

Deconstruction and Reconstruction: How Did Shirley Lim Build Her Asian American Identity on American Soil

Wei Huang

School of the English Language and Culture, Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College, Zhangzhou, Fujian, China

**Corresponding author: huangwei@xujc.com*

Abstract: Shirley Lim is an Asian American writer of multiple identities. By doing textual analysis of her book *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*, this paper applies deconstructive criticism to analyze Shirley's identity formation. The puzzling plural form of "homelands" in the subtitle of her memoir is unriddled by detailed demonstration of how Shirley's wishful thinking about the U.S. was deconstructed and her American identity constructed on the one hand, and how her disillusion of Malaysia was deconstructed and Malaysia as her homeland reconstructed on the other. By taking the initiative to help, Shirley managed to assimilate herself into the American society; by taking the responsibility of her Malaysian family, she retained her Asian bond; on top of that, the two seemingly incompatible elements --- "Asian" and "American" are incorporated and reconciled by Shirley in her own identity building, thus she achieves in becoming an accomplished Asian-American with two homelands.

Keywords: Shirley Lim, memoir, Asian American identity, deconstruction, homelands

1. Introduction

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, as an Asian American writer of Chinese Malaysian origin, has multiple identities: an immigrant, a minority, a feminist, a scholar, a mother, a teacher, etc. Her multicultural identity is a source of fascination for many scholars, and her award-winning memoir *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* is an ideal material for studying her identity formation. The plural form "homelands" in the subtitle of her memoir is thought-provoking. Why is it "homelands", not "a homeland" according to common sense? What do these "homelands" refer to? What does she imply when she calls these places her "homelands"? In her memoir, Shirley claims that both Malaysia and America are her homelands, the former her "homeland of memory" and the latter her "homeland of future" (191). Normally, when we call a place "homeland", no matter whether it is our place of birth or not, we imply that we have established affectional bonds with that place. Inferring from this logic, Shirley has not only successfully assimilated herself into her adopted country --- America, but remains devoted to her place of birth --- Malaysia. How did she manage it? This is the focus of this research.

Scholars in the U.S. and Taiwan have done abundant research on Shirley Lim's memoir, and identity formation is one of their primary concerns. However, their emphasis is on the construction of Shirley's multicultural identity, ignoring the fact that before reconstruction, there must be deconstruction. Therefore, my tentative contribution of this paper is to try to reveal the whole process of Shirley's identity formation by applying deconstructive criticism as my analytical framework. The major conflict and turning point of Shirley's life happened in 1969, when she decided to leave Malaysia for America. It is in the middle of her memoir, and from two of her statements made in this chapter, I found her "total panic" (138) is not without foundation. When she declared that "I would never see Malaysia again, except through the eyes of a traveler" (138), she was enveloped by disappointment; when she said that "I wanted social justice without having to struggle for it" (137), she was motivated by faint flames of hope. Despite this, she was still "numb with misery" (138), because at this point of her life, making up her mind to go into exile, Shirley was a person without a homeland. How could she rebuild her identity and reconstruct both America and Malaysia as her homelands again? In my view, the two statements made by herself should be deconstructed first. In America, a marginalized "Other" like Shirley Lim could not obtain "social justice" she hoped for without struggling for it; by taking the responsibility of a Chinese daughter,

she could hardly remain “a traveler” to Malaysia. By deconstructing both of her own statements, struggling for a footing in the U.S. and fulfilling her Chinese filial piety, she successfully turned herself from a miserable alien without a country to an accomplished person with two homelands.

Accordingly, the body of analysis of this paper is divided into two major parts. In the first part, I will analyze how Shirley’s wishful thinking about the U.S. (“social justice without having to struggle for it”) was deconstructed by the harsh reality of racism and sexism and what she did (taking the initiative to help) to construct her American identity. In the second part, I will focus on how her disillusion of Malaysia was deconstructed and Malaysia as her homeland was reconstructed by her taking the responsibility of her Malaysian family. It is worth noting that the second part is not only about the author’s reconnecting to Malaysia, it also contains how did Shirley Lim achieve to incorporate and reconcile the two seemingly incompatible elements --- “Asian” and “American” in her own identity building.

