No Shelter for Outsiders: Questioning Australian National (Un) Identity in Two Contemporary Novels

Thanis Bunsom[1]

Abstract

As a former European colony and a settler society composed out of waves of diverse migration from all over the world, Australia has never had a simple relationship to notions of national identity. Originally patterned after 19th century European models of mythological nationalism, early discourses of national identity sought to canonize selected places, people and abstract characteristics-most of which were almost exclusively Anglo-Celtic-as defining myths of 'Australian-ness.' However, in the second half of the 20th century amidst a period of intense demographic and cultural change, the Australian government officially adopted multiculturalism as the defining national policy, leading to debates which in turn have become a focal point in a lot of contemporary Australian literature, no more so than in the work of authors from non-Anglo ethnic backgrounds. These writers frequently chart the dilemmas faced by non-Anglo minorities who have long been present in Australia but who have not been fully represented within the available narratives of Australian national identity. This paper analyses two recent novels by Australian authors as representative examples of this trend. Brian Castro's *Birds of passage* (1983) portrays the non-Anglo immigrants' hardship in trying to fit in to mainstream Australian society and the quandary of not being able to call Australia their true 'home.' Hsu Ming Teo's *Love and vertigo* (2000) further elaborates the second generation's loss of identity in a sense that the main character can identify herself neither to Australia where she was born nor to Singapore from where her parents come. The readings are framed and supported by a critical interrogation of Jacques Derrida's theory of hospitality and Ien Ang's theory of ambivalent nature of hospitality. The findings show that Australian-Chinese people from past to present have been treated as outsiders to the mainstream society and their places in it are somehow ambiguous.

Keywords: Australian novels, national identity, home, Brian Castro, Hsu Ming-Teo

[1] Lecturer, Department of Language Studies, School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi

Background

Refusing to Stand Still: The Changing Notion of National Identity

Debates about Australian national identity have been going on since the establishment of Australia. Although there have been many attempts to define what it means to be Australian, no fixed conclusions have been reached so far. In Stephens's column 'Mate, You're a legend' (2003), John Douglas Pringle called Australian identity "that aching tooth." David Malouf, a well-known contemporary writer, stated that Australia was "endlessly fussing and fretting over identity." Donald Horne gave a more poignant statement when he claimed that there had never been and never would be "something called the Australian national identity." He said Australian society was distinctive but diverse. These comments by scholars and novelists imply how complicated and problematic the concept of national identity is. In *Imagined communities*, Benedict Anderson claims that:

> nation, nationality, nationalism–all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse. Thus I am driven to the conclusion that no scientific definition of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists. (p. 3)

Due to this great difficulty, attempts to define Australianness and to create a shared national identity have changed over the years. In the early stages of national history, the definition was determined by the myth-founding process that relied on certain figures (Ned Kelly and other bush figures), certain events in history (Gallipoli, World War I and II), certain places (Ayers Rock) and certain abstract characteristics of the so-called "Australianness" (mateship, self-sacrifice, easy-going orientation to life). In order to identify the stable, common cultures and value patterns that provided for social integration, Parsons (1951) claimed that the Australian government at his time adopted the White Australia policy to create a sense of national unity through racial hegemony. The policy was later relaxed in the 1960s before finally being dropped in the early seventies "in favour of a more generic statement about Australia and its universalistic values such as a democratic, tolerant, diverse and multicultural nation in place of more particularistic and traditional understandings" (Eddy, 1991, p. 152). As Australia approached its centenary of

Federation, debates raged about the meaning and content of Australian national identity throughout the eighties and nineties. Within the public sphere, the conceptual space of Australia has become a potent symbol around which definitional struggles of state and civil society have been organized (Melhurst, 1998). Today, national identity has moved to the centre stage in politics. Recent discussions of Australian national identity have focused on official discourses or media presentations, or have involved expert readings of popular texts. Clahoun (1997) suggests that nationalism and national identity are pivotal to the broader [political] field of contested meanings and symbolic struggle. In the Australian case, the theme of finding what constructs national identity plays a pivotal role in social and political debate. Various competing and often contradictory packages have been developed and promoted (such as economic rationalism, clever country, republic and multiculturalism) for the purpose of remaking a "faulty old Australia" as a "new improved Australia" (Melleurish, 1998). Hotly contested issues about other identity questions, such as Aboriginal rights, immigration, conservation, gun control, gay culture and militarism, are often framed and thought about as in terms of the overarching symbolic logics of the 'Australian' (Phillips, 1996).

In addition, another area of long-standing interest in studies of national identity has been the implications of wider cross-border movements of people from diverse social, cultural and political backgrounds for national identity (McAllister & Moore, 1991). Clark (2007) mentions in her study that the concept of Australian national identity has been challenged by the role of transnationalism which incorporates the dual processes of globalization and localization in determining attitudes towards national identity among transnational migrants. Other studies have indicated that the existence of such transnational communities is likely to interrupt the normative character of the politically and culturally bound nation state (Appadurai, 1996; Cohen, 1996; Wong, 2002). The rise in transnationalism and cultural diversity are therefore responded by the government through reasserting their authority in shaping national identity and national citizenship. The Howard government proposed new citizenship tests which incorporate tests relating to Australian cultural/historical values and English competence.

