

Identity is created Through a Mobilisation of 'Self' and 'Other' in Relation to at Least two Malaysian Works

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Abstract

The texts that have been selected to provide answers to the above-mentioned question are *Green is the color* by Lloyd Fernando and *Mr. Tang's Girls* by Shirley Lim. In the former, how the post modern characteristics of self create and define the protagonist's identity is discussed while in the latter the influence of the patriarchal society on the protagonist's identity shaping is analyzed. The patriarchal society for which the protagonist's father is an example is considered the *other*. The nature of the individual depends upon the society in which he or she lives. (Burke and Stets, 2009, p.3)

Key words:

Introduction

Women's oppression and suppression is a recurring theme in literature. Some like the Redstockings (a New-York-based women's group) believed that men are primarily responsible for women's oppression, an oppression that has lasted for centuries.

It is men who are primarily responsible for women's oppression and it is men, rather than capitalism or society, who benefit from the system of male-female social relations where women as a group are kept subordinate to men. (Hester, 1995: P.33) Others, however, as it is mentioned in the book *Lewd women and wicked witches* blame the women for their own oppression. Whatever the cause of this oppression is, we have been struggling with it since the dawn of time. On the one hand, men have always been considered the superior sex. They are physically stronger than women being pressurized into doing chores around the house. They are said to be the breadwinner of the family. Most major jobs had been held by men not until long ago. The men made the ultimate decisions in the family and were defined as independent beings as is mentioned in *The Impact of Modern-Day Polygamy on Women and Children*:

Before a woman is married, she has value as property bringing her father influence, power, and prestige within the cult. She is "groomed" for her relationship with the man who will be her husband. Her sole purpose is to please her husband by doing what gives him pleasure or satisfaction. She has no right to complain about abuse or injustice. (Burke and Stets, 2009: p.3)

The male children were given more attention and freedom than the female ones as goes at page 58 of the book —Though children of both sexes are equally valued in a family, both sexes are not given the same cultural evaluation: Male is very clearly viewed as superior to female. Some mothers tend to view their male children as fussier, more independent, more active, and more aggressive than their female children from birth (Oboler, 1985:p. 58)

Although it might sound like a bit of a hyperbole for the twenty-first century, the male dominance still exists even in the most modern societies in different forms. On the other hand, women have for the most part remained silent and have not mustered enough courage to fight the male dominance. It is true that females started some feminist movements, but despite all the rights they asserted, they are still identified and controlled by men. A look at the literary works written by women or about women reveals that female suppression has almost always been an issue. In most stories, the female writer or the protagonist is battling really hard to find her identity in the male-centered society.

It is believed that —all people derive particular identities from their roles in society, the groups they belong to, and their personal characteristics. (Burke and Stets, 2009) In the following lines, the two texts which are discussed have the female character being surrounded by the male characters, living in a patriarchal society, being suppressed and oppressed by male dominance and not being able to shape their identities as individual human beings apart from the males in common.

Mr.Tang's Girls by Shirley Lim

It is the story of four girls in the second family of Ah Kong, an affluent but insensitive and traditional father, who fails to cope with the growing sexuality of the eldest girl (Quayum, 2007: p. 66. Kim Li, the oldest daughter of Mr.Tang is a victim of his father's tendency to rule the family. He is an epitome of a typical Chinese father in a patriarchal society. He himself and his behavior around the house does not allow a normal shaping of all his family members character, especially his oldest daughter, Kim Li. Coming from a deep-rooted male chauvinism culture, he tries and to some extent succeeds in holding the whip hand and forcing his family into an unfair imposition when he is around. It can be seen on page 87 of the book Prize-winning Asian Fiction.

On Saturdays, the girls stayed home. No school activity, no friend, no party, no shopping trip took them out of the house. Their suppressed giggles, lazy talk, muted movements and uncertain sighs constituted his sense of home. And every Saturday, the four girls played their part: they became daughters whose voices were to be heard like cheerful music in the background, but never loudly or intrusively. (Comber, 1991:p.87) before going on any further with the effects his behavior had on Kim Li's identity, an in-depth psychoanalysis of Mr.Tang's behavior is provided.