2. Literature Review

Shirley Lim’s Memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* has been published in the U.S. and Singapore three times under three different subtitles. They are *An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (1996) for the American version, and *Memoir of a Nonya Feminist* (1996) and *Autobiography, Local Culture, Contemporary Dilemmas* (2010) for Singaporean versions. From the three different subtitles of the same memoir, it is easy to note that Shirley Lim herself, as a scholar and a writer, is consciously aware of her multicultural identity, and that her memoir, like an inexhaustible mine, is an available source that can be studied and interpreted from diverse angles and perspectives.

Lim’s memoir received American Book Awards in 1996 and was subsequently reviewed profusely and favorably by many newspapers and journals. (e.g. *World Literature Today*, *Pacific Affairs*, etc.) In academia, Lim’s memoir is either studied textually from different approaches or compared with the memoirs of other scholars or Asian Americans/ Asian American women. Those who study her memoir range from scholars whose domain of research is Asian American identity/ literature to master and doctoral students who choose Lim’s memoir as their research subject. However, compared with abundant research in the U.S. and Taiwan, the research on Lim is relatively scarce in mainland China. Nevertheless, it is good to note that Shirley Lim and her works are now increasingly gaining domestic attention. Recently, some research is done by scholars from China’s top universities like Zhang Yan of Peking University, whose published papers dwelt not only on Lim’s memoir, but also on her novels. (e.g. *Joss and Gold*, *Sister Swing*, etc.)

This literature review will be focused on the research which has been conducted on Lim’s memoir in the U.S., Taiwan, and mainland China. In the U.S., Lim’s work as an academic memoir is generally recognized and greatly valued. According to Powell, *Among the White Moon Faces* “not only tells the story of women in the academy, but also is self-conscious in the way the narratives of gender, genre, immigrant, and intellectual are told” (280). Davis is still insightful to note that “[Lim] is, thus, the writer of her story, and the literary critic of her life as a text” (449). Davis believes that by “a comparative reading of personal and professional narratives”, the reader can see how “academics like Lim consciously negotiate the intersection between personal history and academic commitment” (441). Comparatively, Miller and Zeng place Lim’s memoir in a broader academic trend. By analyzing a group of memoirs from the 1990s, Miller notes that what is “common to U.S. academic autobiographies” is that they center on “the plot of transformation” (166). Zeng also mentions about “the flowering of academic memoirs” in which “[s]cholars have been enthusiastically charting the relationship between the private/personal and the public/professional in academic memoir writing” (77). To be sure, to study Lim’s memoir as academic autobiography is only one of many concerns of US scholars. Miller also explores how can an academic life get “transpersonal” (166), and Zeng also demonstrates how Lim’s Memoir “brilliantly captures the complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions of cosmopolitanism” (77). Mok focuses more on how Lim’s “transnational identity” is formed by “moving home” and “writing home” (143).

Mok’s home-making theme was echoed by some Taiwanese scholars. For example, by citing Lim’s own words in her memoir that “home is the place where our stories are told”, Hsu points out that it is not the geography of homes, but the narration of homes that makes one at home. Meanwhile, the formation of transnational identity in Lim’s memoir is further explored in Taiwan. Some start with the concept of diaspora (Lee), and some (Huang) explore issues about cultural displacement and cultural assimilation. Chuang explains how the formation of transnational identity is explored in his dissertation, “[t]he thesis discusses how Lim transforms her identity in the course of the conflicts, the interaction, and the balance between Asian and the Western cultural legacy she faces”, and “how Lim negotiates her multiple

identities and transforms herself with the fusion of the Asian and Western cultures” (1).

