



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**FEMALES IN FETTERS: THE PATRIARCHAL
WORLD IN CATHERINE LIM' S SELECTED WORKS**

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By

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**Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master
of Arts in the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia**

October 2001



To the memory of
My dear sister, Siok Kiew
How I miss you,
I do, I do.

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

This research seeks to explore the feminist views that filter through Catherine Lim's selected works: a collection of short stories and two novels. They capture the essence of feminism when she focuses on the dominant motif of servitude, suffering and subordination of women. Her abject stories of female suffering indicate her belief that women are the objects of oppression while men are the dominating subjects. She portrays women as victims of masculine power and authority. Much has been written by men on the representation of women in various texts. Therefore, it is refreshing to read texts written from a woman's perspective. Catherine Lim's creativity expresses the female experience, indicating her understanding of the emotions and struggles of women who are silenced, marginalised, and imprisoned in a patriarchal world. Her works deal with a wide range of issues: gender, class and culture, giving special focus on traditional Chinese society. Women are the losers, and the maids in bondage. In my opinion, Lim's feminist stance parallels those of leading feminists such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett. This study offers a fascinating understanding of her narratives as a platform for social comment.

Abstrak tesis yang di kemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan Ijazah Master Sastera

**WANITA TERKURUNG: DUNIA PETRIAKAL DALAM TULISAN
TERPILIH CATHERINE LIM**

Oleh

ONG SIOK HONG

Oktober 2001

Pengerusi: Profesor Madya Mohammad A. Quayum, Ph.D.

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti pandangan feminis yang menuras menerusi beberapa penulisan terpilih Catherine Lim yakni koleksi cerpen dan dua novel. Tulisan Lim mencerminkan ciri-ciri utama feminisme melalui motif-motif yang menunjukkan wanita sebagai seorang yang semestinya mengalah, menderita dan dikuasai oleh kaum lelaki. Cerita-cerita Lim memaparkan penderitaan wanita yang juga menunjukkan kehidupan wanita sebagai objek opresi lelaki. Lim juga mengajukan bahawa wanita adalah mangsa kepada kuasa dan dominasi lelaki. Pada umumnya, kebanyakan penulisan adalah karya kaum lelaki oleh itu wanita digambarkan dari kaca mata lelaki. Dengan itu, penulisan Catherine Lim memberi nafas baru kepada dunia penulisan wanita, khususnya dari kaca mata wanita. Melalui karya kreatifnya, Catherine Lim berjaya mengupas pengalaman wanita dari segi emosi, pengalahan serta perjuangan wanita yang tidak dapat bersuara, ditindas dan terbelenggu dalam dunia petriakal ini. Penulisan Lim mempersoalkan isu-isu yang luas perspektifnya seperti kejantinaan, pergolakan di antara kelas dan kebudayaan, dengan memberikan fokus utama terhadap masyarakat Cina

tradisional. Seringkali, wanita menjadi bahan penganiayaan kaum lelaki. Pada pandangan saya, isu kewanitaan yang diajukan oleh Lim boleh samakan dengan pakar-pakar dalam bidang feminisme seperti Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir dan Kate Millett. Pada keseluruhannya, kajian ini menunjukkan satu kefahaman yang menakjubkan kerana karya-karya Lim boleh menjadi satu medium untuk ulasan mengenai masyarakat pada umumnya, dan wanita khususnya.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to examine the feminist views that permeate Catherine Lim's writings, in particular, a book of short stories, *The Woman's Book of Superlatives*, as well as two of her novels, *The Bondmaid* and *The Teardrop Story Woman*. Lim describes herself as "a true chronicler of the human condition. True and caring" (C. Lim 142). Indeed, with her deft pen, she chronicles the miseries of the marginalised women in a male-dominated world. In the patriarchal society of post-war, pre-independence Malaya and Singapore, power and authority resided exclusively with the husband, father or brother to whom the wife, daughter or sister owed obedience. This is the theme running through *The Woman's Book of Superlatives*, *The Bondmaid* and *The Teardrop Story Woman*.