Imposed Authority: Problems in Australian National Identity

The idea of shared Australian national identity, therefore, has proved to be a difficult concept to be defined. Philips and Smith (2000) offer an explanation for such a difficulty. They claim that "academic information about Australian national identity in the mass media or academic forums stresses the process of cultural production" (p. 205). The Australian is seen as an intellectual construct that is continually presented to members of Australian society by elites. Generally neglected in studies of this issue, however, is a concern with reception. Ordinary people and their stance on the constant change of concept and image of Australianness are hardly taken into account by the contending elites. The scholars' comments on the issue are that "compared to existing knowledge of top-down beliefs about Australian identity, information on bottom-up views about Australian identity is thin on the ground" (p. 207). Ordinary people are peripheral in the concept of national identity endorsed by the government such as the idea of multiculturalism and citizenship.

The research conducted by Philips and Smith has led to the conclusion that, whereas governments have tried to reinvent Australia as a democratic, multicultural land, ordinary people have held on to the more concrete, 'worlded' symbols and folk narratives consistent with older, more traditional images of Australia. It is located in personal experience and popular culture. This conclusion is interesting in the sense that it seems to have focused on only a certain group of people who share the same values and beliefs. Although the research does point out a weak point in the construction of the concept, the problem continues. Philips and Smith accept that their research as well as the research conducted earlier has excluded certain groups of people: the minorities in Australia (Asian-Australians, Aborigines and Pacific Islanders). These people have not been taken into consideration when it comes to define the national identity. Their voices have been marginalized from the mainstream society. Therefore, there have been attempts among the marginalized to liberate themselves from the fetters of dominant ideologies and to be recognized as part of the discourse of Australian identity. The attention on Asian-Australian national identity is one of the focuses of this research paper. The Asian-Australian identity has been widely researched by many

scholars. Lee (2006) states that "in the construction of the Australian national self, the exclusion of non-white communities has performed a crucial role" (p. 214). As Ommundsen (2005) claims, "White Australia" would not have been possible without the spectre of a non-White future, a yellow peril whose main function was to define racial and cultural whiteness (p. 406). With recent waves of Asian immigration and multicultural national agendas operating to erode the cultural and racial bias inherent in older models of national identity, the concept of Asian Australian has gained in popularity and usage to address a growing segment of the migrant population that identified increasingly with dual and hybrid national and cultural identities. However, the concept has also become a dilemma for these people who may have been educated to the highest level in the English language only to find themselves barred from being accepted because of their foreignness to Australian society and from their country of origin because of their westernization.

Yearning for Recognition: Chinese-Australian Writings

The Australian national literature has always been regarded as the literature of the European writers. Despite a large number of studies conducted on the Asian-Australian identity, little effort has been made by the scholars to include the literary works of Asian minorities in the canon of national literature. Australian-Chinese literature, for example, can be used as an illustration to the argument. The presence of Chinese minorities in Australia has lasted for the last 153 years ever since the first arrival of Chinese migrants in 1848. Despite the enduring presence of minority Chinese communities alongside historical accounts of white settlement in Australia, Australian-Chinese literature is a late comer to the scene. Australian-Chinese works include Simone Lazaroo's *The world waiting to be made* (1994), Arlene Chai's *The last time I saw mother* (1995), Ouyang Yu's *The Eastern slope chronicle* (1998), and Hsu Ming Teo's *Love and vertigo* (2000). They attempt to portray the reality of Chinese migrants to Australia throughout the national history and also the Chinese diasporas' experiences of everyday lives in modern-day Australia. They are the portrayal of the contemporary world with which we can identify. However, such a portrayal is done through a different perspective, the perspective of the forgotten.

In this research paper, two contemporary Australian-Chinese novels will be discussed in detail to show the writers' point of view towards the concept of Australian national identity that has neglected the existence of the Australian-Chinese people: Castro's *Birds of passage* and Teo's *Love and vertigo*. Through these modern works, the concept of Australian national identity is seemingly not partaken by a certain group of people whose place in the Australian society seems marginalised.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Generally speaking, Australian-Chinese literature condones a sense of not-belonging. Madsen (2006) terms it as "the neither here nor there" rhetoric that highlights the ambivalence that surrounds ideas of 'home' in the context of migration (*Birds of passage*) and the Australian-born Chinese second generation (*Love and vertigo*). As Madsen elaborates, "for migrants, refugees, and seekers of asylum, the difficulties of locating such a space, a place like home, are insurmountable. For the deterritorialised or deracinated subject, there can be no place like home." (p. 118).

In Jacques Derrida's *Of hospitality* (2000), the writer scrutinizes the very concept of hospitality by exploring the relationship of dependence that exists between the duty (*devoir*) of hospitality and the right (*droit*) to hospitality. He explains that hospitality is characterized as a natural and inalienable law. However, the right to occupation of all parts of the surface: culture, social institutions, the State. Hospitality is a right of visitation only, a temporary sojourn, but not of permanent residence as residence would be a concern of treaties between states rather than an issue of human rights. Hospitality, then, reveals the public nature of the public space, which is regulated by the State through the law (international and domestic) and is controlled by the police. There is a relationship of dependence between the moral law of unconditional hospitality extended a priori to all foreigners and the conditional laws that govern the right to hospitality. Therefore, hospitality, like tolerance, is at once offered and withheld; it necessarily remains incomplete, compromised by the proximity of political and juridical forces, and power relationships.

