

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's "Self-Orientalism" Writing in *Mr Tang's Girls*

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Abstract

In *Mr Tang's Girls*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim portrayed a typical Chinese father Mr. Tang, and ended up with the eldest daughter, Kim Li, who was influenced by western thoughts and killed him in order to fight for independence and freedom, showcasing the family tragedy caused by cultural conflicts. In her characterization, Shirley Geok-lin Lim displayed both explicit and implicit "Self-Orientalism" writing, which was reflected in her explicit portrayal of Mr. Tang as an oriental man with authoritarian character and weakened masculinity, and implicitly in Kim Li's image who was willing to take extreme actions in pursuit of freedom and independence. From the perspective of "Orientalism", this article analyzes the characters of Mr. Tang and Kim Li, and discusses the reasons for the tendency of "Self-Orientalism" writing in this work from the aspects of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's self-awakening and educational background, diasporic experiences and reader market.

Keywords

Shirley Geok-lin Lim; *Mr Tang's Girls*; Orientalism; Self-Orientalism.

1. Introduction

Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1944-), a Malaysian-American Chinese, is a poet, novelist, biographer, and critic who has a significant presence in Asian American literature. Her first collection of poems, *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* (1980) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1989) and *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (1996) gained the National Book Award. She is also the author of a novel, *Joss and Gold* (2021), and a collection of short stories, *Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories* (1997). The short story *Mr Tang's Girls* (1997) is from *Two Dreams*, which is set in Malaysia. The short story focuses on the relationship between Mr. Tang, a successful mine owner of Chinese descent, and his second wife and four daughters, as well as the family tragedy that arises from the conflict between the eldest daughter, Kim Li, and her father, Mr Tang.

Previous studies of *Mr Tang's Girls* have discussed the construction of female subjectivity from a feminist perspective and the impact of patriarchal society on the protagonist's identity construction, focusing on the critique of Chinese-American patriarchy [1, 2, 3]. Other scholars have also paid attention to the cultural differences highlighted behind the conflict between Mr. Tang and his daughters, exploring the collision between Eastern and Western cultures [4, 5]. The above studies are generally centered on the dimensions of patriarchy and female resistance and female subjectivity construction. Although some studies have mentioned the East-West cultural conflict in *Mr Tang's Girls*, they mostly focus on the main character Kim Li's resistance to the eastern patriarchy in the work, without paying attention to the author's creation tendency. In *Mr Tang's Girls*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim has explicit and implicit "Self-Orientalism" writing. Her image of Mr. Tang as authoritarian and lacking in masculinity is very much in line with the

Eastern male in the eyes of Westerners. In addition, the portrayal of the daughters, represented by the eldest daughter Kim Li, although intends to against Orientalism and to subvert the Western stereotypes of Eastern women, cannot help but fall into “Self-Orientalism”. Therefore, this article will concentrate on the text of *Mr Tang’s Girls* and delve into Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s depiction of Mr. Tang and Kim Li to uncover her “Self-Orientalism” writing in this work. Furthermore, it endeavors to explore the reasons behind this phenomenon and to discuss the practical significance.

In 1978, the publication of Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism* ushered in postcolonial studies. Said pointed out that the definitions of “East” and “West” were artificially constructed. In his view, “Orientalism is a mechanism for dealing with the Orient by describing, teaching, colonizing, and dominating it; in short, seeing Orientalism as a way that the West uses to control, reconstruct, and monarch the Orient”[6]. Thus, Orientalism is a Western perception of the East that dichotomizes the Eastern and Western worlds, creating an image of a progressive, civilized, and democratic West and a backward, barbaric, and authoritarian East.

