a reading of bleaching "women of color into an asocial invisibility" (1992: 16). In postcolonial feminist critique, the imprisoned and largely invisible creole in Brontë's novel (the first wife, Bertha) becomes a symbol of colonial erasure. Her animalistic tendencies and the equation of this with her madness allow the central characters in *Jane Eyre* to eschew responsibility for her happiness as a human being. The construction of the Other in this critique is of one not capable of contributing as a 'normal' social being, a position which Lim delicately interrogates in each of her novels through the construction of the minor and palpably socially insignificant characters. In Lim's texts though there is no sense of the dialectic of native or non-native and no possibility of the narrator reconstructing herself, or as a woman achieving her identity "at the expense of the 'native', not quite human, female Other" (Donaldson 1992: 22).⁶³ In fact in each text it is the 'not-normal' individual who has the most to teach the 'normal' more central characters of the novels in (occasionally simplistic) terms of what it is to be fully human. Graham Huggan argues that in "contemporary cultural theory, marginality is often given a positive value, being seen as less a site of social exclusion or deprivation

⁶² The idea of the carnival in this sense comes from Bakhtin's idea of grotesque inversions, which challenges "official ideology and discourse of religious and state power" (in Allen, 2000: 22). Lim's grotesque characters though are part of no joyous, public enactment of an inversion of the social order.

⁶³ I remain uneasy with readings of *Jane Eyre* which insist Bertha was, in fact, meant to be coloured. She could well have been unacceptable, more simply, as a white Creole (speaker of hybrid language). The overlay of colour seems a modern interpretation, not completely supported in text. It is, I would argue, her madness that allows Rochester to reject her. She is no longer fully human. This is a move congruent with constructions of difference and race of course; though I'm unconvinced that this (coalition of race and madness) actually occurred in Brontë's text.

than as a locus of resistance to socially imposed standards and coercive norms” (2001: 20). In Lim’s texts the material and constitutive liminality that comes with ‘abnormality’ has little positive value, the sheer misery that imbues Spitface’s existence and his almost total powerlessness is in fact not valorised nor romanticised by Lim. It remains a “site of social exclusion” and of extreme deprivation. The “resistance” that may come from reading difference differently, does not actually occur. The societies described remain unaware that the most outside of ‘their’ outsiders may have something to teach them about “imposed standards and coercive norms”, whether these are from western modern or Chinese traditional sources.

Beth Yahp too, often explores the boundaries of the human in her writing but more often than Lim utilizes the mythologies of her complex background.

Her face is pale and shiny. Her hair falls in dark strands onto her shoulders and neck. The curve of her cheek is what he watches, that moon curve, and then she turns and her features are sickle sharp. Like the teeth with which she bites him. With which she delicately lifts his skin, so small the bit of skin she lifts that he can hardly feel it (1995: 12).

Is this a description of the pontianak ghost, a devourer of human souls? Is she dead, the most abject of abject, and yet not body, not a seeping of fluids, but a seeping of soul, of life force? Is she woman, as threat, as wholly Other, sickle sharp teeth and delicate destructive bite? Is she the fascination of what cannot be contained, what cannot be civilised by Kristeva’s “good and proper body” (1982: 8)? Is she the evil that haunts the margins of humanity, threatening not as the (nominally) grotesque are so overtly threatening to the aesthetics that control and contain us, but threat as both beauty and terror? Such beauty is subtly altered, daintily distorted, offering a difference as shadow and suggestion and therefore more chilling than the overt, pitiable difference of Lim’s ‘idiot’, her ‘madwoman’. In Chinese myth the ghost, according to Judith Zeitlin, is “a symptom of fatal blockage and congestion, a pathological return of something incomplete and unresolved” (1997:249). She is not recognisably a third world woman though she fits into a stereotype of third world superstition. As Yahp has constructed her in *The Crocodile Fury* she is the rich man’s lover, passive yet destructive; an allegory of the potential fury of the postcolonial, the third world, but these remain troubling categories in this context (always uneasy categories in the seeming presumptions of hierarchy and of superiority). Yet, if pontianak ghost she is older than

the advent of this imperialism, part of an imagination barely touched by european intrusions, (or part of a literal noncorporeal world – who is to say?). In Yahp's analysis of the dreaming of the ghost though, she is also allegorical of the displacement of the migrant, of the "in-between creature, hybrid always out of place. Belonging neither here nor there, exactly in this life or the one left behind, known only in broad generalisations" (1995:13). Her transparency, invisibility leaves her with no colour, yet she is not unmarked as white, as norm, but rather submerged in a faceless, universalised asian that erases her as an individual.⁶⁴

This ghost too, is never an individual, she is always the same, all pontianak ghosts are the same when first encountered (as the Other) "with dread and loathing, not for what they are, but for what you think you know they are" (1995: 13). Yahp herself links the telling of the ghost story to her love of the "mystery at the heart of all things", to a challenge to the boundaries "of what's considered possible" (1995:14). If named pontianak⁶⁵, her heritage is more fearful than Yahp's explication allows, born of a lansuir, the ghost of a woman who died in child birth and who generally feeds upon the blood of children, the sharp nipping teeth are vampire-like (Mythology P, 1999) and, as Yahp does acknowledge, designed to suck the soul from the body. An analytical link can be made to Barbara Creed's (1993) description of the monstrous feminine, where she examines both the idea of the vampire and of the medusa in European mythology. This she then links to women as abject, as bleeders of impure blood and as an invocation of the threat of toothed castration, or engulfment (re-incorporating the child back into the monstrous mother's own being). The genealogy of the pontianak as descendant of the lansuir seems to connect with Creed's explication of this monstrous feminine as both the creator and consumer of humanity. Creed's analysis is largely eurocentric and at times disquietingly universalising, yet as she too has clearly perceived, the parallels between certain mythologies cannot be ignored. Parallels,

⁶⁴ This links back to Tseen-Ling Khoo's contempt for the lack of differentiation of both some homogeneous group called Asians and Asian woman writers - "y ou all sort of resemble each other" (1998: 3).

⁶⁵ Shirley Geok-lin Lim says, slightly derisively of her English education and perhaps, of Malay superstition that "On Friday May 13, we read t he witches scene [from *MacBeth*], which in demon-haunted Malaysian society reads like a child's caricature of evil. 'Tail of newt' and 'eye of toad' were comic t rivia beside what Malaysians whisper of blood-sucking *pontianak* and entrails-flying *hantu*" (1996: 207).

though, can be useful in this context, providing imaginative links, despite cultural differences, across literatures.