Home, as a place of security and acceptance, is likewise compromised and rendered ambivalent for the migrant subject when hospitality is always conditional and tolerance is inseparable from a process of "othering".

Similarly, Ang (2001), an Australian-Chinese scholar, offers the same perspective on the concept of Australia as a host country and Asian immigrants as hosted people in her essay "The curse of the smile: Ambivalence and the Asian woman in Australian multiculturalism". Ang argues that Australia is an ambivalent scene of hospitality: "offering reluctant tolerance and unhomely home, where the Other can live but cannot belong" (p. 141). She describes the condition of individuals of Asian descent in contemporary Australia thus: "racially and ethnically marked people are no longer othered today through simple mechanisms of rejection and exclusion, but through an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process of *inclusion by virtue of othering*" (p. 139, emphasis in original). Ang's analysis focuses on the image of a Chinese woman's smiling face, commonly taken as a stereotypical submissive smile of an exotic oriental woman, that featured in an Australian government poster campaign to promote the taking-up of citizenship. This woman's face appeared with the slogan 'Come and join our family'. Ang's response to this poster is compelling. She claims that "in a peculiar way, Asians have, by the mid 1990s, become Australia's pet people" (p. 140) and that in contemporary Australia, Asians are no longer excluded nor are they merely reluctantly included despite their difference, but because of it! What we have here is acceptance through difference" (p. 146).

Hence, the concept of tolerance by Ang has implications for the concept of hospitality proposed by Derrida. Ang's comment on the question 'Where are you from?' as encoding a set of assumptions about 'here' and 'there', non-belonging, that objectifies a person as ethnically marked and situates them as Other. Ang claims that such a question is not innocent in its intentions. It is a question which implicitly states that the person to whom the question is addressed somehow belongs elsewhere and cannot be at home where they reside. Furthermore, when applying Ang's description of patronizing acceptance and tolerance and Derrida's theory of hospitality to Australia's reluctant surrendering of the White Australia policy in the face of inadequate northern European emigration, one may find it a highly compromised

and economically motivated form of hospitality extended to those Asian migrants who were permitted the right of residence. The offer of citizenship, of complete belonging or the offer of a 'home' to these Asian migrants was always already inscribed with the absence of true hospitality, the promise of which was betrayed by self-interested motivations.

This leads us to the experience of such migrants transmuted in literary works of the twentieth century. *Birds of passage* and *Love and vertigo* are two emerging examples of the 'neither here nor there' motif or what I propose as "the post-migratory dilemma" in Anglophone Chinese Australian literature. Both of the novels show how the migrant truly belongs neither 'here' in Australia nor 'there' in the homeland or land of origin. The failure to belong completely to a new home, or to return to the home left behind, is powerfully characterized by such a motif. Madsen argues that this motif is repeated in many canonical texts of Chinese Australian, Chinese American, and Chinese Canadian literature. The frequency of the repetition suggests that this motif is more than just a characteristic of the individual texts themselves, but "is one of the shaping principles of the developing canon of Anglophone diasporic Chinese literature" (p. 120).

Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*: A Home Waiting to be Found

Birds of passage, as the title suggests, is a novel about migration. The story portrays the hardships of migration and the embattled position of the migrant in a racially stratified society. It weaves together the life-stories of a contemporary Australian-born Chinese, Seamus O'Young and his spiritual ancestor, the migrant worker Lo Yun Shan, who arrives in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century with one of the first waves of mainland Chinese lured over by the Gold Rush, only to be driven from the goldfields by depravity, racism and greed. It is through the eyes of Shan that Seamus comes to understand the fight he is making for his own life and sanity in a society yet to come to terms with its own unease about difference and diversity. For the most part, the novel deals with an exploration of social and psychological alienation. Pons (1990) relates the theme of the book to a larger theme which runs through much of Australian literary history. Alienation and a sense of exile figure prominently in Australian fiction and verse. In the words of Tom Keneally,

'home' was always somewhere else and Australia was still at the world's wrong end, an alien if not a fatal shore" (as cited in Pons, 1990, p. 177).

Huggan (2007) offers a different perspective on the novel. He argues that the two stories (of O'Young and Shan) counteract rather than complement each other, providing subtle variations on Castro's main theme: the multiple guises and dissimulations of ethnic identity (p. 133). Charting O'Young's ambivalent status as an ethnic Australian through a succession of historical discontinuities and geographical displacements, Brydon (2005) argues that the novel explores the irony that "one only becomes ethnic through the eyes of another; the labeling is never one's own" (as cited in Huggan, 2007, p. 94). O'Young's attempt to decipher the runic manuscript bequeathed to him by Shan leads him to conjure up a past which then proceeds to haunt him – a past he must piece together if he is to understand his own origins. O'Young's survival in the late twentieth century Australia, like his predecessor's a century before him, depends to some extent on his capacity to elude definition, to displace the dominant ideologies of White Australia that seek to impose their ground rules, their naturalized ways of seeing and thinking on him. O'Young's official/imposed status is that of an ABC (Australian-born Chinese). However, his hybrid, uncertain identity (as an orphan, a refugee or a displaced person) disrupts conventional categories of national and racial identity. Defying the categories that the white authorities impose upon him, O'Young seeks instead to define himself through the medium of his ancestor's journal. But the journal is fractured, the medium is self-defeating, and he soon finds himself reproducing the hysterical tendencies of his earlier shadow self. Only when he learns to relocate himself in the interstices of Shan's writing, is he able to negotiate a space for himself between other people's imprisoning definitions of him. As Huggan suggests, "this space is necessarily provisional and contestatory for O'Young's cross-cultural translations mirror the attempts of the white authorities to translate him" (p. 136). However, the translations prove futile. O'Young's existence remains a puzzle for the white world as he is always, in their point of view, "an excluding insider" (Said, 1979, p. 229)