However, the West’s construction of the East is not unidirectional, and many Orientals have also participated in the construction of the “East”. In his discussion of “Orientalism”, Said has already noted this phenomenon. Nevzat Soguk[7] refers to this phenomenon as the “Orientalized Orientals”. He pointed out that while resistance to various practices of orientalizations occurred in various fields, some non-Western subjects consciously or unconsciously design conscious images in accordance with Western assumptions and expectations. Arif Dirlik[8] argued that the “Oriental” was not a silent and passive object, but participated in the emergence of Orientalism as a dynamic agent, and that Asians came into contact with Europeans and were influenced by each other’s ideas to produce a Europeanized self-perception. Dirlik called this tendency in the Eastern world “Self-Orientalism”. Ethnic writers, with multicultural identities and transnational experiences, have become, to a certain extent, a force for participating in “Self-Orientalism” in the face of the influence of Western cultural hegemony. Gao defines “Self-Orientalism” in ethnic Chinese literature as follows. “Self-Orientalism” is an extended understanding of Edward Said’s “Orientalism”, primarily referring to writers with Eastern cultural identities who imagine and create themselves in the manner that the West imagines them. They affirm and confirm their own identity through the differences or disparities between their own and Western cultures, engaging in “self-representation” in cross-cultural creation. While this “self-representation” often coincides with the stereotypes or fixed images through which the West discourses the East, forming a “collusive relationship” with Western tastes[9]. Ethnic writers’ imagination and reproduction of their homeland in their work is not only a look back to the culture of their homeland, but also a kind of image self-shaping. From this perspective, it is instructive to explore the East-West dichotomy presented by Shirley Geok-lin Lim through her characterization in *Mr Tang’s Girls*.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Explicit “Self-Orientalism”: The “Other” Image of Eastern Men

Said points out that in Orientalism discourse, the East is imagined and constructed by the West, an “Other” that conforms to Western expectations and exists for the West. Despotism, sexuality, mystery, seduction, cruelty, and backwardness are the words most used to describe the Orient. In *Mr Tang’s Girls*, the image of Mr. Tang written by Shirley Geok-lin Lim is negative, especially highlighting his patriarchal authoritarianism and weakened masculinity. Her negative portrayal of Mr. Tang deepens the Western stereotype of Eastern men.

2.1.1. Despotism—Chinese Patriarchy

Ah Kong(Mr. Tang) in *Mr Tang’s Girls*, a Chinese descendant and successful mine owner, adhered to Chinese traditions despite living in Malaysia. Mr. Tang had two wives. Every

Saturday, he came from Kuala Lumpur to his second wife. At home, Mr. Tang was the authority, bringing financial support to his second wife and daughters, as well as controlling them. For example, when he arrived at the house, everyone had to stay at home and surround him in the role of daughters. "Their suppressed giggles, lazy talk, muted movements, and uncertain sights constituted his sense of home"[10]. If the girls wanted to buy new clothes, they had to flatter him to open his wallet. Every Saturday night, he would patrol every room while his wife and daughters slept, as if he were patrolling his own property. He enjoyed the feeling of authority, of control, of ennui. So much so that it was the reason Mr. Tang would be outraged when Kim Li refused to flatter him and showed defiance over her new clothes, and why he was disgusted when he saw his daughters exhibiting adult female behaviors such as painting their fingernails, spraying their hair with hairspray and perfume. He felt that his daughters were growing up, gradually escaping his control, and that his authority was being provoked. Therefore, Mr. Tang quickly organized an arranged marriage for Kim Li with a Chinese-born, Chinese-educated man like him, as a way to gain control over his daughters. However, the arranged marriage triggered the opposition of the daughters who were influenced by Western ideas, "This wasn't China"[10], and the other daughters sympathized with Kim Li's plight. In the eyes of the daughters, Mr. Tang was the "Other" because of his feudal and authoritarian Eastern patriarchy.