In Chinese mythology, as discussed in chapter two, “ghosts are ‘dirty things’, contrasted with the ‘purity’ of the gods, their superiors. In an interesting parallel, in the ‘othering’ of women, they too (women) are “impure, and are termed *lasam* - the same unflattering term applied to ghosts – since they menstruate and give birth” (Jean Debernardi 1993:159). Yahp’s construct, however emphasises the ephemeral, almost attractive nature of the creature’s appearance. The haunting translucency, the evanescence of the ‘apparition’ is both threat and evocation of that experience of invisibility to which the narrator, herself, was subject when she migrated to Australia and became an ‘Other’(Yahp, 1995). The tearing of the night is a tearing without sound, and always the presence is pale, seductive, even the menace of teeth are of only a glint, when they bite it is with a delicate lifting of skin “so small the bit of skin she lifts that he can hardly feel it”, sexual and beguiling and only truly there when she has gone “that is when he feels her: when she is gone”. There is always violence hinted in her construction, “Hair scraped back ...sickle sharp features” but that is part of her allure, not so much a grotesque, not even an abjection, for she is all refined control, dainty artifice “with her pots of paint, with her pigs bristle brushes”, ⁶⁶ she possesses the double artifice of make-up and/or the elegance and the civility of the tools of writing. In the encounter with an overshadowing western modernity she is the (dis)embodiment of an ambiguous femininity, Chia’s /is red is woman is blood stain/, but in this construction *she* is so much less corporeal, so much more transparent, delicate, daintier yet more dangerous. In Yahp’s essay, the experience is counterpoint to “what the white man calls me”. In this experience the writer is seen through, not seen, generalised to the point of elision. Yahp becomes perhaps “ ‘gwei-lo’: ghost” (1995:14) and this is, ironically, one of the celestial kingdom’s names for its European Other: a reminder that the other was never only an-other of Euro/American construction. The ‘power’ is with

⁶⁶ There is a curious similarity here, with a very different piece of writing. Alexander Pope’s ‘Rape of the Lock’ contains the following lines on Belinda’s Toilet: /The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,/ Transformed to combs, the Speckled and the White/ (Wimsatt,Jr. 1951: 91). Pope’s satirical and sometimes malicious play with the artifice of tortoiseshell and ivory comb and the ‘civilised’ pettines of /Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux/ (p.91) contribute to his somewhat misogynistic construction of an /awful Beauty/ who encapsulates the cultured center of the world he portrays. A beauty who, in tools of trade at least, is not unlike Yahp’s cultivated, though much more threatening, apparition.

those who choose not to see, but the re-construction of the experience is influenced by other than the Euro/Anglo/American trace (in both the Oxford Dictionary sense of the word and Kristeva's, of trace as intertext (in Allen 2000).

In the imagining of the Other as woman, the opposition between power and fragility, agency and passivity constantly recurs in the writing explored in this thesis. The changing representation of the ghost, which Judith Zeitlin has mapped in the Ming and Qing periods in China, can be linked to Said's discussion of the western academic construction of the Oriental. The discursive strategies, occurring in such different times and from within disparate histories, are eerily similar. Zeitlin states, "at first condemned as a dangerous, pathogenic carrier of yin-poison, the ghost becomes an object of pity who can be cured and rehabilitated" (1997: 249). This change, of the construct woman and the construct ghost, from the threatening to the fragile, connects to the discursive pathologising of women which occurred at the time. The "fantastic difficulty in walking" described in one of the ghost stories Zeitlin discusses, links the helplessness of the feminised, and therefore automatically impotent ghost, to the "eroticized crippled gait that bound feet produced" (p.247). Sexually erotic or frighteningly titillating, each image is neatly packaged and contained.

I will include Zeitlin's quote from Furth here in full as it brings several of the discussions of this chapter together though of course in a different analytical context:

Biology had tamed the powers of pollution associated with the borders between life and death, replacing them by a set of naturalistic symptoms controlled within the system of healing... Threatening symbols of female sexual power were replaced by benign symbols of female generativity and weakness that moderated pollution taboos and permitted an interpretation of gender based on paternalism, pity, and protection (1997: 249).

There is an irony in Yahp's construction of the weakened ghost/spirit and the (at least initial) passivity of the feminised other, the Lover in *The Crocodile Fury*. The diluting of the threat of the female ghost historically meant a diminution of her power to contaminate so, in a return to Creed's theory of the monstrous feminine for a moment, the threat of an engulfing femaleness is transposed into a fragility which poses little or no threat at all. Zeitlin connects this to the "fetishized, displaced locus of the female genitals in this period" (1997:250), that is the tiny bound foot, which effectively kept

the living woman physically vulnerable and therefore less potentially menacing. Yahp's conflation of the ghost's translucency, her invisibility with the experience of the migrant as Asian, as indiscernible Other is possible also because of a dominant discursive formation that seeks to neutralise perceived threat, 'feminising' or infantilising the perception of a lurking menace in its depiction of a passive, if corrupt Orient. The gender politics of this is interesting in so far as the male 'oriental' is feminised. Tony Schirato offers an interesting discussion of this.

Schirato in the 'Narrative of Orientalism' (1994) describes the 1939 cinematic depiction of the 'good' Indian Gunga Din, in the film of that name. The film was situated in India and charted the story of a British soldier and his, suitably obsequious servant, the Indian Gunga Din. Schirato describes the male Gunga Din's physical presence in the film as characterised by weakness, he is "both the typical and the ideal 'native'" in that he is "unimposing" (1994: 47).⁶⁷ Schirato emphasises that Din is not "in any way physically powerful and threatening", he is the child rather than the adult in the binary of western and other as constructed in the film. In a surprisingly familiar vocabulary, linked back to Zeitlin's discussion of the construction of the term woman, there is a discursive colonisation/identification of the term Indian with weakness and with a type of infantilisation. There is one scene, however, which inverts this. It is the scene where the Indian 'cult', the Strangers, meet in a cave to discuss the terror they will loose upon the unwitting British. The soldier and his servant overhear this threat. In that moment of menace and violence another Indian, another India is created. This Indian (the leader of the 'cult') invokes Kali (many armed goddess of destruction); in a menacing dance of shadow and stealth, the Strangers are called on to kill the British. This lurking menace, which is both cowardly but a true threat, is, of course, contained by the courage of the coloniser and the loyalty of the good Indian, who 'save the day'. The eeriness of the scene, all creeping shadow and hunched duplicity, reflects the uneasiness of proximity. The pontianak ghost too is shadowy menace, all the more terrifying because *she* exists at the corner of the eye, is never quite there. The Other, in either case is, in this instance at least, part of a Manichean binary of "self and other", either "colonizer and colonized" (Ashcroft, 2001: 50) or "feminine and masculine", there is no rhizomic subtlety here.

⁶⁷ Homi Bhabha has stated that the "split subject of the racist stereotype - the simian Negro, the effeminate Asiatic male - ...ambivalently fix identity as the fantasy of difference" (1985: 150).