In mainland China, as was mentioned earlier, the research on Lim’s memoir is sparse, but the recently available research is promising. Zhang Yan’s published paper on Lim’s memoir is informative and almost all-inclusive. Unified by criticism and defiance to anything unfair of the memoir’s narrator, she relates colonial rule and education, racial and sex discriminations in both Malaysia and the US.

The above analysis evidently shows the main difference between the concern of U.S. scholars and that of Chinese scholars. While American scholars put emphasis on the relationship between Shirley Lim’s personal life and academic life, Chinese scholars value the author’s formation of transnational identity more. Since accounting for the plural form of “homelands” is the goal of this paper, my concern is similar to that of Chinese scholars. However, as I mentioned in the introduction part, my analysis is not simply confined to the construction of Lim’s identity. By using deconstructive criticism as my theoretical framework and focusing mainly on Lim’s American experience, I try to add an extra dimension to the research of Shirley Lim and her memoir.

3. Theory: The Process and Reason of Choosing Deconstructive Approach

Due to Shirley Lim’s multiple identities, a variety of theories could be applied as analytical frameworks for her memoir. During the process of my first reading of the memoir, my mind was live with conflicting ideas. The description of Shirley’s grandfather’s patriarchal family (her mother’s silence, her father’s defiance, her own invisibility as one of the many daughters in the big family), her humble and submissive position in the relationship with her boyfriend Iqbal, the flagrant sexism she faced in job-hunting both in Malaysia and America, irritated me so much and invited me to criticize patriarchal superiority and dominance using feminist theories; Shirley’s inability to speak the local language but her attachment to the colonial language --- English, the Malayan application of British educational system, the legacy of British rule --- race discords, tugged me to examine from Shirley’s experience the post-colonial effects of British rule applying post-colonial theory. Meanwhile, racism was never out of my scope of concern. Even before Shirley came to the U.S., she suffered from racism frequently. The preferential treatment given to Eurasian girls in her convent school, the teaching position given to a Muslim instead of her despite her merits, the race riots of May 13, 1969¹ which caused her exile, and the abundant evidence of racism in America all dragged me to criticize the above injustices through the lens of race theories. When I try to find one dominant theory to unify and organize my thought, I used to be inclined to apply the perspective of “the Other”, for “the Other” is the “colonized”, the “woman”, the “non-white” (which is Shirley Lim’s position), in the binary oppositions of colonizer v. colonized, man v. woman, White v. non-White. But I found that using this approach, it is easier for me to criticize than to reach a conclusion. By merely criticizing, I had a hard time explaining the keyword in the subtitle of the memoir --- “homelands”.

When I read the memoir for the second time, I bore “homelands” in my mind and finally found that the deconstructive approach will help me to solve the dilemma. Then it suddenly dawned on me that I was subconsciously affected by Shirley Lim herself. In 2018, Shirley Lim had given us a lecture on Chinese diasporic writing in my university. Her answer to the question “her understanding of home” during the Q&A part of the lecture had greatly impressed me. Shirley had told us that the word “home” immediately generated in her mind “homeless” or “absence of home”. Thus, I had got the impression that the deconstructive approach of analysis was essential in the mind of this scholar writer.

The word “deconstructive” immediately generates in my mind influential figures like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. The former is famous for his explanation and application of “différance”, and the latter for his interpretation of “discourse and power”. In my view, the deconstructive approach is not ONE definite and unchanging theory. It is a way of thinking and interpretation. Most modern philosophers, writers and scholars are more or less influenced by the deconstructive approach, but their understandings of the approach vary. I’m indebted to Lois Tyson’s interpretation of “deconstructing human identity” (257-258) in writing this paper. According to her, “the world is infinite text, that is, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play.” “[W]e are, ourselves, unstable and ambiguous force-fields of competing ideologies.” “The self-image of a stable identity that many of us have is really just a comforting self-delusion.” “We don’t really have an identity because the word identity implies that we