At the same time, under the patriarchal system, women are only subordinate to men and do not have their own thoughts and personalities. In *Mr Tang's Girls*, the image of the second wife was the traditional image of women under patriarchy. The second wife was absolutely submissive to Mr. Tang, even going so far as to give up her religious beliefs. She was originally a Christian, but gave up her religion because marrying Mr. Tang as the second wife violated the Christian doctrine of monogamy. In the eyes of the church, "She's a stray lamb"[10], and her parishioners stopped visiting her. In Malaysian society, which was dominated by Western ideas at that time, Mr. Tang, who practiced polygamy, was regarded as a pagan and was feudal and backward. Thus, he was also the "Other" in Malaysian society.

2.1.2. Feminization—weakening masculinity

In his book *Masculinity*, Sui posits that the academic concept of "masculinity" encompasses not only the gendered qualities, modes of speech, and physical characteristics of men but also extends to include "male gender roles, gender norms, power structures, ethical morals, and aspects of personality, which are deeply ingrained in social and cultural contexts, as well as political economies. Moreover, it is intimately connected to national imagery, ethnic identity, racial consciousness, and class status"[11]. From a racial perspective, the justification and construction of white masculinity in Western society has often been based on the devaluation, denial, deprivation, and suppression of the masculinity of people of color. As Kimmel puts it, "All along in the United States, the masculinity of native-born Protestant men was built on the dehumanizing devaluation of other men's masculinities—black men, Jewish men, gay men, and other non-white immigrants. These men were either hypermasculinized (savages, cunning, gluttonous) or demasculinized (effeminate, dependent, weak)"[12]. In *Mr Tang's Girls*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim also weakened Mr. Tang's masculinity in order to appeal to the mainstream Western stereotypes of Eastern males.

Although Mr. Tang was a successful Chinese mine owner who was shrewd and capable, he mostly presented the image of a silent, weak and feeble male who was dependent on women and lacked masculinity. First, although Mr. Tang controlled the family financially, he was completely dependent on women mentally. Spending time with his second wife and daughters allowed him to regain his strength, "the movements of women through the rooms returned him a masculine vitality. Their gaiety aroused him to strength..."[10]. Other than that, he spent most of his time silent, sleeping or napping. "Sleeping through the morning, drowsing in the lounge-chair through the afternoons, and sitting somnolent through tea and dinner hours"[10], "He had again slipped into silence, drowsing along with the buzz of feminine discussion"[10]. What's

more, he was also silent and coldly violent in the face of Kim Li's rebellion against the arranged marriage, "he turned his eyes away from her and stayed in his room all night"[10]. In the face of his daughters' growth and independence, they were gradually escaping from his control, and Mr. Tang felt helpless and powerless, believing that "the shelter he had built for eighteen years was splintered by the very girls he supported"[10]. Therefore, he attempted to control his daughters by organizing an arranged marriage for Kim Li. In Shirley Geok-lin Lim's portrayal, Mr. Tang embodies silence, weakness, and inarticulateness, which aligns with the Western mainstream's feminized perception of Eastern men. Although some of them are shrewd and capable, they are by nature lacking in masculinity. The construction of this character reinforces the stereotype of Eastern men in the West, catering to the dominant Western cognition of Eastern masculinity.

2.2. Implicit "Self-Orientalism": The Western Reflection of the New Eastern Women Image

If the portrayal of Mr. Tang and his second wife caters to Orientalism, the portrayal of the daughters represents Lim's attempt to counter Orientalism, especially the most prominent portrayal of the eldest daughter, Kim Li. With the gradual awakening of women's consciousness and the influence of Western thought, Kim Li's conflict with the Chinese patriarchy intensified, and she ultimately fought for independence and freedom without hesitating to kill Mr. Tang. The image of Kim Li is not only a subversion of the passive and submissive oriental woman in the Orientalist perspective, but also a profound critique of patriarchy. However, Shirley Geok-lin Lim's portrayal of Kim Li expresses both an intent to counter Orientalism and a tendency to "Self-Orientalism".

