

Lili Ma

REPRODUCING THE "OTHER": ERIC LAMBERT'S REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE WOMAN IN *THE DARK BACKWARD*

In Eric Lambert's novel *The Dark Backward*, published in 1958, the woman character encounters two forms of Australian male power. However, sexual oppression is more noticeable in the novel than racial discrimination. The woman character Liu Sun is "assigned no position of enunciation" (Young 164), while the alienation and incomprehension felt by Tony, in his relationship with her dominates the narrative. Through analysing what the novel sees as their love story, this essay shows how male power is exercised and legitimated by marginalizing or excluding the interests of Liu Sun.

The events of *The Dark Backward* take place during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya in the closing stages of the Second World War. Tony, an Australian Intelligence Officer, together with two other team members, hides in the jungle of Malaya, radioing back information about Japanese troop movements to Australian headquarters. Captured and tortured by the Japanese, he is rescued by the Malay Communists, one of whom is the Chinese woman guerrilla Liu Sun with whom he falls in love and she with him. After the Japanese surrender, although he is aware of the difficulties under the White Australian Policy, he wants to take her back to Australia as his wife but she refuses for the sake of her cause, that is, the liberation of Malaya. In the end, their different ideologies—Communism as against British colonialism in Malaya—drive them apart. It seems that Tony craves peace at home in Australia, while Liu Sun is dedicated to fighting for the people in her country.

From the beginning when Tony and Liu Sun meet, they have different aims in life. Tony seems to be filled with much hope for a new life, he wants to live in "a world that was serene and safe for the old, high and promising for the young" (88). However Liu Sun, whose parents have been killed by the Japanese and who has been raped by a group of Japanese soldiers, is determined to pursue relentlessly her revolutionary cause to "liberate" Malaya from all colonial rule. Despite her love for the Australian, Liu Sun sacrifices her own feelings and security for the sake of her revolutionary cause. The sub-text for the contemporary reader, however, includes the doubtful future Tony offers to Liu Sun in an Australia in which Asian wives were not welcome.

The story is recounted in first person narrative by Tony. According to Tony, Liu Sun uses "pompous jargon" when she expresses Communist ideology (189); she needs no protection from men in the face of danger; and she loves her five-cornered cap, a symbol of her revolutionary cause, more than anything else. She is represented as a woman possessed of split characters: some part belongs to a conventional woman, a woman who craves love; but most of her body and soul belongs to her cause. The conventional woman in Liu Sun is in frequent conflict with the fighter. And Tony foresees that finally it is the fighter Liu Sun who wins:

Liu Sun, the girl who loved, the girl who so much wanted to be a woman—and Liu Sun of the five-cornered cap, they were struggling openly and without shame. And I knew that the five-cornered cap was going to win. With another it might have been the woman and the lover but with Liu Sun it was the five-cornered cap. And the reasons for the way of such things are not to be solved even by the wisest. (192)

To justify Tony's perception of the love between himself and Liu Sun, the latter has to be portrayed as a paradoxical figure. She is a lovely woman who is beautiful and sexy, yet she is too strong and too independent to need protection from men. In other words, she does not save any space for any man, not even the man who loves her and whom she loves. She is simultaneously womanly and unwomanly: she is physically a woman and emotionally she is not a woman. This ambivalent attitude towards Liu Sun becomes palpable when Tony describes her as follows:

Liu Sun walked at my side. From time to time I turned to smile at her, and the look she returned, though unsmiling, was womanly and intense. Her self-reliance, her strength and ruthlessness gave her a stature beyond that of one who was only loved. Here was one who craved no protection; her warmth had to be stirred in other ways. I was remembering she had not thanked me, nor responded in anyway, for the protection I had given her before. And yet, even in the drab uniform, the body was excitingly round, the face exquisitely soft and the eyes unmistakable. She was a woman. (112)

The narrator uses both declarative statement and rhetorical questions such as "She was a woman" (112), and "Is she not a woman?" (110) to reiterate the fact that Liu Sun is a woman. Each time the fact is repeated, it gains more authority for the narrator and reinforces Liu Sun's role as a woman. His authority of narrative and his construction of women are guaranteed, but not the content of Liu Sun. According to the authoritative narrator, Liu Sun does not consequently meet the standards expected for a woman. She does not understand her lover's distress, she does not deserve compassion; her eyes, which are like "merciless blades" (166), are not a woman's. Besides, the fact

that she is a woman requires her to give up her ideal and pursuit which are "too grandiose for a small woman like her" (194), and instead, to seek protection from a man to whom she is supposed to yield for the love between them.

Later in Australia when he recalls his Malayan experience, Tony seems to have a better understanding of Liu Sun. For he makes a comparison between the two women—Liu Sun the Chinese and Juliet the Australian—and draws the conclusion that Liu Sun is spiritually superior:

Only the other day as Juliet and I were walking on the street, I thought of Liu Sun. It was as if the mere shadow of Liu Sun walking beside her had made Juliet pale. I saw Juliet's acquiescence, her flatness of vision, her contentment with mere physical comfort. And I knew it was all no good. (115)

But the problem is: how much can Tony and his narration be trusted? If he failed to understand Liu Sun when he was with her in Malaya and experienced things with her, his understanding of her back in Australia again goes beyond Liu Sun as she is. From what has been analysed, his estimation of Juliet is equally suspect. He cannot accept women as they really are, but constructs them as they ought to be and judges them accordingly. And never has he tried enough to understand things from a woman's perspective. For example, Liu Sun's reaction to men, which is difficult for Tony to comprehend, may have been affected by her experiences with the savage Japanese soldiers. Liu Sun's attitude to men and war may be more psychological than political. And Tony, being a man, simply reduces Liu Sun to a woman whose mind is saturated with political ideology and who therefore lacks the capacity to love and to be loved. He seems to imply that the unhappy ending of their love story is her problem—both personal and political, not his. He is normal and right, not only politically, but also psychologically.