¹Race riots of May 13, 1969: On that day, Chinese shophouses in Kuala Lumpur were burnt down and 2000 Chinese were massacred. What’s worse, according to the author’s account, “The army was called in, but the Malay soldiers had been slow to stop the race riots and had allegedly shot at Chinese instead.” Shirley, as a Chinese, chose to hide out in a friend’s house for security. But as she stated with disillusion that “No place in Malaysia was a refugee as long as racial extremists were free to massacre and burn.”

consist of one, singular self, but in fact we are multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties, and intentions.” Each of us is in fact “a kaleidoscope of selves”, “if we’ve invented our ‘identity,’ then we can reinvent it.”

The identity formation of Shirley Lim in her memoir is a perfect case in point. When she decided to leave Malaysia for America, she thought that she would only see Malaysia “through the eyes of a traveler” from then on, and that the U.S. might offer her “social justice without having to struggle for it.” These statements are bound to be deconstructed, because after changing her environment of living, more cultural elements and realities as signifiers would come into play in her “text” of life, and “reinvent” her identity again. The result of the “play” is revealed in the word “homelands”, which proves that although her identity transformation is still in the process of formation, she has found a momentary stop in the continuing flow of change.

4. Shirley Lim’s Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Her Identity

In this section, there are two sets of deconstruction and (re)construction: deconstruction of Shirley’s statement on “social justice” and construction of her American identity; deconstruction of her statement on her being “a traveler” to Malaysia and reconstruction of her Malaysian/Chinese/Asian identity. There are similarities and differences between the two sets. On the one hand, both sets are about the deconstruction of Shirley’s own conceptions and statements, and in the two sets, both identities are successfully constructed when Shirley took the initiative to help, to take responsibilities. On the other hand, the differences are still worth mentioning. First, my emphasis is put on the first set so that it is consistent with my focus --- Shirley Lim’s American experience. Second, it is harder and takes longer for Shirley to deconstruct her wishful thinking about America than to deconstruct her disillusion about Malaysia, for America is a totally new and strange environment for Shirley, which takes time to observe, to reflect and to form her own opinion and understanding on it. However, the Malaysian part is still indispensable. Without it, the “homelands” would be changed into a singular form, and Shirley Lim’s formation of Asian-American identity would be incomplete.

4.1. Deconstruction of Her Wishful Thinking about the U.S. and Reconstructing America as Her “Homeland of Future”

In Chapter 7 of her memoir, frustrated by the domestic racial conflicts and the injustices she and her people had suffered, Shirley Lim wished, “I wanted social justice without having to struggle for it.” Though she left Malaysia “numb with misery”, she harbored a hope to make a change in a totally different environment in the U.S. There was a change indeed, but not without frustrations. Her hope for “social justice without having to struggle for it” was deconstructed by the harsh reality of racism and sexism. It was not until she took the initiative to help --- to be of service at the Castle in Brandeis (as a dormitory counselor), setting a writing center to help her students, being naturalized as an American citizen to help with her son’s assimilation --- that she gradually constructed her American identity.

Without struggling for social justice, what Shirley (as an Asian woman) had to do was to “play the roles set out for [her] by people who didn’t know [her]” (140). Her first roommates taught her a lesson on what White supremacy would be like when manifested by ordinary Americans. When seeing her for the first time, Jason welcomed Shirley by saying, “I’m an anthropologist, and I’d like living with a foreigner” (142). Jason thought that he was showing his goodwill, not being aware that how insulting the word “anthropologist” is when said to a minority, and how alienating one may feel been addressed a “foreigner”. His girlfriend Brenda was no less pretentious. When she found Shirley wrote poems, she said condescendingly, “I don’t know why you waste your time. You should take something more useful, like basket weaving” (142). Shirley felt that as an Asian and as a poet, she was like a “half-wit” in the eyes of the American couple.

Many Americans, it seems to me, are quick to condemn what they don’t do, to judge what is different negatively. Something about a society whose founding principles are articulated on an arrogation of ethnical superiority has given rise to a morality of intolerant standards: “we” are always better than “you” (143).