2.2.1. Attempts to counter Orientalism

Looking back at the history of Malaysia's colonization, Malaysia has been subjected to the invasion and rule of Portugal, Holland, Britain and Japan, among which it was subjected to British rule over Malaysia for 120 years. Colonialism brought both "pain and humiliation" and "free thinking, national consciousness and high-tech goods" to the people of the Third World[13]. *Mr Tang's Girls* was set in a multicultural Malaysian society, and therefore, Western culture inevitably influenced the family. For example, the family's eating habits were heavily influenced by the West. Mr. Tang bought Western specialties such as ham and cheese from Kuala Lumpur every Saturday. Furthermore, Kim Bee had a Bible on her bedside, and Kim Mee glued posters of the British singer The Beatles on the wall of her room. At the same time, the daughters read western magazines such as *Her World* and *Seventeen*, which promoted women's enlightenment and emancipation. It is evident that the Tang family is westernized in their daily diet and life, and the younger generation recognizes the popular Western aesthetics and is deeply influenced by Western culture and thought.

As Kim Li grew up and under the influence of Western ideas, her sense of femininity awakened, and she dared to rebel against patriarchal constraints in pursuit of independence and freedom. Saturday afternoon tea time was the time when the daughters asked Mr. Tang for dresses, gifts, and other favorite things; the other daughters were trying to please him, while Kim Li stayed "away from the table, not eating or drinking, kicking her long legs rhythmically throughout the meal"[10]. When Mr. Tang refused to buy new clothes for the girls, Kim Li retorted in a provocative tone, "Ah Kong, your daughters are becoming women"[10], which undoubtedly challenges Mr. Tang's authority and triggered his violent anger. But Kim Li, undaunted, hummed and returned to her room at ease with a triumphant smile. However, it was because of the provocation of Mr. Tang's authority that he, in a rage, decided to punish her. He arranged an arranged marriage for Kim Li in and attempted to bind her behavior with the feudal tradition of marriage. At first, she felt very excited, thinking that she could finally get rid of her repressive family. However, when she learned that she couldn't see her husband before marriage, and when

she realized that she was the one being restrained, she showed great dissatisfaction and defiance, stating that she must have a date with her husband before marriage. It can be seen that Kim Li wanted to build her marriage in a western way, pursuing freedom of love and marriage. After fruitless communication, she rebelled by putting on heavy makeup and wearing revealing clothes, but also failed to succeed. In the end, she fought for independence and freedom through the extreme form of patricide.

The portrayal of Kim Li challenges the Western stereotypes of Eastern women. She is no longer the weakling waiting for redemption, but the strong one who possesses the ability to change the status quo. Kim Li's rebellious behavior, though extreme and undesirable, profoundly reveals the despair and resistance of individuals under patriarchal and cultural oppression.

2.2.2. The New Eastern Women in the Western Mirror

However, the characterization of Kim Li is not only an attempt to counteract Orientalism but also reflects the Western perspective and values Shirley Geok-lin Lim holds when shaping the image of new Eastern women. Compared with Mr. Tang's second wife, an oriental traditional woman, the daughters represented by Kim Li are gradually awakening to women's consciousness under the influence of western ideas, no longer remaining passive and silent. This subtly suggests Shirley Geok-lin Lim's comparison between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of their role in promoting Eastern women's awakening.