From Yahp's arcane play with representation of the Other, we can move to Shirley Geok-lin Lim's engagement with the discourse of an ordinary which is also a periphery, at the margins of the significant and the weighty. She plays with this, twisting the usual westernised categories of what is imposing, what is powerful and what is normal. In one early story she shifts the kind of representations that usually place 'white' westerners as unmarked by colour. Of all the writers looked at in this thesis, she and Chia are the most concerned with the trope of colour, and in Geok-lin Lim's case, with the idea of the coloured woman. The disjuncture of this with the experience of home has to some degree already been discussed (see Chapter 5), but is also partially interrogated in the story 'Keng Hua' where the female protagonist Weng, is going out with an American she has met at work. There are a series of stereotypes: Peter smells because he has been drinking but Siew, Weng's friend responds to this observation with a generalisation,

" 'All white people smell," Siew had told her. 'It's the meat they eat. Big plates of red beef with the blood still dripping. Ughh!'" (1995: 99)⁶⁸. It is the white man who is made peripheral in this conversation, his barbarism and fleshy physicality clearly unattractive. He is described as a "big, brown-haired, red-skinned man who had a roll of fat above his trousers and thickly coiled dark hair over his bare arms, springing up from the backs of his hands" (1995: 98), his size and clumsiness are emphasised several times. The facileness of the depiction reflects and deflects discussions of the representation of Asians or of the native as it occurs in western literature (Said 1978; Bhabha 1985; Schirato, 1994). Gargi Bhattacharyya reverses the usual classification of White and Other when she depicts an alternative subject formation where the category of white is both exotic and ultimately somewhat pitiable:

Not my object, my thing, my fantasy. I'm looking – but I can't fix him in my sights.

More and less human than us, he reddens easily...

Even as he flakes and falls apart, the white man can't see himself. The world's audience can't recognise another's glance. Unaware he lets it all hang out. Flaunts his paunch, scratches his crotch, wipes his body ooze on the surroundings, convinced the marks don't show... A clumsy child, finger in nose... (1996:123)

⁶⁸Gargi Bhattacharyya actually asserts that there is a link between a meat and milk (ie. European) culture and imperial expansion" (1996:134).

Bhattacharyya argues that the challenge for the “dark world ...is to imagine ourselves without the demeaning counterpoint of whiteness” (1996: 134). This, she claims, may require a perverse imagining; the perversion/inversion of imagining the (currently) most powerful gender/race as a “clumsy child, finger in nose” (1996:133). Perversity contains multiple meanings: ‘wicked’ imagining, in the way that the black American writer Leroi Jones ‘imagined’ the bloody death and destruction of white protagonists, having a black character (Clay) state to his white ‘companion’: “I mean if I murdered you, then white people would begin to understand me. You understand? No. I guess not. If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music” (in Patterson, 1971: 515). The word perverse, too, can imply a wilful resistance to subsumation and appropriation. Or the imagining may be perverse because it is contrary to the dominance of the Euro-American imagining about the way the world is or should be. Bhattacharyya chooses to make her imagining derisive, to make the white man an unattractive child, who cannot perceive his own repulsive excess, wiping his “body ooze on the surroundings, convinced the marks don’t show”. All of these imaginings still contain the “demeaning counterpoint of whiteness”, caught in the discursive loop of the marks that aren’t supposed to show.

Peter (the American), in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s story, reflects, more gently perhaps, Bhattacharyya’s imagining of the grotesque child-man. Peter at the very least is no (neo-colonial) Kurtz, not a profound, though angst-ridden evil. Lim’s description has more in common with Conrad’s delineation of the native woman (Torgovnick, 1990) though it lacks the occult and sexualised overtones. In Lim’s text the coloniser or at least neocoloniser is, dismissively, ordinary; the *white* man becomes a rather less glamorous, somewhat fat reddish-skinned man, clumsy and a tad pitiable. Marked by colour but not sharp-edged white and not possessing even the hard primitivism of the noble, North American savage of Rousseau, he is, in fact, completely unprepossessing. Aida Hurtado argues that for whiteness to be the “center of the Universe, it is necessary for whiteness to be not only an unmarked category but also an *inherently* superior category” (1996: 139). The construction then of ‘the white man’ here is an interesting inversion of the construction often found in colonial text. In her discussion of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Torgovnick (1990) points to the moral bankruptcy of Kurtz but shows that the representation remains threatening, the character disturbing, dangerous. When compared to this, the bumbling, putty-like quality of Lim’s representation is more

in line with the descriptions of child-like natives (see the reference to Schirato, 1994 above) than to the superiority, even if only in terms of a very masculinist aesthetic of brooding menace, of much colonial text.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim not only notes the limitations of Peter's white masculinity, but also the arrogance of the American national, who in a Malaysian context, can make definitive judgements: "You Malaysians are superstitious". The response is, "We Malaysians? What makes you think you know us?" (1982: 100). This issue of knowing remains central, the constitution of knowledge is a powerful tool in creating dominant epistemologies. To be fair, no similar question is asked in the story about the generalising and stereotyping statements the Malaysian characters make about the American. Yahp's example of the contact with the Other, that the Chinese name for "Occidentals is 'gwei-lo': ghost" (1995: 14) seems less applicable here than the Chinese label for Euro/American foreigners per se as barbarians. The imagery of the bloody meat consumption of the man and his pink/red meatiness of physique is a highly unappealing representation, the act of making him the object of conversation and comment subtly inverts the 'usual' placement of neocoloniser and native, of centres and margins. Monika Fludernick argues, "this inversion of the colonial paradigm is, however, still rooted in colonial education and does not escape the clutches of Western discourse" (1999:52). She continues, in a discussion of *The Glassblower* by Gupta, that the American character in this novel, Sparrow, "instantiates precisely those characteristics of laziness, inefficiency, and slyness typically projected on the colonial subject" (1999:53). This inversion of the inauthentic stereotype in order to contain former or new colonial domination of imaginative production may reflect Ashcroft's initial discussion of "psychological internalisation and unconsciously complicit associations" (2001:50) that are part of colonisation's rhizomic rather than hierarchically dominating imperial hegemony. Although the inverse of this too then must be the experience of the west, where as Bhabha argues, ambivalences and exaggerations infuse the construction of its Other.