Her first job in the U.S. --- being a teaching fellow at Queens College showed how could an Asian teacher suffer from racism in her work. For Americans, the prescribed role for Asians is waiter in restaurants, so “[i]t must have been discomforting for some of them to find a ‘foreign’ graduate student explicating Thoreau and the dull mysteries of the argument paper in their first experience of higher

education” (165). After class, none of her students found their way to her office to talk; when she gave a dinner party for her students, none came except two, who were one hour late.

As an immigrant mother, Shirley felt that she and her son were treated as aliens and outsiders because they “did not look white European” (199). When she brought her son to parks or other public places, what she could only do was to watch “enviously as strangers veered toward each other and began exchanging intimacies of toilet training and bed-wetting” (198). And also, no kids played with her “olive-skinned child” (198). The author is very critical about the fact that “[t]here are many ways in which America tells you don’t belong” (199).

The eyes that slide around to find another face behind you. The smiles that appear only after you have almost passed them, intended for someone else. The stiffness in the body as you stand beside them watching your child and theirs slide down the pole, and the relaxed smile when another white mother comes up to talk. ... A polite people, it is the facial muscles, the shoulder tension, and the silence that give away white Americans’ uneasiness with people not like them. ... The United States, a nation of immigrants, makes strangers only of those who are visibly different, ... Some lessons begin in infancy, with silent performances, yet with eloquent instructions (199).

“The roles set out for [her] by people who didn’t know [her]” was not only a minority and a foreigner, but also a woman who was supposed to get married at a certain age, to spend her spare time shopping not learning, to be less competitive than men in job market. As a graduate student, when Shirley met her first-year adviser, Mr. Harts, the latter said to her, “What are you doing here? You should be married. What do you hope to get out of Brandeis?” (146) When her savings running out, Shirley applied for a job at a department store without revealing that she had just completed her doctorate at Brandeis. Working there, Shirley found that shopping was a source of pleasure and contentment for most women. No matter how frantically they shopped, it was acceptable. Shirley herself, when finding her purchases disappointing and shopping not so interesting, took to reading during lunch break. But her difference, not acting like most women, made herself a target of derision: “‘A college girl!’ Fanny (a shop girl) sniffed. ‘You should be doing better than a check girl!’” (169) When Shirley tried to find a position in academics, she found hopelessly the evidence that White males were given preferential treatment. Alan, who had been a year her senior at Brandeis, was officially admitted as a junior faculty member while Shirley and other women remained to be teaching fellows.

All the above evidence shows that “without struggling for it”, Shirley, as an Asian and a woman is bound to suffer from injustice in American society. Her previous wishful thinking was deconstructed by the harsh reality. However, Shirley is never a passive sufferer, she is a born fighter. Even though she didn’t fight in America in a radical way, she managed to find ways to gain support and recognition. For her, the major way of accommodating to American society is to be of service, to find or to establish a community that can give her a sense of belonging.

She felt that she “had taken the first step to entering the United States on her terms” (155) when she became a dormitory counselor at the Castle in Brandeis, and she was filled with joy to be necessary to others. There she got a chance to experience how sweet it was to be in a community of women, for the Castle was then a segregated dormitory for female students. It is a community “where one’s laughter was laughter and not flirtation, where someone combed your hair to adorn you, not to penetrate” (156). She was no longer as lonely and miserable as when she first came to America, because in this community, “there were others who could help” (156), and the provisional sisterhood is a repeated experience that she “look for, work for, use, offer, and cherish” (156). Although women are divided by unequal privileges of race, class, age, nation, etc., the “sisterhood” Shirley experienced in the Castle was the “sensibility of support” “when social gender is recognized as a shared experience” (157).