At the end of *Mr Tang's Girls*, Kim Li adopted the extreme way of "patricide" to completely get rid of the shackles of patriarchal power is also worth thinking about. In the Eastern society of Malaysia, where Mr. Tang has been trying to build up a filial family for 18 years, how can the conflict between father and daughter lead to "patricide"? This can be regarded as both an exaggeration of the East-West cultural conflict and a catering to the theme of "patricide" in Western literature. In the field of literature, Chen[14] points out that the theme of "patricide" has a long history in Western literature. Since the appearance of the ancient Greek myth and legend The Tale of Oedipus, Western literature has been retelling the story of human "patricide". Compared to China and even the whole East, "patricide" is rarely seen, and Eastern literature mostly presents the ethical family affection of parents' kindness and children's filial piety. Liu also points that, "Westerners rebel against patriarchal authority ultimately to satisfy their own desires and realize their own value, definitely not for the sake of morality, justice, righteousness, or the sake of the whole situation to benefit the world, but rather self-centeredness in every aspect, and take the other as the object of conquest"[15]. In *Mr Tang's Girls*, Kim Li's pursuit of personal independence and freedom and her disregard for ethics and morality in committing "patricide" is, to a certain extent, Shirley Geok-lin Lim's response to this theme in Western literature and the extreme expression of the pursuit of individual freedom and resistance to authority in Western culture. The portrayal of the Kim Li not only maps out Shirley Geok-lin Lim's comparison of Eastern and Western cultures, but also reveals her implicit tendency of "Self-Orientalism" in the work.

2.3. Analysis of the reasons for "Self-Orientalism"

In *Mr Tang's Girls*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim creates a family environment full of tension between Eastern and Western cultures. The portrayal of Mr. Tang, from an Orientalism perspective, is not only a reification of the "Other" image of Eastern men but also serves as a foil to highlight Kim Li's defiance of patriarchy and her pursuit of independence and freedom as a new Eastern woman. Shirley Geok-lin Lim's portrayal of Kim Li, although intends to challenge Western stereotypes of Eastern women, cannot fully escape the framework of Orientalism, and her depiction inevitably reflects her deep influence by Western perspectives and values. As for the reason, the "Self-Orientalism" writing is directly related to Lim's self-awakening and educational background, diasporic experiences, and considerations for her target readership market.

2.3.1. Self-awakening and Educational experiences

Shirley Geok-lin Lim was born in 1944 in British colonial Malaysia. As the only girl in her family, she experienced exclusion by her brothers, leading her to behave like a boy, engaging in activities such as “running fast, jumping from high walls, cycling at full speed, or not returning home until late” [16], which can be seen as Lim’s childhood resistance to gender discrimination. Entering adolescence, like other girls, she yearned for sexuality and relationships. After her relationship with Ikbao, she realized that she was confined to the role of a housewife, unable to escape the traditional female roles set by Eastern society. The constraints and suppression of women in Eastern culture made her feel oppressed and resistant; she believed that “...the local family, gender culture tries to use brute force to mold everyone into the same pattern. I strive to find the corrupting power to shatter the hard shell of being Chinese and a daughter” [16]. In her view, by utilizing the corrupting power of Western culture, she could break free from the discrimination and oppression of women in Eastern society. In addition, English education has had a profound impact on her. During the early period of British colonial rule in Malaysia, English was mainly disseminated among the Malaysian nobility and elite to cultivate local elites to serve colonial rule. In the middle and later periods of British colonization, in order to expand their rule, strengthen the dominant position of English, export cultural values and spread Christian beliefs, the British rulers implemented cultural hegemony in Malaysia and promoted English education. Shirley Geok-lin Lim began her English education at the age of six. She not only became proficient and proud in using English for communication but also earned an English undergraduate degree from the University of Malaya. Leveraging her English proficiency, she went to the United States, where she obtained a Ph.D. in English and American literature. She chose to write in English, which became a significant part of her identity and career. Language is the carrier of culture; through the medium of English, Lim not only gained the key to access and reach the West but also unconsciously internalized Western values and stereotypes about Eastern culture.