To take a closer look at the book, *Birds of passage* is described by critics as a metarealistic work of fiction. The story contains a lot of impossible coincidences which could only be realistic if the reader believes in the reality

and power of imagination drawn through Castro's narrative strategy. Pons argues that the interwoven stories of O'Young and Shan are for the purpose of "unlocking the gates of alienation" (p. 180). The separate worlds of the two strangers are alienated, incomplete and mutilated. Since each world belongs to a different century, and is peopled by a different set of characters, the challenge lies in the way Castro links the two together in order to bridge the chasm of time and show the underlying unity of experience between Shan and Seamus.

To set the historical background for the world of O'Young and Shan, the novel begins with a long quotation from Geoffrey Blainey:

> If there had been no Chinese here, Australians might have almost invented them. Every society at times need its scapegoat, its target; and it was almost as if the Chinese were the yardstick by which the British in Australia judged themselves, and they judged themselves to be pretty good. They complained that the Chinese were insanitary and that on the diggings they polluted the water. They complained that the Chinese were birds of passage who were eager to leave Australia, taking away the gold at the earliest possible moment. They complained that the Chinese were heathen. They were addicted to drugs – opium rather than alcohol – and were the supreme gamblers. Curiously, a version of all these complaints could have been directed against many of the British diggers on the goldfields. The Chinese were specially vulnerable because they were different and were easily identified. Moreover, they were here in disturbingly large numbers. In 1859 one in every nine men in Australia was Chinese.

According to the quotation, it is clear that the novel offers a historical account of the Chinese settlement in Australia. Derrida's concept of hospitality can be applied through the British reception of the Chinese. The hosted people are not warmly welcomed by their hosts. In addition, this foreword sets the record straight as to how the novel is going to be constructed. Shan's journal follows an explicit chronology by beginning in 1856 with Shan's account of his life in

Kwantung. A few months later, he embarks for Australia which he reaches on February 2, 1857. From then on, the chronology remains much less precise but the reader can still map out the course of Shan's journey: from Robe to Ballarat then Bendigo, where he arrives when the Chinese community there is protesting against the ข4 residence tax introduced in March 1859; his move to the Burrangong goldfield; Lambing Flat in July 1861 shortly after the anti-Chinese riots; his return to Ballarat, then Melbourne, and the journey back to Kwantung in 1863.

Shan's journey in Australia is described as an "odyssey" (Pons, 1990, p. 183). It is certainly an odyssey in the sense that this journey is a quest, not only for material gain but also for acceptance as a human being. On the way to Ballarat, Shan is constantly greeted by racist comments: "No gold! Go back to where you came from. Bloody parasites!" (p. 85). The prevalent atmosphere of hatred towards the Chinese is described in one of Shan's journals:

> If only you could see the misery that surrounds us. Men go to ruin, some because they have found gold, others because they have found none. Beneath the fabric of outward serenity, all social order has disappeared. No, there is no fighting in the streets yet, nor is there blatant drug-taking and whoring. But if you look beyond the smoke, if you cast your eyes about, if you lift up tent flaps, you will see the untrusting and untrustworthy faces of men… Are we all victims? Is this the dance of death amidst the holocaust? Is this the behaviour of ruined men, men who are under threat from within and without? (pp. 103-104)

Interestingly, Shan's choice of word seems to foreshadow an upcoming massacre of the Chinese migrants in the anti-Chinese riots. The holocaust is predicted and turns out to be true when "several Chinamen [are] beaten up in such a trivial dispute as water. They are accused of wasting water, of dirtying it, of ruining good ground" (p. 109). The Chinese migrants face hardships caused by the aridity of the foreign land and the hostility of the white people who refuse to recognize their existence:

> Last night, there was a raid on one of our camps in the gully. Twenty tents were burnt. Some men lost everything except the clothes they wore. The raiders came stealthily, leading their horses. They threw torches under the tents. Men who were asleep raced out from the inferno. Some tried in vain to save their belongings. There was confusion. The fires lit up the gully, flickering over the trees. Fire cleanses, too, rids them of their guilt, destroys diseases, the vermin of little yellow men. (p. 110)

In this passage, the fire is an important symbol that shows different cultural connotations. Fire in Buddhism is always compared to the inferno which literally signifies 'Hell' where bad people are punished after death. Chinese people are metaphorically living dead in Hell where they are not accepted as part of the Australian community nor are they protected by the authorities. Fire, on the contrary, in the biblical myth, connotes light and power. It is therefore seen as a tool by the white people to wipe out the Chinese race, perceived to be an illness. So, from the Eastern point of view, Hell is the place for wrongdoers to be punished. An important question is raised here: what do those Chinese migrants do to deserve such elimination? The answer is clearly given through Clancy's statement, worth quoting in length:

> 'You know,' he said. 'I've been studying you fellows. I've seen the way you work the ground, methodically, in organized groups. Now, that's something we can learn from you. You share out what you get among your relatives. It's a brotherhood, you understand. But you're here, not in your own country. You're sucking everything out and putting nothing back in. Now don't get me wrong. A lot of white men are the same. They'll get their gold and go home to England or Europe. You see, the problem with you is that you look different and your numbers are so great. You can't spread out and merge in. Yes, that's the basic difference.' (p. 116)

Clancy makes it clear that the only mistake that the Chinese migrants make

is to look different. They have the wrong skin colour and that is an enough justification for the whites to exclude them from their group. The ironic point of the novel is that Clancy, a gap-toothed Irish man, who seems to sympathize with the destiny of the Chinese people is later to become the leader of the anti-Chinese riots.