This of course has always been part of the discourse of centre and margin. The metropolis assumes its hegemony to be absolute only to find native peoples whose name for themselves is 'the people' and who have no other way of naming. The centre so often *is* centre because analysis occurs from there and elides or denigrates the

hegemony of another naming, another perception of what it takes to be fully human. Fludernik describes the ambivalent position of “some former victims of marginalization and ‘cultural’ oppression [who] have been enabled to turn the tables on the West” and have also “become implicated in a general Western economy that continues to exclude and discriminate” (1999: 56). The critique of Said’s construction of Orientalism (see Chapter 1) was that it failed to emphasise that this so called orient had always had its own way of naming and constructing the Occident. Clearly though, in view of world politics as Said (2000) has stated, the discourse of the west has had, in this time and space, greater material power and greater discursive clout than that of its Other. Spivak’s continual return to the pragmatics of the construction of the third world woman and the epistemic violence of such discursive constructions, also reminds us that such discussions are about real people whose lives have been tainted, disrupted and used in the aftermath of the huge imperial project which characterised the European expansion of the last few centuries. What Catherine Lim and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Beth Yahp, Grace Chia, Leong Liew Geok, Nirmila PuruShotam and many other writers also present ‘us’ with, however, is the complexity and variation of interaction and response that occurred and is occurring to such a monolithic enterprise. Sometimes that ‘reaction’ is exemplified by an emptiness, a void which signals that in the schemes of the experiences and affects which construct worlds such interactions have a less than significant impact. The Arcane threat of the Other or the diminution of the Self when one is the Other who is under construction, sometimes disappears from the writing in an engagement with the ordinary, the everyday that constitutes, finally, so much of existence.

You can imagine this kind of afternoon. There, in that other place. Not here. There’s the clinking of bowls from the back of the house, the low sizzle of oil. The wok ladle scraping against its hot centre, onions curling to the right texture. The plates piled high with cut vegetables and meat. There, that place, where the muted shuffle of kitchen slippers leaks down the passageway to the front of the house, and children are intercepted on their swift run through. (Yahp 1994:143)

That “other place. Not here” and another time, not now, is what the story is about. But it is also about the tastes and sounds and touches and interactions of lives. The tactility of the description builds on the detail and sound of ‘everyday’ life; it has a concreteness that can be contrasted with the ephemeral quality of the ghost, the ambiguity of the not-

temporal, the non-corporeal. Yahp builds detail onto detail, familiar (and the not-so-familiar to the western reader) in a way which normalises, touching on the ordinariness of the act of cooking and of eating but then luxuriating in its appeal to the senses, its ability to comfort. Sneja Gunew states that when “ethnicity is represented as lived everyday experience, a kind of barrier is set up to appropriation (and full identification)” (2000 :230). While this is placed so categorically, “There ...Not here”, west or east becomes a periphery, the ease is in the being there, in the sight of food piled high and the familiarity of the spaces, the expectedness of kitchen slippers and boisterous children and onions curling “to the right texture”.

The warm, lovingly detailed richness of this can be contrasted with Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s story entitled ‘Hunger’, where the same attention to detail occurs with a devastatingly different affect. Lim describes the child, Chai, watching as another eats:

Chai tightened the uniform belt and thought of Suleng. Suleng’s mother was a washerwoman, but in her hand Suleng had a piece of white bread spread thick with margarine and sprinkled with sugar. Suleng wasn’t in her A class. Suleng was a B class girl, but her uniform was starched and ironed, the creases sharp and straight, the folds thick like her slice of bread and the yellow margarine spread with a fat knife. The starch made Suleng’s royal blue cotton uniform gleam, like the fat sugar crystals glistening on the margarine on top of the bread (1995: 200).

Here the tactile nature of the food is indicative of loss, absence, neglect. Chai watches the ‘lesser’ Suleng (she is after all the daughter of a washerwoman and in the B class) consume the lowly bread and margarine which, in imagination, becomes laden with value, richness, thickness, fatness (even the knife used to spread the margarine is fat), an affluence in excess of literal meanings. Fat sugar crystals and starch crystals gleam and glisten like jewels implying a luxuriating in care and attention that the neglected child, Chai, misses. There is no writing against here. The poverty contains little ethnic specificity. It is simply, harrowingly, not having enough.

The allure of food becomes more ominous later in the story when the child is lured to sit with an old man by the sweet wonder of a proffered guava. The payment is for the man to fondle the child, - “She didn’t think anything of it”. Eschewing victimhood, Geok-lin Lim returns autonomy to the canny little girl, who when next offered 10 cents, by the man (and the attraction of the food it could buy) runs past without looking. “He had

only money to give her, and the ten-cent coin did not make up for the terrible pleasure of ignoring his pleading eyes and wavering hand” (1995: 208). The terrible pleasure is a pleasure in power, in refusal that asserts her freedom, her separateness from the hunger and neglect which leave her so vulnerable to abuse and could so easily frame her entire existence. Gunew, in a discussion of food, bodies and language states that in the story ‘Hunger’, Lim “creates a protagonist not unlike the younger self of” her memoirs (2000: 231). She re-creates a ‘silent’ subaltern through the agency allowed to her as the ‘third world’ intellectual she has become. But this persona also and always incorporates that hunger, that lack, the mundane and the chilling *banality* of malnourishment. Gunew, however also notes an interesting parallel in this story and in Lim’s autobiography. She quotes a passage which describes Lim’s experience of her first year studying in the U.S:

If there was nourishing sweetness in all this warehouse of food, one would have to tear through unyielding metal, thick polyvinyl, pounds of cardboard; and the sweetness jacketed in the shapely banana was so mixed with the bitter gummy chemicals of its premature harvesting that my stomach heaved in disgust even as my teeth frantically chewed to keep ahead of my ravenous hunger. For the first year in the United States I was always hungry, a hunger that rebelled against American food (Lim, 1996: 148)

Gunew links this to an attempt to recover “a forgotten history/corporeality through food” (2000: 231). Loss and hunger exist, in this context, in the so-called land of plenty. The artificialness, the unyielding artifice of American food, characterised as it is by its packaging rather than its function as nourishment or sensual delight, contributes to another, quite different experience of malnutrition. The hollowness, the ugly deception in the sweetness and bitterness which jackets “the shapely banana”, points to the deficit that can exist in affluence, the compromise that provides plenty and negates the remembered, delightful sensuousness of the food. John Tomlinson, in *Globalization and Culture* notes “globalization, from its early impact, does clearly undermine a close material relationship between provenance of food and locality” (1999: 123). Yet Lim’s mourning for the local here, is for a past or for a place not so much nostalgised as felt deep in the body, to the point where bodily harm is a possibility. This is not the denigrated local or as Bill Ashcroft puts it the “particularly bounded and xenophobic version of locality as a collection of coercive tribal pressures” (2001: 216) that might characterise ‘cosmopolitan’ discussion of the parochial, but rather a recognition of the

particularity of experience that cannot be always be contained in or by the alienating impersonality of metropolitan plenty. The everyday, in repeated sounds, foods, textures is linked to a nurturing local that contrasts with the flawed nurture implicit in the deficit of bitter chemicals and premature harvest. Luce Girard in 'Doing Cooking', her discussion of the everyday, argues, "Each gesture, each smell, each culinary trick is thick with the condensation of memories", reverberating with childhood remembrances which she links to "histories of migration" (cited in Highmore 2002: 152).