The Woman's Book of Superlatives is centred round the theme of woman as victim in various cultural contexts. In her Prologue to the book, Lim declares that the "images of suffering women" sadden her "because neither history nor geography has been protective of women" (6). They go through all kinds of suffering in the hands of men. While *The Bondmaid* focuses mainly on the Chinese ethnic group of Singapore, Lim includes minor characters who are Indian, Malay, Eurasian and Caucasian in *The Teardrop Story Woman*. Thus she brings together racial mix and cultural variety to blend in with the Chinese background and weave in "the ordinary woof and warp of existence" (Pan 884). In *The Bondmaid*, her

chief concern is the fate of the bondmaid and cultural practices such as ancestor-worship, respect for elders, male bias and so on. Similarly, in *The Teardrop Story Woman*, the focus is on the misfortune of being born female and Lim explores the sufferings of the unfortunate female who has to struggle to find a niche in a harsh patriarchal environment. As Ong Sor Fern comments in her review of *The Teardrop Story Woman*, “Catherine Lim continues her fascination with the woman as the underdog” (*The Straits Times* 1998: 3). The theme of female submission to male oppression recurs in her writings.

Statement of the Problem

The female protagonists of Catherine Lim are subjugated to a life under the domination of men. Her characters are a reflection of the people she has observed or known in her life. Through her portrayal of the marginalised heroines, Lim shows her sympathy for the women who are on the fringes of society. She also highlights women’s great capacity for endurance as well as revenge.

In *The Woman’s Book of Superlatives*, Lim uses the metaphor of the scorpion which can “sting through your palm,” exemplifying the stoicism of women who have to endure pain and suffering because they do not have much choice. What emerges from this collection of short stories is Lim’s apparent aim “to articulate the condition of women, and to suggest how much men are responsible for their suffering” (Koh 8).

According to Jaschok and Miers, their “studies of women as domestic drudges, sex objects and child-bearers illustrate the continuing use of women in

age-old ways, showing the transmutation and politicisation of these users in the colonial societies of Hong Kong and Singapore...” (9). This is clearly exemplified in *The Bondmaid* and *The Teardrop Story Woman* in which the feminist issues centre around male dominance and male bias against women. In the Chinese community of Malaya in the 1950s, men still wielded power and women had to submit to them.

The Bondmaid captures the ethos of a wealthy and powerful household in which the bondmaid, Han, falls in love with young Master Wu, who only wants her for “sexual gratification.” In this story the feminist issue is entangled with class discrimination. Han is subjugated to a life of oppression under the men of the House of Wu, the matriarch, Wu and chief bondmaid, Choyin. However, Han transgresses the social boundaries of the time by not conforming to the conduct expected of her.

In *The Teardrop Story Woman*, Mei Kwei is a victim of two worlds. One is the rich man’s world that is represented by Old Yoong who uses his wealth to bind her to him. The female protagonist is also a victim of the religious world which is represented by Father François Martin who “asks for a night of passion” and Austin, her devout Catholic fiancé who demands she takes catechism classes. Catherine Lim, being concerned with the “inner life” and “private passions” of her female protagonists, expresses her thoughts and feelings through her portrayal of Han and Mei Kwei.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is confined to the aforementioned works of Catherine Lim. The study will focus on the woman protagonists who are oppressed and suppressed by the men who rule their lives. In the novels, the author depicts traditional Chinese society with its “cultural emphasis on continuity of the male lineage, the importance of filial piety in the Confucian ideology, the religious practice of ancestor worship... and the centuries-old subjugation of women” (A.Wong 15). The study will also draw attention to “the severity and bleakness that come with being female in a patriarchal society” (Smith 55). With regard to the collection of short stories, the social themes “coloured by differences in individual experiences and background” (Pan 884) will be explored. The feminist issues that emerge will also be discussed.

Conceptual Theory

Catherine Lim’s three works will be analysed from the point of view of feminism. According to Tuttle, “feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society’s treatment of women; it attempts to analyse the reasons for and dimensions of women’s oppression, and to achieve women’s liberation” (107). Lim captures the essence of feminism when she brings to the fore, the dominant motif of servitude, suffering and subordination. She also tries to analyse the reasons for a woman’s oppression, for example, her failure to produce a male child can cause her to be rejected or ostracised by her husband. In her three

works, Lim portrays a patriarchal culture, that is, one which is in favour of the interests of men. For example, the wealth of Old Yoong and Austin Tong seems to be their power to “buy” Mei Kwei’s beauty and freedom. Although she has no love for either of them, she marries them, not to satisfy herself, but to satisfy them.