Eventually, as a way for Shan to find refuge for his non-belonging identity, he goes into the bush to "lose himself completely" (p. 152). In the narrator's description, the bush is similar to a labyrinth in which Shan wanders in precise circles, lacking direction. However, without direction, Shan finds "a guiding principle that he has unconsciously followed; and the principle has led him back to himself. He imagines seeing another survivor in the bush, another who is also himself, camping where he camped, eating what he ate" (p. 152). Unable to rely on the foreign society, Shan adopts self-renunciation and seclusion to rescue himself. He begins to head 'east' where his homeland is situated. Finally, he gets to Port Melbourne containing a vessel that will lead him back to China. His experiences in Australia, nevertheless, make him "conscious of the immense changes in himself" (p. 153). Shan is on a different path now, in control of his destiny, and he brings with him something of the void he has experienced in Australia, the silence and the stillness that help him to accept his microscopic role in the eternal recurrences of nature. The last episode of his journey brings both a sense of hope and defeat to the reader. Shan is back in China and has found the significance for which he has been searching: "the celebration of not searching and the wonder of the imagination" (p. 157). Shan's life may be fulfilled with self-seclusion yet it seems delusional to the reader when one's life relies entirely on pure imagination. The experiences of not belonging in Australia have affected Shan's identity in his homeland. The failure to reconcile with the Chinese society results in Shan's living in a dream. In the last sentence of the novel, Shan is "still waiting, and that a child waits for me" (p. 157). We may wonder for what or whom he is waiting and whether a child is waiting for him. Even though the reader is given a clue that the child in question is Seamus O'Young, born in a century apart, Shan is not blessed with such a definite answer.

O'Young's account, on the other hand, is more complicated. The reader is not told when he was born and none of his experiences are dated.

We are supplied with the only chronological information: “Suddenly I knew I was feeling exactly as Shan had felt one hundred and twenty years ago” (p. 107). This statement enables us to place him in the late 1970s and can lead to the interpretation that O’Young’s existence in modern Australia is as shattered and confusing as the way he is narrated. Born as an ABC, O’Young experiences a sense of alienation and fragmentation. His diverse journeys are similar to Shan’s in their quests. Whereas Shan seeks acceptance from his new society, O’Young seeks a place to belong in the only society with which he is familiar. As he is labeled a foreigner in his own land, O’Young’s sense of displacement grows larger. The narrow-minded Australian society puts him on trial for being disruptive to the racial hegemony. His cross-breeding is seen as a disease to the health of Australian society. For example, his Eurasian look is thought of as a form of physical abnormality. He is put in a special class designed for intellectually-challenged students despite his normal intelligence and he is also tested for English competence even though English is the only language he speaks. Therefore, his identity is constrained by the society. The only thing that gives him solace is the fragments of Shan’s journal. In his own narration, he states:

> Beside me I have the fragments of a journal. I found them a long time ago, stuck to my memory like the remnants of a dream. I have read and reread those words, translated and re-translated them, deciphering the strokes of the Chinese characters, building up their meaning, constructing and reconstructing their sense. I feel the closeness of the situation the author is describing. I feel I am the counterpart of this man who was writing more than a century ago. (pp. 4-5)

O’Young’s feelings of displacement are only made sense of through his identification with Shan. He shares Shan’s sense of alienation and both of their existence cherishes each other through the space of time. When he is in Shan’s world, his world becomes complete too. Uncertain of his true identity, O’Young derives strength from a spiritual relationship with his ancestor.

O’Young’s journeys, therefore, are both the crossing of space and the crossing of time. In his own narrative voice, he mentions his usual act of ‘running’ as the crossing of time:

> I do not know what it is that makes me run. Each day I run along the tracks criss-crossing the pine forests near the house. Nothing about the landscape is familiar to me. I cannot remember that I spent years of my childhood here. Everything has grown over, the past covered by a new skin. (p. 47)

His act of running signifies the ongoing search for his origin and his attempt to come to terms with his unknown past. He is an orphan of mixed race. His past is blurred, fragmented and he does not remember having a childhood in this specific landscape. The landscape appears foreign to him because it is not his to begin with. He is therefore still running between and straddling the white world and the Chinese world to find a suitable landscape in order to rest his spirit.

Furthermore, the crossing of space is not in any way easier for him. In many of Shan's border crossings, he is confined by the definition of his race that is imposed on him by the authority of those countries. When crossing the border into England, he is questioned for a long time by the customs officer about his race. Only when he surrenders to the concept of ABC, does the officer become satisfied. As he ponders, "entering countries, like entering life itself, is a painful thing" (p. 69).