Mr.Tang

He has got some form of dysfunctional behavior as he was born in a patriarchal society where character shaping was highly affected by the patriarchy imposed on people by males. He learnt that it is a normal thing to control your family because his father might have given him the false impression by his behavior. The most influential exponent of the dual systems approach describes patriarchy [.....] As a set of social relations between men [...] which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enables them to dominate women. (Murray, 1995: p.7)

For thousands of years women kept in total subjugation in all patriarchal societies, and it so happened that most societies were patriarchal. Thus for centuries it was considered a natural law that women were inferior to men and must submit to the latter's authority for the smooth running of family life. (Engineer, 1992, P.1)

Mr.Tang's girls never feel at ease when their father is around as goes page 87, Their suppressed giggles, lazy talk, muted movements and uncertain sighs constituted his sense of home (Comber, 1991:p.87) The children had to suppress their feelings in his presence in order to keep him satisfied. The only daughter who plucked up enough courage to fight her father's dominance was Kim Li as it is evident on page 88/89. The father is surprised why his daughters' clothes do not fit them anymore and they are in need of new clothes, his wife answers him quite cautiously, Girls grow so fast, Peng. Their clothes are too small for them in six months. (Comber, 1991:p. 88) The other daughters except Kim Li follow their mother and are painstakingly circumspect not to incense their father. I haven't had a new dress since Chinese New Year; (Comber, 1991: p.88) says one of them. I've grown three inches in one year (Comber, 1991: p.88) says another. Ah Kong, your daughters are becoming women (Comber, 1991: p.89) Kim Li said in an aggressive voice. This sentence by Kim Li keeps everyone tight-lipped. Kim Mee (another daughter of his) was furious because Ah Kong's face was reddening. (Comber, 1991: p.89) All the girls (except Kim Li) and the wife have gotten used to living within the law of the father and do not dare to fight the losing battle of opposing him.

The father wants to have them by the short hairs, keeping a tight rein on them. He shudders at the thought of their children's growing up, destabilizing his patriarchy. This is how he develops the *defense of denial*. A definition of some terms seems indispensable here.

Unconscious is the storehouse of painful experiences and emotions, wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we will be overwhelmed by them. The unconscious comes into being when we are very young (Tyson, 1999: p.15)

Defenses are the process by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious. They are the process by which we keep the repressed repressed in order to avoid knowing what we feel we can't handle knowing. (Tyson, 1999: p.18)

Denial is one of the defenses which mean believing that the problem doesn't exist or the unpleasant incident never happened. (Tyson, 1999.p.18) The father is denying that his daughters are growing up and he hates this fact when he witnesses it. Once he was walking past his daughters' bedrooms at night, catching sight of his daughters sleeping, he saw that Kim Mee slept curled against her bolster. In a filly baby-doll, her haunches curved and enveloped the pillow like a woman with her lover. He hated the sight. Mr. Tang wanted his children to belong to him, depend on his homecoming, and fall sleep in his presence, innocent and pure (Comber, 1991:P. 91) What's more, he so greatly revels at the tea time and the family's mask of happiness and good behavior that he doesn't want it to end and he expresses this fear by denial.

Every Saturday they made high tea at five. The girls peeled hard-boiled eggs.....Ah Kong would eat only fresh bread....., but he enjoyed watching his daughters eat like European mems...Saturday tea was when he considered himself a successful father and fed on the vision of his four daughters eating toast.....while his quiet wife poured tea by his side (Comber,1991: P.87-88)

Kim Li ruins his enjoyments and wishes by opposing him. Not being able to stand Kim Li's odd behavior which is the direct result of his behavior on her character shaping, he tries to marry her off to one of his assistants as his second wife (Quayum, 2007: p.66)

It is assuredly obvious how hard he is trying to captain the family. He knows that his family pretends to be happy around him while they're suppressing their true feelings when he is around, but he makes no effort to relieve the tension by getting emotionally close to them. This is what Freud calls *avoidance*. It is another form of defense. Staying away from people or situations that are liable to make us anxious by stirring up some unconscious i.e., repressed experience or emotion (Tyon, 1991:P. 18)

He avoids close emotional attachment to his daughters in order to avoid confronting his unconscious and repressed emotions. The defences of *avoidance* and *denial* Ah Kong suffers from, his endless effort to be authoritative although he failed as far as his oldest daughter is concerned and constant practice of patriarchy are why Kim Li's identity is not formed as a normal child. As it was mentioned before, all people derive particular identities from their roles in society, the groups they belong to, and their personal characteristics. (Burke and Stets, 2009) Kim Li's father was rarely present due to the fact that he was polygamous and spent most of his time in his first wife's house. They were his second family. Every Friday he drove down from Kuala Lumpur, where his first wife and children lived, in time for dinner (Comber, 1991:P.87) and stayed only for the weekend. Kim Li's identity is not shaped separated from his father's behavior. In fact, she cannot develop her true self until the end of the story because it is directly affected by his father and his patriarchal behavior. An analysis of Kim Li's identity is provided in the following lines.