John Frow (as discussed in Chapter 1, above) has argued that the everyday⁶⁹ or ordinary is often constructed from negatives, from what is *not* official, *not* History, *not* "scientific rationality" (1998: 38). These negatives can often be linked to a denigration, rather than celebration, of the nostalgia implicit in Girard's "childhood remembrances", reducing the experience described to a kind of banality that allows for the dismissal of such unofficial, not-capital H, histories. George Seigworth, however, in a discussion of the value of banality for cultural studies, argues, "To begin with, then, it might be useful to consider how the infinitely diffuse nature of banality as '*common* place' unfolds – surreptitiously, insignificantly, and nearly imperceptibly – within and around the passages of everyday life" (2000:231). This unfolding of the "*common* place" is made more complex when it becomes entwined as ethnography but as Gunew has argued, concretising experience can in fact act to discourage "cultural appropriation" because when "ethnicity is represented as lived experience, a kind of barrier is set up to full appropriation (and full identification)", a strategy against incorporation (Gunew, 2000: 230). The common places of Yahp and Geok-lin Lim's stories are also made concrete, not to become representative of 'a' culture, as an act of "information retrieval" but rather to make tangible the particularities of a lived experience.

⁶⁹ Michel de Certeau (1988) in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, of course, has argued that the practices of the everyday can open up new spaces beyond the control of dominant systems. This mirrors the debate around the construction of the magical real (see Chapter 2) where the intrusion of a non-material world-view challenges the hegemony of "scientific rationality". de Certeau refers to the creation of subversive myth but does not make a direct link to magic realism. de Certeau locates a kind of counter-narrative in the way disempowered workers may use the workplace for their own objectives (photocopying on the boss' time is an example given), the creation of such 'spaces', mundane as they may be, within the controlled environment of the workplace allow for a subversion of or reinterpretation of dominant systems.

The detail of the everyday can, however, also confront and challenge. When Kirpal Singh gave qualified praise in his review of Catherine Lim's earlier work: "it seems to me that she has the markings of a really terrific writer. So far Catherine Lim has dealt with the 'little' ironies ... But where are the 'big' ironies" (1993/4:23), he ignored the power of the "little ironies" to connect us to experience, to allow us to examine the 'common' place and find extraordinary meaning. In Lim's story 'The Teacher', she explores an every day, one of searing consequence, a truly violent 'banality'.

"Look," said the teacher to the colleague who was sitting next to him in the staffroom. "Look at this composition written by a student in secondary four..." The teacher read ...'[My father] *say I must leave school and stay home and help him. My younger brothers and sisters they are too young to work so they can go to school. My mother is too sick and weak as she just born a baby.*' Can anything be more atrocious than this? And she's going to sit for her General Certificate of Education in three months' time! ...[the reading continues and the girl explains that her mother has intervened and convinced the father not to take her out of school] *'I think he agree because he was in good mood. If in bad mood like drunk he will beat my mother up and make trouble in the house. So my mother told me I was no need to stop learning in school. And that was the happiest day in my life which I never forget'*. (1993a: 110-111).

Catherine Lim, like Shirley Geok-lin Lim in the earlier passage from 'Hunger', documents abuse. Here the child concerned is exposed to no sexual threat, and the neglect that leaves her vulnerable is linked to the failure of an institution as well as the disfunction of her family. Her teacher's focus on the English competence of the piece of writing under discussion misses, of course, what she is actually saying. The girl's joy at being allowed to continue at school, the domestic violence that characterises her experience is subsumed by the teacher's concern for grammatical accuracy. He is more consumed by his frustration at his student's failure to learn the minutiae of language than by the moving story the child has to tell. Later she again writes a story, meant to be about 'The Stranger' but which instead records her father's violence towards her mother. The teacher's response is "this composition is not only grossly ungrammatical but out of point. I have no alternative but to give her an F9 straightaway. God, I wish I could help her!" (1993a: 113).

Lim then bleakly, briefly records the stark gossip surrounding the girl's suicide "When the news reached the school, the teacher was very upset and said, "Poor girl. What? She actually jumped down from the eleventh floor? Such a shy, timid girl. If only she

had come to me with her problems. But she was too shy and timid to speak up" (1993a: 113).

The long summary of the text is included deliberately, for it gives an intimation of Lim's subtlety here. The teacher is ordinary, his concerns, encouraged by a competitive system of education, are completely unremarkable, his gender unimportant, it is not his chauvinism that blinds him. And while the child has failed to conquer English (the intrusion of the colonial) it is the pedantry based on mastery (sic) of the minutiae that is destructive not the colonial impact of the language itself. But the teacher does care, has coached the child, worked hard, would have tried to intervene if she had 'spoken up'. The searing irony that Lim creates is that of course she has spoken. Perhaps like Spivak's story of Bhubaneswari or Lim's other story of the bondmaid, such a discourse cannot be heard in official registers, perhaps it is coincidental that it is women, concerned with both the little and the big pictures who have in these incidences, tried to record something outside of, impossible to discern within Frow's, "History in the sense of the grand narrative...not formal or official" (1998:58). Perhaps it is an arrogance to speak for, to 'know' a story that is not yours and tell it as though it is. The harrowing quality of the child's suicide of the last paragraph is that it is unexceptional, an event that distresses and is gone with nothing learnt from it. It is in the minimalism of the story that Lim achieves impact. The political implications (the "bigger picture" Singh laments) are not explicated. The child's failure to achieve a celebratory colonial hybridity through fluency in English, or the failure of a state institution (the school) to identify the abuse to which the child is exposed is not explored. Lim doesn't explore, doesn't explain, she presents an 'everyday' world into which there is a sudden implosion of tragedy and then leaves the reader to deal with this for themselves.

Catherine Lim does, at times, directly address the discourse of the 'big picture', moving away from the poignancy of the individual to a sardonic 'profundity', that of the public and political. In the poem 'Singapore' she addresses the 'big' idea of Singapore's position in the global world space:

The totalising of the Firsts
Need no longer take first place
In Ministers and MPs' speeches.
First Airport. First Seaport.
First financial centre. First Convention Centre.

First for Hotels for the third year running.
First of Third World countries to leave
Third World for First.
A city of towering steel, glass, chrome,
Truly an embarrassment of riches'
Where the wheels of machinery are never less than
perfectly oiled
For efficiency never less than perfect one hundred per
cent.

The wheels roll into the twenty first century
With incredible momentum and tempo.
In its roar is a small timid voice asking:
"Will the iron of the machine enter the soul?
Will the tempo of becoming
Crush out the rhythm of being?" (1992: 7).