Inevitably, O'Young's unclear past affects his present and future. His marriage to Fatima, a mixed Portuguese-Australian woman whom he meets on the train to Paris, confirms this obscurity. O'Young's conjugal life is cursed by his inability to communicate with her. He retreats further into a world of solitude and books. However, the worlds of books "have imprisoned and confused [him]' (p. 63). They are after all the books written in the language of the people who suppress him.

As for his future, O'Young puts it on a par with Shan's. Without Shan, he cannot exist as he describes:

> I begin to wonder if Shan were my reason for being. Was he creating me out of this silence, so that, deprived of his voice, I could discover my own? (p. 65)

His identity becomes validated when his communication with Shan takes

place. The communication across the chasm of time is a means to bring O'Young back to the beginning: the discovery of his own voice and his own self. By preparing O'Young to the transition of the discovery, Castro establishes a lifeline for him which would eventually bring salvation. As O'Young asks of Shan, "hasn't your journey then been in effect of a translation of yourself and a transition for me?" (p. 62). O'Young's ability to identify with Shan, helps him achieve a transition between a life of anguish and frustration and a new life which holds at least a promise of fulfillment.

At the end of the novel, O'Young and Shan have a symbolic meeting through "the wind and the banshee". After the meeting, O'Young has a moment of epiphany in which he is "released from that other self. He is blubbering and crying and laughing. (p. 155)" He has found himself and, therefore, does not need to rely on Shan any longer. Now he is at liberty to pursue his individual destiny. Again, this may carry a glimpse of hope to the character as he is a 'reborn' person. However, to us the reader, a sense of defeat can still be traced as O'Young is reborn in the same place that does not accept his alien identity. His rebirth also comes with a sacrifice of his Chinese identity, symbolized through the abolished tie from Shan. He has no family to wait for and is not waited for by anyone either. O'Young's life comes in full circle, that is, there is no clear beginning and nor is there any clear end.

Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and vertigo*: No Place Called Home

> The immigrant child has the advantage or the burden of knowing what other children may more easily forget: a child, any child, necessarily lives in his own time, his own room. The child cannot have a life identical with that of his mother or father. For the immigrant child this knowledge is inescapable.
>
> (Richard Rodriguez, an American writer)

Love and vertigo by Hsu-Ming Teo explores a slightly different kind of experience: the experiences of a Chinese migrant family and its second -generation children. The book powerfully depicts a failure to belong, to find a true home for the narrator and the narrator's mother, whose act of suicide

opens the narrative. The inability of the characters to embrace a complete sense of being-at-home is a consequence of the ambivalent hospitality inscribed within the social formation of Chinese Australian experience.

The novel begins with the story of Grace Tay who flies to Singapore to join her father and brother on the eve of her mother's wake. Here in Singapore, she explores her family history, looking for the answers to her mother's death and finding her identity and a place to belong. *Love and Vertigo* gives a contrasting picture of two different generations of Australian -Chinese: the recent immigrant and the second generation, each of whom is divided by not only the generation gap but also the gap of traditions. Those from the Chinese world in which patriarchal traditions play a crucial role in women's lives find it hard to understand their children whose world is shaped by the Western values, education and freedom. Vice versa, the second generation or the ABC cannot understand their parents because of such a cultural demarcation. The inability to cross-communicate roots from what Samuel Huntington has termed "the clash of civilization."

For the close analysis of the book, it is crucial to pay our attention to the two main characters, Grace Tay and her mother Pandora, as the two female characters depict the immigrants' dilemmas caused by the clash of civilization in a different manner. I shall start with Grace Tay and her dilemma of a second generation: the dilemma of "a banana", as widely used by Anglo-Chinese writers such as Amy Tan and Hwee Hwee Tan. The notion of a banana signifies the yellow façade with the white flesh within. It applies mostly to the second generation of American-born Chinese and British-born Chinese who are Oriental only in their physical look but totally Occidental in their behaviour. In this Australian context, Grace Tay can also be labeled as a banana. At the beginning of the novel, Grace Tay, the protagonist and the narrator, recalls her first experience in Singapore as a child and she describes it as:

> I think of the one and only time, when I was fourteen, Sonny and I had been forced to come to Singapore with Mum. She brought us to visit the relatives and they took us to the Rasa Singapura hawker centre so that we could have satay, Hainanese chicken rice, Singaporean Hokkien

> noodles, tah mee, laksa, gado gado, rojak. This was my mother's comfort food. She wanted to share it with me, but I complained about the noise, the smells, the disgusting charnel house of the table where the previous diners had spat out pork ribs and spewed chewed chicken bones all over the surface. (p. 2)

From the passage, the clash of civilization occurs when the narrator finds herself alienated from the culture of her own mother. The local food which makes up her mother's identity and comfort is rejected by the narrator. She is disgusted with the way Chinese people eat and spit out their food because her table manners are set by the Western standard. As she continues telling about her experience, her complaints shift to her mother:

> I was baffled that my mother could belong to these people. For the first time in my life I saw my mother in relation to her family and I did not recognise her anymore. Her carefully maintained English disintegrated and she lapsed into the local Singlish patois, her vocabulary a mélange of English, Malay and Chinese; her syntax abbreviated, chopped and wrenched into discerning unfamiliarity. (pp. 2-3)