Kim Li

Kim Li usually opposes his father without being washed over by fear. Kim Li has some unresolved conflicts because of living in a patriarchal family.

As it is stated in: The patriarchal family is the institution through which repression and oppression are internalized within the individual psyche. The reason for these unresolved conflicts can also stem from not receiving enough love from his father. His father has spread himself too thin, being married to two wives and manages two families, so he does not and cannot devote enough time to both of them. He only spends two days with his second wife and their daughters. All children need their parents' attention and constant care and when they are deprived of, they repress their feelings. What widens the gap between the father and daughter in this short story is when he selects a husband for her without even telling her. These repressed feelings and emotions are shown in different forms. Kim Li hangs onto them in disguised, distorted, and self-defeating ways which are shown in different parts of the story. On page 86 we read, She suffered from unpredictable moods which had recently grown more savage. (Comber, 1991:p.86) When his wife told him how Kim Li had taken the news of her arranged marriage she reacted, I was afraid Kim Li would yell and scream. You don't know the tantrums she can throw. Well, she took it so calmly, (Comber, 1991:p.96) which suggests that she normally argues a lot and has bad tempers. They do not know the ulterior motive behind this calmness is the thought of killing his father she is planning to commit at the end of the story. The short shorts she wears, the heavy make-up she applies, the aggressive tone of hers and in the end and in its most destructive form the murder of his father are all examples of how she expresses her repressed feelings in distorted, disguised and self-defeating ways.

Kim Li's struggle to shape her identity and her true self apart from the influence of his father is littered in all lines of the story. She struggles to free herself from the influence of her patriarchal and polygamous father in order to be able to form a consistent, independent true self. The *indecent* way of her clothing, smoking, her aggressive tone, and her strange moods are what she uses to oppose her father to find her true self.

Green is the colour by Lloyd Fernando

Central to the novel is a Malay woman named Sara. As Dr Wong Soak Koon has said in the introduction of the book, it seems that Sara is given more attention by the author. It seems to me that Fernando gives prominence to the woman character, Siti Sara. A large portion of the last segment of the novel is told in her first-person narrative or through her unconscious. (Fernando, 2004, p. 2)

Sara's identity is analyzed from a post-modernistic view of the self. It is believed that a postmodernist self is *socially constructed*.

One's society's values, languages, arts, entertainment, all that we grow up surrounded by, define who we are. We do not have fixed identities which are separable from our surroundings and which remain the same even though certain characteristics and circumstances may change. (Wade, 2001)

We are simply influenced by all the people we contact everyday and by the even trivial changes they trigger in our lives. According to post-modernists, it is wrong to assume that individual's identities are separated from that of people around them. In this novel, Sara's identity is created through a mobilization of *self* and *other*. The men around him influence her identity to a great extent. They try to gain control over her life. Many unpredictable things happen in Sara's life. When his husband, Omar comes back from a tour with some Iranians and Pakistani students, his behavior has changed. Omar doesn't treat her wife well and manipulates her for his sexual satisfaction and later asks her to move to a village named Jerangau where in his idea the real Islam is practiced and life is simple. She is also influenced by Yun Ming (the man she loves), her father, and Panglima (the man who has tried to possess Sara since she was a child). She is also influenced by the society she lives in. After the riots of May 1969, the society was in a state of chaos and disorder. At least three different races live in Malaysia which makes it really difficult for them to live side by side according to their religious, cultural and social believes. Sara's identity was influenced by all the above-mentioned factors and she is therefore a post-modernistic self.