She was “eager to make Hostos students her community” (171) too when she was teaching at Hostos Community College in the South Bronx, a college with a black and Latino student population. Besides her teaching responsibilities, she set up a writing center to help students with the assistance of senior or graduate students. Her students grew close to her and, after Shirley left Hostos and worked elsewhere, it was those students she remembered and missed. It’s clear that by “being of service”, the affectional bond was established not only between Shirley and her students, but between herself and the American soil. The construction of her American identity was furthered by becoming a teacher who was loved and recognized by her American students.

By choosing to be naturalized as an American citizen, Shirley constructed her American identity symbolically. She had made this choice for the benefit of her son, for she hoped her son to have “the primal experience of bonding with an American homeland” (194). However, her American identity became a reality that influenced her way of thinking and her daily activities: she found that she was no

longer free to accuse America without accusing herself because she was already a part of American; wishing to give her son a complete experience as an American citizen, she had to try hard to assimilate herself into American society first. Shirley was keenly aware that, “[a] child’s society is his parents” (197), and that “he is nonetheless tied to the company his mother keeps” (197). She didn’t want her son to be as isolated and alien as she had been. She “wanted something different for [her] son” (197), which is “the sense of identity with a homeland” (197). Shirley anxiously accepted “every birthday invitation” (197) from the Montessori mothers, and “drove down numerous Yorktown and Somers Circular dead-ends, clutching party invitations and directions in one hand” (198). And later Shirley was proud of her son’s successful assimilation. She described her son Gershom as a 100-percent American whose “memories include years of July 4th Boy Scout parades and salutes to the strains of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’” (210), who was a “quintessential American consumer”, and “everything that enters his mouth, his mind, his spirit, is American” (210). Moreover, the authors’ understanding of American identity culminated in an epiphany: the “very privilege must come freighted with responsibility” (211). “Being an American, after all, is not much good if it is not good for something other than identity” (211). To this point, the author’s own assimilation is complete. By helping her son to gain American experience, she herself not only successfully constructed her American identity, but was also willing to share the responsibility of her adopted country.

4.2. Deconstruction of Her Disillusion of Malaysia and Reconstructing Malaysia as Her “Homeland of Memory”

Not only did Shirley Lim develop the awareness to share the responsibility of America, but she also remained a Chinese daughter by shouldering her responsibility of her Malaysian family. The gloomy prospects of her personal life and national future occasioned her statement when she left Malaysia, “I would never see Malaysia again, except through the eyes of a traveler.” The deconstruction of this statement doesn’t have to take as long a process as the deconstruction of her first statement about “social justice”, for her love for her homeland Malaysia is deep-rooted. Once her cord of love for her home country was touched to the quick, her flow of emotion would be triggered. Realizing how profound her attachment to her homeland of memory is, Malaysia as her homeland is reconstructed no matter where she is.

Shirley’s love for his father is the trigger of her love for Malaysia. When she was still a graduate student studying in America, her father died. In order not to interrupt her study, her family delayed the news for nearly a month. She was overwhelmed with grief when she knew that she had lost her father forever and moaned:

It was unimaginable that father, the source of whatever drove me, that total enveloping wretchedness of involuntary love, my eternal bond, my body’s and hearts’ DNA, had been dead for almost a month. The world had a hole in it, it was rent, and I would never heal (162-163).

When she received a package of the papers from her father’s belongings, she found that

Father had kept all my old school record books, annual school certificates of achievement, examination diplomas, yellowed letters of recommendation from high school teachers, and Malaysian citizenship documents (163).

Reading a diary her father had kept in the last weeks of his life, Shirley saw that

All the entries were addressed to me. In the early entries, he wrote he was hopeful he would recover, and he did not want me to return home because it was so important for me to continue my studies. In the second to last entry, he asked that I hurry home; he didn’t believe he had much time left and he wanted to see me. In the very last entry, addressing me as his dear daughter, he wrote that although he knew I would do so, still he asked that I promise to take care of my brothers and sister, Peng²’s children (163).