Evidently, her mother in the Singaporean context is a stranger to the narrator. Her mother's real identity which has never been revealed has now come out in the open as manifested through the way she speaks. The language in this context is very interesting for us to look into. According to Kachru (1987), a well-known Indian linguist, "language is identity" (p. 97). Singlish, an English dialect spoken widely in Singapore, is therefore a representative of the shared culture and identity of a particular group of people. Hwee Hwee Tan, a Singaporean writer and an Oxford graduate, also claims that "Singlish is a key ingredient in the unique melting pot that makes up Singapore. Singlish is inventive, witty and colourful. It is also the language of our roots as it was first spoken by the uncultured immigrants who built Singapore to be what it is now. Hence, Singlish stands for so much more than a language. It is the culture, the history and identity of the Singaporeans" (p. 65). From this assertion, it goes without saying that outsiders who are not part of this culture, the narrator included, certainly see the dialect as a cultural burden to the

understanding of the speakers. Once her mother resumes her old identity and language, Grace becomes merely an observer to the connection between her mother and her people because she, as an Australian, does not have any place in it. Therefore, she comes to reject her Singaporean side when she states:

> These Singaporean roots of hers, this side of her-and possibly of me too-were unacceptable. I looked for difference and sought superior disgust as an automatic response. I realise now that I had gone to Singapore with the attitude of a nineteenth-century memsahib. I was determined not to belong, not to fit in, because I was Australian, and Mum ought to be Australian too. (p. 3)

The second generation can never really 'return' to the country of their parents. The fact that her blood is Singaporean is not able to bridge the 'chasm of time' that separates her mother's departure from their point of return to Singapore. She can only identify with her Australian side as it also connotes superiority. The irony lies in the fact that because of her Australianness, she feels superior to other Singaporeans but back in Australia, she is after all inferior to the whites.

As the narration reveals, Grace Tay's rejection of her Chinese/Singaporean identity stems from two reasons. First of all, she is not accepted by her classmates at school because of her Chinese look. Her Chinese name is Pui Fun Tay but she prefers to be called Grace. This preference can be read symbolically. In adopting an English name, she prefers to be seen as a mainstream Australian, rather than an ethnic minority. She hates her Chinese name because that shows the difference between her and others as well as her not belonging to the group. Grace is also aware of her race which is considered to be inferior and she acts humbly in front of her white classmates in order to be accepted. The interaction between her and her friend, Niree is a good example. She willingly assumes the role of a servant to a queen bee. In an elastics game, Niree orders her to hold up the elastics and she "walks over and changes place with her so that she doesn't have to hold up the elastic anymore. I shift the elastic band until it is at my ankles, the line biting into my white cotton socks. Niree starts jumping and skipping and hopping" (p. 165). Her desperate wish to belong to the white society lingers but

is always left unfulfilled. All her life, she seeks acceptance from people around her. Her brother, Sonny, with whom she thinks she could identify does not want her near him at school because he too wants to "fit in with the Aussie kids" (p. 177). He is ashamed of her because he is ashamed of himself too. They both realise that they are different and fade gradually into becoming invisible. Therefore, the difficulty to belong in the white community becomes the dilemma that always perpetuates in the second generation's mentality.

In addition, Grace Tay (as well as her brother Sonny) is caught between the two traditional worlds in which she straddles. The Western world that her white friends live seems liberal and easy-going whereas the world in which she is brought up is strict and inflexible. Jonah represents the Chinese world which Grace and her brother have tried to eliminate. As Grace describes, "we were not filial, obedient, slipper-fetching children the Patriarch had expected. When he compared our attitude towards him with his own respect towards his parents, he was simply bewildered" (p. 234). Traditionally, according to the narrator, "a Chinese child is obliged to study hard, do well in exams, and accompany his/her parents everywhere" (p. 235). Grace fails to be that kind of daughter and chooses to turn her back on the Chinese traditions. However, she has nowhere to go forward either as the white world which she has tried to embrace is not willing to take her in.

Pandora, Grace's mother, on the other hand, comes to Australia after she marries Jonah, also called the Patriarch. Pandora was born into a Malaysian-Chinese family that already has five daughters. It is universally known that a Chinese family does not welcome the birth of a daughter. Pandora, therefore, is not wanted by her mother. She is given to an aunt who later has her own son and gives her back to her mother. Pandora is treated like an object of exchange since her birth. All her life, she yearns for love and attention from her mother. Pandora grows up in a patriarchal world where she and other women hold a marginalised place in the society. Women are unarguably expected to be a filial daughter, obedient wife and devoted mother. After she gets married with Jonah, Pandora's duty is directed towards taking care of Jonah's mother. Pandora's free spirit is confined by the Chinese traditions so she asks her husband to move to Australia. In Australia, she hopes to find a new 'home' where she can be herself and does what she wants. She adopts

Christianity and goes to church regularly. However, Pandora never fits in the church community, a microcosm for the Australian society. She always faces questions about her place of origin:

"Where do you come from?

"Burwood," she said.

"No, I mean, where do you really come from? Originally? (p. 217) The question 'Where are you from?' implies the sense of otherness. Pandora is seen as a stranger or a guest who only visits temporarily. The sense of permanence is not expected through such a question.