A post-modernist self is further described as complex, multilayered, multiple, and not integrated. Although people often speak of the problem of identity, in truth the individual is faced throughout the life span with a problem of *identities*. In modern societies, the social fabric into which daily lives are woven is complex and multilayered. Often, people find themselves working, playing, loving, and learning in different social contexts within which it is possible for them to take on different identities. In fact, it seems that among the major psychological challenges of our era is the multiplicity of roles and identities that individuals must adopt. Gergen and other postmodernists have claimed that multiple selves are an adaptive response to a world of multiple demands. Through this lens, as cultural evolution is carrying human nature toward a more autoplasmic, docile structure of personality, the idea of an integrated identity or personality appears to be an ideological holdover from an earlier historical era. Similarly, Greenwald (1982) speculated that the idea of integrity or unity in personality, so central to classical theories of personality and psychotherapy (Ryan, 1995), may be a myth. (Leary and Tangney, 2003.p. 267)

Sara's identity is fractured and fragmented due to the voices around her, shoving her around. These voices belong to Omar, Panglima, Yun Ming and her father. How each of these *others* has affected her identity-shaping will be discussed.

Sara is young, beautiful and educated. She is a university lecturer and undergoes some changes due to the instability of her surroundings. She is married to Omar who has educated in Harvard and seems like an open-minded man. Although she is a married woman and her father is a religious teacher, she falls in love and has an affair with Yun Ming who is a Chinese civil servant at the Department of unity. Islam believes a Muslim woman should behave in a gracious and soft manner, taking care of her husband and children and always remaining faithful to him. Shall I not inform you about the best treasure a man can have? It is a virtuous woman who pleases him when he looks at her, who obeys him when he command her, and who guards herself when he is absent from her. (Hasan, 2003: P.8) A Muslim woman has to be loyal to her husband, do what he asks her and guard her sexuality. Her affair with Yun Ming is considered immoral, wrong and abhorrent as she is a Muslim woman.

Omar's behaviour has changed during the course of their marriage. At first when she met Omar in the States, he was a frivolous man, the frivolity that had been an engaging part of his character had disappeared. (Fernando, p.40) In their first meeting they had danced and his touch seemed like fire. (39) Now Sara thinks that their relationship had never progressed. (39) Sara is confused and does not know what to do or how to talk when Omar is around. As it was mentioned earlier when he comes back from a tour, his behaviour has changed and Sara is no longer able to communicate with him. When he returned he had become withdrawn, and spoke to her less. It was as if blight had fallen. (40) What makes everything worse is when Omar calls Sara sundal (unfaithful).

He asks her, who is the man you've got? ... you've got someone, haven't you? (50) He even neglects Sara's presence which is considered an assault to her. One day as she placed a tray of glasses of syrup for them on the low table...he continued talking without a flicker of recognition of her presence...she felt a vile sense of inferiority.(40) As a consequence, she leaves Omar and commits adultery with Yun Ming. Before going on, a short definition of Multiphrenia is provided.

Multiphrenia

This refers to the many different voices in our culture telling us who we are and what we are. The various relationships we have in our lives pull us in different directions. We play "such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view." (Wade, 2001)

Sara is in a state of *multiphrenia*, on one side there's Omar not only expecting her to do as he wants, but also abusing her sexually and physically. He also considers her as inferior to himself.

She tries to remain stable by being faithful to her husband because he used to be a decent man. Her identity becomes fractured and unstable. Because of that she has to play various roles. This makes her lose her identity and she no longer is a consistent and single person. "In the postmodern world, you just don't get to be a single and consistent somebody. (Wade, 2001) Sara used to be a typical married Muslim Malay but due to the different people who influence her life, she turns into a post-modern self with multiple identities. Another person who greatly influences her *self* is her father.

Lebai Hanifah was an Imam. Sara's relationship with her father was really strong and she was influenced by him all along her life. Sara's multiple identities are in a large part because of her father's role in her life. Her father always loved her and cared a lot about her. He taught her all the religious principles so that she can develop a good, moral character.

She looked again the sweet tousled child I had loved. Allah forgive me, more than her brothers. It was on my knee that she learned to love numbers. From me she learned to speak Arabic [...] When she read Quran, all the fixtures of the material world failed and the crystal clear tone prevailed all over. (105)

Before turning to a postmodernist self, she was a person with good religious background. Sara loved her father, adored and admired him, was proud of him and more importantly the attachment between them was really strong. Sara even dreamed about him and was encouraged to go on with her relationship with Yun Ming. Look after each other! (141) he said to her in the dream. Her father is another voice in her life telling her what to do. He in some way encouraged her to free herself from Omar and live with the person she loves although this would make her an unfaithful wife to Omar.