In keeping with minority feminist criticism which “tends to use irony as a primary literary device to focus on their self-definitions...” (Guerin 207), Lim uses “situational irony to great effect in the stories in enhancing the horror, pity and outrage at the events recounted” (P.N.Wong 30). An example is the naivety of Pei Yin who follows her teacher’s instruction to the letter by kissing her father when she asks for his signature on her Family Joy Project. This was the impetus that led the lustful father to rape his daughter. Lim “repeatedly explores the relationships between individuals and their environment and the negotiation between the old and young, the rich and poor, the traditional and modern and Asian heritage and Western influences” (Pan 884). Peter Wicks notes that “Lim’s place, her niche, is contemporary Singapore, and especially the ‘Chinese people of her childhood and adult experiences’” (77). Lim asserts:

... I have an enduring fascination with my Chinese roots, and write with an almost obsessive passion, about certain aspects of the Hokkien culture I grew up in

(http://www.catherinelim.com/perso_c.htm)

In Lim’s novels, the Chinese practice of having bondmaids and concubines was very real in her grandmother’s generation. Because she based her novels on stories she has heard from her aunts and grandparents, she portrays very realistic

pictures of the harsh traditions of China that have crossed the South China Sea to the shores of Singapore and Malaysia.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are to explore the elements of feminism in Catherine Lim's selected works by examining the subservient role of women in a patriarchal society. This study also intends to identify the problems women face in their search for identity and recognise the reasons why they see themselves as victims of masculine power. It will also investigate whether women, by virtue of their education, are able to break free from the bonds of patriarchy and Asian tradition.

Significance of the Study

From time immemorial, women have been shackled by a male-dominated society who define and articulate their roles, values and opinions. Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist scholar and critic declares: "The term 'female' is derogatory... because it imprisons her in her sex..." (35). Yes, women have been imprisoned in a world dominated by men and even today, the so-called freedom that females are said to enjoy is "freedom in fetters." British scholar and novelist, Virginia Woolf, who is an important precursor in feminist criticism asserts that "men have treated women and continue to treat them as inferiors." That is why, even today, women play second fiddle to men and are treated, not as individuals, but as beings of secondary status.

Significantly, Catherine Lim's "great affinity with the suffering women," especially those "who endure," prompts her to write about them. Her stories are inspired by her keen eyes and ears – what she reads and observes around her and the tales she hears from various elder members of her family. These "dormant incidents" which remain "alive in my memory" are the threads with which she weaves the fabric of her stories. We read of the Asian woman who must remain traditional and be "modest and always deferring to the men" (Y.E. Lim 72), and yet has to endure pain and suffering. These are real issues that still plague women today, though to a lesser degree than during the last generation. Catherine Lim writes not just about the Chinese experience but extends to the Indian and Malay suffering sisters as well as those of Southeast Asia. It is hoped that this study will enlighten readers on the subordination of the Asian woman, in particular, the Chinese woman.

Hopefully, this research will contribute to a greater interest in feminist readings of literary texts within academia in Malaysia. Perhaps it may provoke other researchers to delve deeper into the feminist attitude of Catherine Lim or Suchen Christine Lim, another Singaporean writer who writes "polemically against the oppression of Chinese women in a diasporic, traditional Chinese society" (Ang 67). In *Gift from the Gods*, the author prefaces the story with a Hakka song which highlights the futility of being born female. Tai Ku and Yoke-lin endure their physical and emotional pain to survive in a harsh patriarchal society.

Limitations of the Study

Koh Buck Song, a Singapore literary critic, remarks that Catherine Lim is a prolific writer who “has achieved the most in terms of scope” (*The Straits Times* 1992: 3). Her numerous collections of stories, poems and three novels cover a wide range of issues: culture, class and gender. Due to time-constraint, it would not be possible to deal with the entire corpus of Lim’s works. Therefore, only one collection of her short stories and two of her novels will be studied. These selected works contain enough depth and room to be explored.