The listing of the Firsts, of the achievements, takes on a rhythm of almost senseless repetition, the play on the numbers so that the /First for Hotels for the Third year running/ becomes with equal emphasis the /First of the Third world countries to leave Third World for First/. The huge economic and symbolic differentiation between Third and First Worlds is elided, while the irony of /Truly an embarrassment of riches/ implies realms of excess, of a move to both the modern and the First World that begs examination. The terms themselves, in the play of contrast and juxtaposition and in the implied question of what it means to be /First of the Third world countries to leave/ Third world for first/, imply school-child like rivalries. The hierarchies of first and third, with the curious elision of second, become part of a deadly serious yet oddly droll semantic game. The question /Will the tempo of becoming/ Crush out the rhythm of being?/ encourages a probing of the ideology of progress which seems to underlie such competition. The becoming is what? The third world becoming first? The contrast of the material, industrial movement and the loss that may be inherent in it, echoes Shirley Geok-lin Lim's sense of the loss inherent in the plenty of the supermarket. The firsts so eagerly vied for, the deeper hierarchy (and Manichean binary) implied in the competition to enter the first world is made somehow both petty and disturbing in the rhythm of the text.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her influential discussion of 'the' third world woman, has in a very different way to Lim, revealed the hollowness of monolithic category. She states:

Geographically, the nation states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, China, South Africa and Oceania constitute the parameters of the non-European third world ... A number of scholars in the U.S. have written about the inherently political term *women of color* (a term often used interchangeably with third world women, as I am doing here)... (Mohanty et al 1991: 5-7).

The sheer sweep of the geography is somewhat breath taking, the nonsense of such 'a' category similarly so. Nearly a decade later the terms, though, are still employed. The "inherently political term of women of color", remains. Mohanty of course, herself, interrogates this naming and the political alliances it can both carry and exclude. Leela Gandhi argues that "this newly reclaimed figure [the Third World Woman] is now postulated as the triumphant site of anti-colonial resistance" (1998: 88), a role this mythical 'she' might both claim for herself or choose to reject.

'Third world' is and has been, an uncomfortable term. Its appropriation and the appropriation of 'women of color' as badges of pride rather than as symbols of victim status, inversely challenge the arrogance of what Aida Hurtado calls " 'pigmentocracy' – that is privilege based solely on skin color" (1996:12). But in the texts focused on here, this 'third world woman' or 'woman of color' is rarely a central construct. 'She' is implied in Yahp's comments on her own writing (1995; 1996), implicit in the experience of marginalisation and erasure concomitant with the act of migration and the external construction of an alien and encompassing 'Asian' identity. In Shirley Geok-lin Lim's autobiography a version of this 'woman of color' appears in the representation of a hyphenated Asian-American identity, in the performance of an uneasy transnationalism. Yahp frames her experience of elision from within the story of a ghost, Shirley Geok-lin Lim from within the literary creation of an 'everyday' self. Catherine Lim, however, writes her outsiders from within the 'norms' of her own society. These norms are sometimes recognisably western influenced, sometimes not. The act of Othering, of the "psychological internalisation" cited in Ashcroft at the beginning of the chapter, of a norm that creates a woman of color or an invisible Asian, occurs though at the axis at which the migrant is formed, it is far less evident in the experience of home. Chia's initial poem directs attention to the Other (that is also her) in "yellow is what the white man calls me" but the reductive simplicity of the view is

also rejected, changed into the complexity of the colour orange - lush and vital and many things which have little to do with what the white man names anyone.

Awakening can stop and silence you, freezing the continuity and momentum of movements. You can be held in thrall to the clouds swiveling in the blue, the leaves of the trees braiding the wind, the birds chattering and murmuring in the downpouring night.

(Alphonso Lingis, in Grosz 1999:204).

Lingis' chapter in Elizabeth Grosz's *Becomings* tells the 'story' of "Nancy Gilvonio, half breed, improbably born somewhere in the Peruvian Andes, entombed, disappeared. *Nancy Gilvonio, mistress of Nestor Cerpa Cartolini, alias camarada Heurta, alias camarada Evaristo...*" (in Grosz 1999: 213). Lingis is relating the extreme of the colonial experience, the chill of the disappeared, the reality of Pizarro's 16th century conquest in the cold light of the 20th century day. Is it being or becoming that the excerpt explores, that moment when one is held in thrall in the "down pouring night"? The string of aliases in the later description, the burdened noun – "half breed", the terrifying participles – entombed, disappeared, what kind of teleologies or ontologies do such words carry? How do readers engage with or critics examine the uninterpretable affect which inflects the lyricism of the initial passage when it is contextualised within the experience of the quote which follows it? Robert Young in the preface to his book *Postcolonialism*, describes the terror and viciousness of the colonial he finds inscribed in a photograph of a young Algerian man taken in the 1950s and states: "For me, the postcolonial remains always marked by these images" (2001: ix). The moving lyricism of Lingis' words may be less directly confrontational than the obscene actuality which continues to exist in the graphic description Young re/produces, yet both 'say' the same thing. This cannot continue to be, it cannot be forgotten. The imperial impulse through time and across categories has left scars on the psyches of those oppressed by regimes of power and on those who practise/d the oppressions.

As Guneratne (1997: 3) has stated, "The metropolitan abolition of postcolonialism", its dismissal as unfashionable, does not relieve those once defined by the term, of their "postcoloniality". But of course neither postcolonialism nor postcoloniality ever possessed a singular or static meaning. Yet in the writing studied in this project, overt horror has not neatly equated with the experience of the devastating imposition of the

colonial, it has, more often, been linked to a patriarchal system which confined and contained, which diminished and demeaned women. This occurred in a past which, it has sometimes been implied, should remain largely unspoken, unlike the 'bigger' historical and national stories, which parallel it; a position these writers have singularly failed to endorse.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim in a review of Ambroise Kom's "Knowledge and legitimation", cites Kom's claim that in Africa today the quest for knowledge is organised in order to be able to claim "some sort of extracontinental legitimacy", and the "identity related wounds" left by the colonial still run deep. Lim makes the point, however, that the experience of the postcolonial is not homogenous. While she does not address the issue of the plight of indigenous peoples in Malaysia (neither do any of the writers in this study), she does make the point that "intellectual discourses in states like China, Japan, India, Malaysia, and Singapore are seldom about the continued psychological damage of colonial history". She continues, stating, "In looking to the West, to Silicon valley for example, political and educational elites in Singapore and Hong Kong do not speak from inferior dependency, or for mere imitation and subordinate hybridity" (2000: 2). Lim is arguing for a different construction to the postcolonial debate, reiterating the impossibility of generalities. While using, herself, a rather encompassing "Asia", she directs attention to the new cultural conventions which are appearing and are not centred in the west – "In the cultural sphere of East Asia, young Hong Kong people imitate the newest fashion and music from Japan, while Malaysian Chinese look up to Cantonese film stars from Hong Kong". Finally she argues for the value of the entry into the global, stating that cultural transformation is less a " 'shameful' hybridity than [a] necessary cost ... of entering into the citizenship of global modernity". This cost is always "interrogated, always negotiated and always mediated" by local institutions but is nonetheless perceived to be of value. At one level this acknowledges something of Ahmad's sense of the non-centrality of the west while at the same time arguing that these states appropriate what they find useful and change or reject what they don't. Lim's argument is not that the west has not been influential (or damaging) but that many nation-states no longer perceive themselves as poor cousins in a global theatre. And yet Grace Chia writes this at the end of the 1990s:

What is the Orient to you?