The day Shirley received the package, she emptied her bank account and sent the few hundred dollars in it to Peng. And she promised Peng that she would send her money every month to raise her half-siblings. Doing this is the only way Shirley could fulfill her Chinese filial piety, in her own words, “[i]n writing the bank drafts, I remained my father’s daughter” (164). Here the author defined the identity of “self” in the Chinese way, “It is the family, parents, siblings, cousins, that signify the meaning of the self” (164). “This is the meaning of blood --- to give, because you cannot eat unless the family is also eating” (164). By taking her responsibility as a Chinese daughter, Shirley unknowingly deconstructed her own

²Peng is her stepmother whom Shirley never likes.

statement of being a “traveler”, and reconstructed her Chinese identity.

After she became a mother herself, Shirley tried to make up with her estranged mother who had abandoned her family when Shirley was eight, for she felt it would be hard for her to speak as a woman and a mother if she failed to define herself as a daughter. And she wanted to give her son the memory of his grandmother too. However, she couldn't overcome the sense that her mother was already a stranger to her, and she couldn't open her mouth to ask her mother to account for her abandonment. Shirley's remorse was complete, for when she finally decided to try to listen to her mother's side of the story, her mother died. Had she heard her mother's story, she would have been able to understand her better. For Shirley, if her father's death triggered her attachment to Malaysia involuntarily, her mother's death forced her to find a reconciliation: not only the reconciliation between Shirley and her mother, but also the way to reconcile between her Asian and American identities. She realized that while she has to struggle to get a footing and justice in American society, she has to let go of struggles for her “memorialized homeland” in order to live on. That way, her love for Malaysia remains, and she could stop being absent in America. She can tell both the stories about America, as well as about Malaysia. For Shirley, “home is the place where our stories are told” (232). By telling the story of both Malaysia and America, she managed to combine her double identities after their construction and reconstruction.

After the death of both of her parents, Shirley has frequently returned to Malaysia and Singapore to “refresh [her] spirit” and her “original literary identity” (209). The words by herself are clear evidence to show how affectionately Shirley attached to Malaysia, “[n]o matter how urgent my struggles to escape childhood poverty and the country's racial politics, I have continued to feel an abiding identity with Malaysia's soil” (209). Shirley continued to repair to her brothers' homes in Southeast Asia, “mending those ties that had bound [her] to them” (209). Even Peng hugged her after father's death. Shirley thought that something of her remained in her Malaysia family, not merely as past but as prologue.

As a writer, a scholar, a teacher, and a feminist, her identity both as Asian and American were recognized when she became a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The job description amused her, for she said “[i]t could have been written for me” (228) after examining it. St. Barbara asked for “a creative writer who was also working on Asian-American literature and on feminist issues” (228). The location of U.C. is also fraught with meaning for the author. As the first state to exclude Asians, it is also the state which gave the author the greatest recognition. Asian, woman, the source of discrimination when she first came to America became the source of her pride and advantage. Violent but loving father, self-absorbed abandoning mother, miserable childhood full of memory of poverty, hunger, injustices, colonial rule of Britain and race riots in Malaysia --- all the struggles and unhappy memories of the author, being told as stories, became the parts which form the author's Malaysian identity.

5. Conclusion

When mentioning about identity, people tend to take it as something stable; when doing research on identity, scholars tend to study identity formation. I understand these tendencies, but at the same time I question them on the ground of deconstructive way of thinking. Human identity is like a “text”, the signifiers that constitute it will come into “play” with more signifiers in the external world and cause its deconstruction and reconstruction. Shirley Lim thought that she could be a person living in the U.S. getting social justice without fighting for it, but all the injustices in the form of racism and sexism, acting like signifiers, play with her original statement and deconstructed her wishful thinking. She thought that she would only be “a traveler” to Malaysia too. But when she took the initiative to help, to take more responsibilities, she got the chances to immerse herself into diverse settings with more signifiers (which are in the form of social phenomenon and cultural elements), and finally reinvented her identity as a person with two homelands.

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