In *The Woman’s Book of Superlatives*, Lim paints a vivid but dismal picture of women in modern society – “how they cope with or are trapped in a no-win scenario” (Y.E. Lim 99). In *The Bondmaid* and *The Teardrop Story Woman*, the figure of the bondmaid predominates. The bondmaid is not just a literal figure; it is a metaphor for the maid in bondage. This research will examine the themes of the disadvantaged, downtrodden and deprived women who invariably end up being the losers, and yet contribute to the cultural identity of Malaysia, Singapore and some Asian countries. The study will also explore Lim’s feminist viewpoints as she focuses on the endurance and stoicism of women who continually struggle against victimisation and exploitation under male supremacy. In addition, Lim is also concerned with Confucian patriarchy which enslaves women to Chinese tradition.

Definition of Terms

Feminine Mystique

A term coined by Betty Friedan to describe the image of womanhood in which women are perceived only as wife and mother. She prefers women to have a less restricted role so that they can develop as individuals.

Feminist Criticism

An approach to literary criticism which focuses on gender issues. Feminist critics assert that society is patriarchal and women are under the control of men who give them no voice and no value in their work. Women are also prevented from realising their productive and creative potential. They are considered unequal to men and viewed as the negative object while men are assumed to be the dominating subject. Feminist critics try to analyse women's writings and challenge the literary canon that have shaped the images of female inferiority.

Gynocriticism

A term coined by the critic Elaine Showalter to describe the reading and studying of texts written by women. It is a woman-centred critical practice that focuses on an analysis of female-authored texts but turns away from male-authored texts.

Other, the

A major concept which Simone de Beauvoir uses to explain the oppression of women. Women are the Other in all cultures and play the role of Other as defined by men. In a world in which man has kept the power for himself and made the rules, the sexual division has come to be seen as the most basic and women have not been allowed to be fully human. They should refuse otherness and strive for full equality.

Patriarchy

Literally it means “rule of the father” (Tuttle 242). The concept is a social order in which the male enjoys domination while the female suffers oppression.

Methodology

This study consists of six chapters. The first chapter encompasses the introduction which is divided into the following sections: statement of the problem, scope of the study, conceptual theory, objectives, significance of the study, limitations of the study, definition of terms and methodology.

The second chapter which comprises the literature review has two segments. The first segment provides a survey of feminism advocated by proponents of feminist theory. Feminist ideas from the West will be studied and minor strands of feminism such as Black feminism, lesbian feminism and Third World Feminism will be included. The works of leading theorists, for example, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir will be examined. An attempt will be

made to relate their theories to Lim's works. The second segment of Chapter II gives an appraisal of the literary criticism on Catherine Lim's works. Primary material includes a lecture by Lim. Then I will review the literature of critics who have examined Lim's fiction, namely the critiques of Peter Wicks, Poppi Smith and Lim Yi-En. I will also study graduate students' theses which are pertinent to feminism in Lim's fiction. Published and unpublished interviews will be included to enhance my feminist reading of Catherine Lim's works.

The three texts that I have selected for my research will be explicated in Chapters III, IV and V. Lim's abject tales of female suffering in *The Woman's Book of Superlatives* (Chapter III), *The Bondmaid* (Chapter IV) and *The Teardrop Story Woman* (Chapter V) indicate her view that women's bodies are objects of oppression and abuse. I will also investigate the themes of Confucian ideology, male supremacy, Chinese traditions and superstitions, women's endurance and marginality that are prevalent in the three books. In addition, I will examine how the images of men and women reflect the conventions of a Chinese milieu that has prevented the female from achieving total equality. I perceive that Lim is not just a writer with a feminist bent, she is a social commentator as well.

Chapter VI is the conclusion. My main focus here is Asian feminism but it is not confined to Lim's Chinese society of Singapore and Malaysia. It will encompass a wider region to include Indonesia, India, Pakistan, China where the voices of women will be heard. I will comment on advocacy groups like AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) in Singapore, AWAM (All Women's Action Society) in Malaysia or APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association) in Pakistan. These groups offer services to improve the conditions of

women and help them to find a place in society. They also try to break down barriers and press for reforms for the betterment of women. Their activities to uplift the status and dignity of women will be highlighted. Although Catherine Lim denies being a feminist, her stories of feminist struggle give the impression that she is one. She may not belong to a social group to fight for women's rights but with her acid pen, she is creating an awareness among her readers that they must reach out to their suffering sisters.