Her father's death was a really hard jolt for her as she consulted him about all matters and he would help him whenever necessary. She was no longer able to ask him for guidance. This fact is made known nearly at the end of the story when Omar saves her from Panglima's house.

I'm going to take her from here. You have brought disgrace to us all. I know she was greatly attached to his father. Now he's gone, she has strayed because she has lacked his guidance. (175/176)

These voices (Lebai Hanafiah, Panglima, Yun Ming and Omar) around Sara shape and create her identity.

Panglima who is a friend of Sara's father has been fond of her since she was a little child. He always gives his advice to Sara's father on all matters, especially the ones related to Sara's life and education. He is always seeking a way to get close to her although he himself is married. He's a senior officer in the Department of Unity; therefore he is considered a powerful man.

His disrespectful behavior with Sara puts her in *multiphrenia*. When Sara goes to his house alone in the hope of being able to release Dahlan and Yun Ming he makes her unconscious by drugging her and then raping her. He does not take the responsibility of raping her and instead shifts the blame onto Sara for *his* shameful act. He accuses her of her sexual relationship with Yun Ming. —you make yourself cheap with a *kafir*, why were u acting like this with me? (167) Kafir is what Panglima calls Yun Ming because he is a Chinese. Sara's vain attempt to remain stable and not to let her identity be fractured and fragmented is foiled for the second time. She is *pulled into various directions* in the effort, but because the idea that it was her own fault for being raped is imposed on her by Panglima, she changes to an unfaithful woman to both Omar and Panglima because they define her so by calling her *Sundal*. She unconsciously bore the false belief that she is unfaithful but does not show any signs of regret. She recalls the first time Yung

Ming and she were together which shows she unconsciously believes she is what Panglima calls her.

One of the concepts by which postmodernist characters are defined is a *Protean Self*. The protean self is capable of changing constantly in order to adapt to present circumstances. (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 93)

Sara has changed into a *Protean self* as a result of her affair with Yun Ming. She was taught well by her father as a child especially religiously, but after committing adultery with Yun Ming, she no longer cared much about Islam. A Malay Muslim woman would never ever think of having an affair, so Sara as a Protean self changes her beliefs in order to be able to continue her relationship with Yun Ming. Her identity is now without any center.

Casting a glance sideways at the handsome white mosque across the lake, she was startled as she thought: I will not go back. (128) When she looks at the mosque there are no signs of a true Muslim in her thoughts. Considering this mosque as a symbol of Islam, she has changed her religious belief as she is a *protean self*. She even changes her political beliefs: In the chaotic condition of the country after the May riots the 3 different races could not put up with each other and religious tolerance was zero, Sara (a Malay) falls in love with Yun Ming (a Chinese).

Some may see change as reflecting one's true self, others may argue that there simply *is* no true self. (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 93) Her religious and political change is not a reflection of her true self but lack of this self. This is evident when at the end of the novel Yun Ming asks her to go to the Eastern Zone with her, but her attempts to stay away from him failed. He was crowding her, just as Panglima did. Then he was saying something absurd about needing her...I'm lonely. Come with me to the Eastern Zone. You think if you insist on something for long enough you'll get it? She realized he was not listening...She stood on the pedals of her bicycle to burst away, but he held it till she spun around and fell. (179)

As it was mentioned earlier the four different voices (Panglima, Yun Ming, Omar and her father) in Sara's life changed her identity from that of a Muslim married woman to a multiple and fragmented postmodernist self without any centre.

In both of the texts, Identity is totally influenced by other factors which surround the person. Both characters battle for the stability of their *true* selves. Kim Li and Sara's identity is shaped and affected by the outside forces or *others*. "Identity is created by outside forces. (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p.93). As it was mentioned earlier for Sara these *others* are the four men in her life who shape and create her identity as they please. Postmodernists keep the idea that Self and identity are no reality but the result of definitions. The idea that there is a real me that is identifiable throughout life is abandoned. (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 93)

Herself becomes fragmented, de-centered and fragile to the point when she loses her true self and her attempts for keeping stable fail. Kim Li, on the other hand does succeed in finding her true self at the end of the story when she murders her father. For Kim Li the *others* is her polygamous and patriarchal father who is a symbol of the patriarchal society she lives in which encourages polygamy.

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