Dusky SPG's?
Yellow *kowtows*?
Blazing red *cheongsams*
With ~ slits ~ for eyes, ~ slits-up and between the thighs
beckoning? (Chia, 1998:17).

The traveller is not always benign; travelling across borders may repeat old prejudices in an imaginary Orient which remains replete with desire. Here the language of Chinese patriarchy (the derogatory slit that is woman) found in Catherine Lim and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's work becomes skewed into the language of the 'international', the 'transnational' sexual predator. The Orient becomes woman, becomes /~ slits for eyes, ~ slits up and between the thighs/ beckoning/. This caustically repeats Susie O'Brien and Stuart Hall's censure of the neocolonial which commodifies and consumes.

And yet the commodity of 'Oriental sex', of the exploitation facilitated in the unbounded world of the cosmopolitan, is not exclusively western. Catherine Lim's story of the young Thai would be-prostitute in 'The Solace of Guilt' (1993b) begins as an adventure and ends as a complex tragedy. Here the central protagonist is a well-off Singaporean male and the 'victim' a young Thai girl. The man remembers with salacious pleasure, as he moves toward his first bought sexual exploit, his grandfather's encounter with a bonded servant. He cannot finally have sex with the girl-child with whom he is presented though and she kills herself because he does not desire her, she sees herself as not desirable. The question of desire and exploitation, of the need for women in particular to be desirable has run through much of Catherine Lim's work. Here the ambivalence of desire, the savage irony at the heart of what is perceived to be desirable is explored. Both Beth Yahp and Catherine Lim have made a link, too, between wealth, moral decay and oppressive practice that is not solely inflected by colonial or neocolonial excess – /where money rolls down superhighways in a space/ virtually dominated by ~slit~ eyes/ (Chia 1998: 17). Internalising the colonial may have created the denigratory self-naming but dominance is other than this. Affluence, as much or more than ethnicity, impacts the ability to consume what is desired. As Ali Behdad has pointed out (quoting Kenneth Surin), globalisation does not diminish "unequal access to power and knowledge" rather it may simply eliminate the "absolute spatial divisions between exploiters and exploited" (2000: 82).

In arguing the soundness of an ongoing post-colonial critique, Bill Ashcroft has stated: “It is, ultimately, in the capacity to transcend the trope of the boundary, to live ‘horizontally’, that the post-colonial habitation offers the most radical principle of transformative resistance. It is in horizontality that the true force of transformation becomes realized” (2001:15). Ashcroft’s tone here seems to iterate a celebration of the globalised cosmopolitan world into which, many claim, we move. Shirley Geok-lin Lim has postulated a slightly different but recognisable global in which inhabitants of nation-states negotiate a place but, it is implied, also cross the traditional boundaries that comprise a national consciousness. For Ashcroft the possibility of alterity lies in the breaking down of hierarchies and binary oppositions. Instead of - and his argument is of course more complex than this brief description allows - the boundaries of nation-state, of race and others, there is or will be the dynamism and challenge of the “post-colonial” in which ideas like that of the horizon can help us to reconceive “the bounded precepts of imperial discourse”. It is, he asserts, “in the range of strategies, the tenacity and the practical assertiveness of the apparently powerless”, that will lie the potential for transformative practice (2001: 17). Ashcroft is aware that the terrors of exploitative practice continue yet seems convinced of the “possibility of alterity”, the impact “of the radical principle of transformative resistance”. It remains difficult to see the possibility for transformation in the experience of a postcolonial slavery which feeds the greedy needs of the global community, as in Ashcroft’s own example of the enslaving of young boys which occurs in the production of that most benign symbol of affluence, the chocolate bar.

The idea of transnationalism, of a continuance of the validity of postcolonial analytical frameworks which eschew, to some degree, national boundaries is also linked to feminist discussions which note that “transnational is a term that signals attention to uneven and dissimilar circuits of culture and capital” (Grewal and Kaplan, 2000: 2), and argue that such a construction allows critique of a “system founded on inequality and exploitation”. Grewal and Kaplan claim too that the:

theories and methodologies of the so-called ‘post-colonial’ critics have enabled us to study transnationality. For example, notions of ‘orientalism’, ‘subalternity’, ‘hybridity’, ‘diaspora’, ‘travelling theory’, and ‘border theory’ provide feminists with cultural tools to examine a vast array of representational politics (2000: 2).

Representation, as I have argued in this thesis, is fraught with difficulty. The call by the Feminist Press in the U.S. for Shirley Geok-lin Lim to re-present her experience, to explore her 'hybridity', her 'diasporic' existence, was layered with the uneasy nuances of hyphenated identities and uncomfortable complicities. Yet this hybridity was not that of Lingis' "half-breed", of the ludicrous multiplications of namings that indicate how almost white one can be. This indignity she has been spared. The need for Catherine Lim to re-create the life of the bondmaid, to explore 'subalternity' was always shadowed by the material existence which had been erased and then, so much later, reconstructed for a reader's consumption. The 'Oriental' as woman was explored and the myths about the possibility of any one such 'her' were exploded. Yet Shirley Geok-lin Lim became an Asian, an Oriental in her experience of migrant existence, in the hyphen in her identity that somehow implied the adjective coloured and Beth Yahp felt that with Australian migration she simply disappeared into an undifferentiated being that was Asian. These urbane women travel across borders yet sometimes the borders, defined in the discourse of race, still follow and contain.

In an acerbic reponse to the more celebratory possibilities in the kind of approach Ashcroft espouses, Dorothy Figuerra has argued the demise of postcolonialism, expressing deep unease at the proliferation of what she calls 'isms' in theory, in a way reminiscent of the much earlier critiques of Ahmad, Parry and McClintock (in Chapter One above). She states:

One of the causes of the intellectual irresponsibility that pervades literary theory today is that it is quite possible for one 'ism' to be superseded by another before many readers have even discovered what the earlier 'ism' stood for. So, as the popularity of postcolonial criticism is beginning to be eclipsed by the next 'ism' whether it be transnationalism, nomadism, or aestheticism, we might want to pause and ask a simple yet not irrelevant question: 'What was postcolonialism anyway?' (2000: 246)

Jan Nederveen Pieterse's, quoted at the beginning of Chapter One pondered whether or not "there is such a thing as postcolonial theory" (2000:92). Nikos Papastergiadis has recently suggested that the "supposed allies, and the intellectual leaders [of postcolonialism], Bhabha, Hall, Said and Spivak, whose texts appear as the guiding references in almost every article, are now accused of sleeping with the enemy" (2000: 90). Papastergiadis finds this accusation of betrayal, simplistically reductive. He asserts that equating "discussions on exile and hybridity" (in which Bhabha, Said and

Spivak have played a pivotal part) *solely* with instances of “intellectuals wallowing in sentimental nostalgia or exploiting the opportunities of late capitalism” is both “crude and unfair” (2000:90).