In addition, although she finds herself in the new environment, her husband still expects her to fulfill her role as a Chinese wife. Whereas she enjoys the scenery and the freedom that the Australian landscape offers, she remains imprisoned and oppressed within the domestic sphere. She longs for the same freedom and social equality that other white women possess. Suffocating within the domestic sphere, she turns to shopping as a solution to her lack of freedom. Her spending money is a way to liberate herself because at least, she has authority over it. Her frustration is fuelled when Sonny moves out of the house because he does not get along with Jonah. As a consequence, she starts to act rebelliously by neglecting her housewifely duty. She does not clean the house or cook food. She also refuses to sleep with her husband. Instead, she starts an illicit affair with a white priest to fulfill her sexual need and also to gain protection. The affair with the religious figure can be read as Pandora's assertion of her existence into the realm of the Western belief and value. Her hope to abandon her husband and run away with him suggests her wish to leave the Chinese world behind and fully embrace the white world. However, the hope shatters when the priest refuses to show up. Similarly, the white world is reluctant to recognise the existence of others.

As the story reaches the end, Pandora develops full blindness after she returns to Singapore. The blindness can be interpreted in different ways. It can be read as Pandora's retreat into her own world in which her existence does not rely on anything else except her own spirit. In this light, she is free from all the social obligations and has the power to control her own life. She does choose to commit suicide at the end. On the other hand, her blindness is caused by her inability to adapt to her old life in Singapore. Both

Singapore and Pandora have tremendously changed and therefore, Singapore is no longer the familiar place for her and vice versa. As Grace wonders while she is walking on a street in Singapore, "when she returned, did she gaze uncomprehendingly around her and realise that this was no longer her home?" (p. 3).

Hence, Pandora's dilemma is that of an immigrant who is not allowed to assimilate fully into the new world by her old world (represented by Jonah). In addition, the new world is also reluctant to welcome her into its sphere. When she decides to return to the old world/home, she no longer fits there because the chasm of time and space has influenced her way of looking at it. The 'home' therefore becomes an unfamiliar place. The assertion is well-illustrated at the end of the novel when Grace arrives in Singapore and tries to follow her mother's life path by visiting the places of her mother's childhood. The passage is worth quoting in length:

> I know that on the day before she died, Mum had been found wandering along Serangoon road. This was why she had come back to Singapore. She wanted to come back to where it had all begun. To trace the moment when she could have made another choice and life would have been completely different. She had been looking for her childhood home—the terrace shophouse with the cracked cement courtyard—but had given the taxi driver the wrong street address. Actually, there was no right address. The entire neighborhood in which she had grown up had been bought by the government in the early 1980s and bulldozed. Whole streets and narrow lanes were eradicated to make way for brightly lit, air-conditioned, neon-signed shopping centres. Exasperated by her increasing incoherence and distress, the taxi eventually dumped her near Dhoby Ghaut. Lost in the city she'd always considered her 'real' home, her white walking stick tapping wildly in front of her. (p. 275)

Grace comes to identify with her mother, like O'Young and Seamus in the other novel, through this very walk. As she smells the pungent air of foreignness in Singapore, she wonders if her mother has felt the same. She doubts if her

mother wishes she were back in Sydney, "where she could at least orientate herself with ease" (p. 275). The most important question that Grace asks is "Did she finally realize that, whatever she might now be, she was no longer Singaporean?" (p. 276). The reader then has to ask as well what they actually are: Singaporean, Australian or neither?

Pandora, in her death, "reeks of bitter violence and disappointed dreams" (p. 279). As the narrator puts it, there are no real answers to her mother's death or to her own life. Grace Tay is still looking for the reasons and answers that will somehow "never satisfy" (p. 280). Her feelings as an alien intruder on Singapore and Australia will continue to linger because she has not found her 'real' home. She leaves Singapore behind and "will not be coming back" (p. 280).

Love and vertigo, in a larger extent, complicates the 'turn to Asia' thesis in a way that Australian-Asians are reluctantly integrated into modern Australian culture, but what the two novels are trying to point out is that the integration is not necessarily in the ways that white Australians might imagine it to be. Asian-Australians are somewhat the product of nationalistic social formations of both Australia and their country of origin and therefore, they are fully integrated into neither Australian nor a greater Chinese culture. As a consequence, there is no place that they can truly call home. The 'home' is still waiting to be found.

Conclusion

Australian national identity is an idea that has been constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed. There have been various attempts from the government to come up with the common, shared values that all the Australians can identify with. Certain popular figures, places and activities were drawn together in the early national history to create a sense of Australianness and a sense of nationalism. However, as the country progresses, Australia is forced to recognise the 'other' that has long been present on the Australian soil and to embrace the ideology of diversity: multiculturalism and multiracialism. In theory, the multicultural Australia seems like a perfect idea for the nature of 'melting pot' countries. In reality, it divides ethnic people into segregation and isolation. Derrida's theory of hospitality is applicable to the modern

situation in Australia that plays the role of a reluctant host to different ethnic groups that have come to the nation in search of refuge. The hospitality, in this sense, can be withheld anytime.

Due to the controversial nature of the concept of national identity, it is not surprising that it has become the subject around which national literature has revolved. Literary works have always been a tool to inform, to celebrate, and to cast doubt on the concept of national identity. They are the intermediary that connects the writers' ideas and opinions to the government and the public at large. Australian-Chinese writers such as Brian Castro and Hsu-Ming Teo explore the concept of national identity through the forgotten voice of their people. Their peripheral place in the Australian society, their experiences as immigrants and ABCs and their dilemma and everyday battle are raised in their literary works as a way to plead for compassion, sympathy and above all, acceptance from the country that they call 'home'.

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