2.3.2. Diasporic experiences

In *Mr Tang’s Girls*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s “Self-Orientalism” is intricately linked to her diasporic experiences. Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s short story collection, *Two Dreams*, was written from 1969 to 1996. This period began after she left Malaysia for the United States in 1969, following the 13 May Incident, which left her with a profound sense of despair. In 1957, Malaysia declared independence. Through her works, Shirley Geok-lin Lim articulated her vision for a harmonious Malaysia. She expressed the aspiration for a unified Malaysian identity that transcended the divisions of Malay, Chinese, and Indian, envisioning a future where all would be part of a single nation—the “Malaysian nation” [17]. However, the racial unrest of the 13 May Incident in 1969 shattered her expectations. After the 13 May Incident, Malay nationalism was further entrenched within the national ideology, solidifying the centrality of Malay culture and political legacy. These measures significantly impacted the Malaysian Chinese community, exacerbating existing tensions and challenges. For her, the shift in Malaysian language policy at the time actually changed her world forever. She was unsure if she was still part of the society, and she gradually found herself became a cultural exile. After the 13 May Incident, Lim left Malaysia for the United States in an attempt to gain a new belonging, and acquired American citizenship in 1980. The change of nationality is not only a change of political identity, but also a change of cultural identity. As an Asian, she had to work very hard to integrate into American society. In the face of mistrust from students and ostracism from colleagues, she worked hard to build relationships with students through after-school tutoring. In the face of discrimination against Asians in the white community, she joined community committees and organized community activities to actively integrate into the community and “westernize” herself. By the time she wrote *Mr Tang’s Girls*, Lim has been a U.S. citizen and her work is a look back at her homeland from a Western perspective. Shirley Geok-lin Lim not only integrated into the American

environment in her life, but also was inevitably influenced by the American mainstream culture in terms of her ideology and value system, and these influences permeated the creation of *Mr Tang's Girls*.

2.3.3. Consideration of the reader's market

The "Self-Orientalism" writing in *Mr Tang's Girls* is also motivated by commercial publishing and catering to the consumer psychology of the target readers. Chinese writer Kao[18] pointed out that the development of Chinese literature in the United States was more concerned with the Chinese culture in the writers' works than with their linguistic ability and writing skills. She also pointed out that the splendid Chinese cultural traditions presented in literary works were far less likely to attract the attention and interest of American readers than various bad habits. In other words, because their works cater to the curiosity and consumption psychology of Western readers, thus gaining the Western market. In Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Mr Tang's Girls*, the portrayal of the East includes the negative image of the Eastern Chinese father, the highlighting of the backwardness and corruption of Oriental culture, and the ending with the clash of East and West cultures, Kim Li's patricide, and the awakening of the fettered women through Western thought. It is not difficult to see that these elements serve to cater to the expectations and market demands of Western readers.

3. Conclusion

Mr Tang's Girls is Shirley Geok-lin Lim's look back at her homeland as a Westerner, and her negative image of the Orient as backward, authoritarian and corrupt, such as patriarchal despotism and arranged marriage, caters to Western expectations and deepens Western stereotypes of the Orient. At the same time, the portrayal of Kim Li, although subverting the stereotypical image of Oriental women in the West, cannot help but fall into "Orientalism" in the attempt to counter Orientalism.

In the writing of ethnic writers, "Self-Orientalism" is a noteworthy tendency. Ethnic writers not only carry the emotions and memories of their own cultures, but also, because of the reality of being in a Western society, they are always subjected to the impact of Western culture and values. Perhaps in their pursuit of recognition and acceptance by Western readers, they may unconsciously distort or exaggerate their own culture to meet the Western world's imagination and expectations of the "East", but this tendency is not entirely out of their subjective will, but is a complex phenomenon arising from the background of multicultural collision and integration. "Self-Orientalism" writing not only reflects the efforts of ethnic writers to seek recognition and voice in the cultural gap, but also reveals the stereotypes and misunderstandings that are prone to appear in cultural exchanges. With the deepening development of globalization and the increasingly frequent exchanges among different civilizations, the question of how to get along with multiple civilizations is also a problem that mankind has been facing. Meanwhile, as readers, when reading literary works, we should also uphold critical thinking, identify and consider the author's creation intent and potential cultural stance, objectively assess the cultural value of literary works, and avoid the suspicion of our own culture as well as excessive pandering to other cultures due to the author's personal views or cultural tendencies.

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