Perhaps both Pastergiadis and Figuerra can be ‘right’. When the theory lapses into the celebratory, then celebration comes too soon. We cannot ignore that Nancy Gilvonio’s terrifying ‘post’colonial story (Lingis, 1999) interpolated into an academic space, does not offer a hope for transformative practices that will change national or multinational obscenities. Nor can we ignore that while the story of Nancy Gilvonio’s incarceration carries echoes of Catherine Lim’s very brief portrayal of the dead woman revolutionary, the latter portrayal had a disturbing simplicity that obscured rather than illuminated the implicit terror of the tale being told. The trope of the woman fighter, with her breast bared and exposed to the puerile gaze of the watching crowd was exploited both for its pathos and to reveal the superiority of the sensitive priest. When contrasted with the actuality of Gilvonio’s temporal and material existence, her torture and erasure, it becomes questionable as textual trope, textual prop. When Catherine Lim valorises the priest’s chivalry, however, Spivak’s postcolonial theorising of “white men saving brown women from brown men” becomes of critical value, it provides a way of speaking about Lim’s text that situates it within a discourse that reflects the asymmetries of power which continue to inform the materiality of Guneratne’s ongoing “postcoloniality”. There are eerie similarities of language evident in discussions of the U.S. military intervention into Afghanistan, where a violent gallantry is part of the laudatory rhetoric inflecting reports of the conflict. A recent editorial in the Australian feminist journal *Hecate* declares, “particularly galling for many feminists is the claim of the American propaganda machine to be liberating women through this war” (2001:4).

And in this context, Edward Said’s discussion of one of the chief isms of postcolonial theory, orientalism, re-emphasises the need to analyse such asymmetries. Said has stated, in the context of the ‘War against terrorism’, that followed the tragedy of September 11: “The basic paradigm of West versus the rest (the cold war opposition reformulated) ... has persisted, often insidiously and implicitly in the discussion since the terrible events of September 11 [2001]” (2002:1). Behdad, acknowledging Said, although in the context of the Gulf War, also states, “the myths of the cruel oriental despot [as articulated by Said] can be strategically rearticulated into the stereotype of

Muslims as degenerate terrorists so that the neo-colonial violence of the United States in the Middle East could be fully supported and justified by the culture as a whole” (2000:79). As Guneratne has argued, the demise in the fashionability of postcolonial critique does not mean that postcoloniality or its neocolonial cousin have ceased to exist. The theory of the postcolonial, while justly subjected to rigorous criticism, still offers us a way of talking about, of debating ongoing imperial or neo-imperial imperatives.

Terry Eagleton in his review of Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, made the chillingly prophetic statement “American students who, through no fault of their own, would not recognise class-struggle if it perched on the tip of their skateboards, or who might not be so keen on the third world if some of its inhabitants were killing their fathers and brothers in large numbers, can vicariously fulfil their generously radical impulses by displacing oppression elsewhere” (1999:4). The counter-hegemony and urbane sophistication and tolerance of the global and cosmopolitan become frighteningly skewed in the aftermath of a time when some of the, ironically fabulously wealthy, inhabitants of the nominal third world have killed American fathers, brothers (mothers and sisters) “in large numbers”. The, admittedly flawed, tools of language we use to examine the responses to such actions often come from the debates that have been part of postcolonial theory. As I’ve already indicated, the term third world has a contested hegemonic meaning. The degeneration of ‘bad’ Muslims into two prongs of an axis of evil becomes possible, even acceptable, in the tension between “generously radical impulses” and stereotypes of a murderous oriental cruelty. Eagleton, in his discussion of Spivak, argues that “she fails to drive home the point that a good deal of post-colonialism has been a kind of ‘exported’ version of the US’s own grievous ethnic problems” (1999:4). The fraught nature of the “US’s own grievous ethnic problems” are touched on in the discussion of Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s inculcation into the world of the ‘coloured woman’, in the discursive internalisation of this that was never evident except as some kind of aside (in time spent with the nuns for example) in her experience of her Malaysian childhood. In the transition to a hyphenated Asian-American adulthood Lim herself is transformed from a Shirley Temple look-alike to a coloured woman sardonically grateful for the small recognitions she is given. Said’s ‘academic oriental’ becomes Lim’s lived coloured in a process mapped in all its pettiness and discursive power within her text.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim also, but too briefly, explores her sense of the multiple and difficult realities that impact on both her neighbours and her students (objects or subjects of “grievous ethnic problems”) and her sense of distance from those same students who have no way of accessing her burgeoning middle-class status (Chapter 5). Yet she remains aware of her own multiple positioning, of the difficulty of speaking at all, as does Spivak. And Eagleton’s commentary comes dangerously close to the patronising when he makes the remark, however pertinent, that Spivak does seek to remind “fans of the Black Female that she is also a highly paid bourgeoisie and the scion of the colonial elite”(1999:6). Eagleton’s claims for a materialist and Marxist analysis do not excuse, though, the condescension evident nor the willingness to caustically deploy the labels – Spivak as representative black female, reminiscent of Lim as ‘representative’ Asian–American, ‘coloured woman’, but neither of them quite ‘legitimate’, ‘authentic’, nor ‘third world’ enough.

The fatuousness of the terminology regurgitated in the inverted commas has been explored in the crossing between text and theory in this thesis. To apply such terms to the grandmother in *The Crocodile Fury* or to Second Grandmother in *The Teardrop Story Woman* becomes a nonsense in any reading that responds to the texts as literary work within a rich intertextual web of meaning, rather than as ‘solo’ texts from which the western reader can extract a set of facts or ethnically particular, or ethnically peculiar, attitudes. The questions can be asked: were these characters coloured, were they third world, were they victims? But if they were any of these, this was an outside construct, another’s ‘Other’, always peripheral. And so the stories told convinced me, not of the political appropriateness of a literary response but of the need for the imaginary, the need in the grandmother’s words from *The Crocodile Fury* to deal with “unfinished business”. And the stories, speaking of the arcane and the ordinary, writing self and other, exploring lived experience and lived imaginings, histories, nostalgias and questionings, sometimes illuminated by theory, sometimes not, these stories continue to:

hold firm against the desolating air,
and gather shapes that
tell of love, or pain, or something
not quite there (Lee Tzu Pheng, 1988: 31).

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