Under Tony's desire for peace, there is a strong sense of masculinity, a strong element of possessiveness towards the women he loves. He claims that his dream is "conventional": to love a girl who is tender and submissive so that his manliness can have full play. He wants to acquire "ownership" (145) of Liu Sun and therefore to become her "master" (138). To him, women are subjects to be ruled and possessed by men. Therefore Liu Sun is a mutual asset between two men—Lee Kim the Communist leader and Tony the Australian officer: "I had her body. He had her mind" (158). That is how Liu Sun is divided—into body and soul—but with nothing left to herself.

On top of his love for Liu Sun, the reason why Tony singles out her among the "strangers" in Malaysia seems to be that he thinks they are both the "other" to

the Camp Committee which is composed of male communists. He is a foreigner, and she a woman. Tony identifies with Liu Sun in this sense of otherness and attempts to use her love to assume power for himself.

To gratify the man's narcissistic needs, Liu Sun's femininity is important. Without it, even Liu Sun's strength becomes resented: "all I could remember was that I was the man, supposedly the stronger; and I was resentful against the cruel strength of her" (140). Tony's logic is simple: if Liu Sun had yielded for one moment, or part of her womanliness had been surrendered to his masculinity, their love could have survived. In other words, Tony's logic demands Liu Sun to compromise if there is a conflict between them. She is the one who should give in:

If she had only cried, and I could have taken her in my arms and comforted her, and given her all a man is meant to give to the girl he loves. If I could only have perceived, and thanked her for, the triumph of affection that had allowed her body to be coupled to a man's again.

But I had neither the courage nor the sense to assume the yielder. (140)

Here Tony shows a moment of significant insight, that is, for a man to yield his masculinist ideals of mastership and patronage requires courage and sense. It is easier and more comfortable for Tony to require Liu Sun to yield, as it is what he assumes a woman should do. And yet he does not sufficiently take into consideration her background, her nightmarish experiences. He seems to have forgotten that her "femininity," if there was any at all before he knew her, was destroyed by the Japanese soldiers.

Tony's representation of Liu Sun and his own unhappy experience in his relationship with her follows a pattern in male understanding of women, as analysed by recent commentators. Cranny-Francis, for example, points out that women's psychological states are either neglected or misunderstood by men, or used to serve their own purposes (Cranny-Francis 11). While Tony recognises Liu Sun's commitment to her cause, he represents her personal priorities to fight as a patriot as a suppression of her natural feminine need for husband and family. Tony in effect is like Freud, who pathologised some women as hysterics when their behaviour went beyond his phallogocentric interpretation.

Contemporary feminist theory, unavailable to readers when Lambert's novel was published, allows us now to see clearly what readers in 1958 might only have suspected. Liu Sun's personality can only be seen as a product constructed by the phallogocentric point of view which excludes her political dedication and her personal, private experiences. Tony's construction of Liu Sun tells the reader more about Tony than it does about Liu Sun. If this Chinese woman seems

“preposterous” (185) it is because of a lack in Tony, not in Liu Sun. Liu Sun remains incomprehensible to Tony because what she does is goes beyond Tony’s male-centered paradigms.”

Tony cannot understand Liu Sun in two ways. Firstly, he cannot understand her as a woman, for her qualities do not meet his expectations of what is ‘natural’ in a beautiful woman. Secondly, he cannot understand her as a person, for she is from another ethnic background whose conduct makes him sometimes feel alien to his own. As a woman, Liu Sun is different from the “conventional” girl of Tony’s expectation; as a lover, she seems to prefer fighting for her cause to personal happiness.

The ending is thus inevitable for both Liu Sun and Tony. To become Tony’s lover, Liu Sun would have to give up her patriotic cause, to put aside her strong character, and to remove the part in her which Tony sees as unwomanly—she has to lose her original self in order to meet Tony’s expectations. When she does not do so, she is seen as inscrutable, unsympathetic and responsible for the abortion of a beautiful love. And in either case, Tony is the one who is presented as sensitive—even over-sensitive as indicated by his ambition to become a concert pianist and by his periods of amnesia brought on by the psychological stress of war and injuries.

According to O’Leary, the author of the biography of Lambert, *The Dark Backward* is “the most political and philosophical of all Lambert’s books” (O’Leary 81) and “[h]is prevailing disenchantment, desolation and doubts are made articulate through his four main characters” (O’Leary 82). It seems probable that Lambert shows much more sympathy for Tony than for Liu Sun partly because Tony reflects a self-representation of Lambert (*Ibid*). Tony is depicted as a gifted young man, a would-be musician, a courageous soldier and a compassionate humanitarian, whereas Liu Sun is rendered unwomanly and too political to be able to pursue human happiness. The concept of love held apparently by Lambert and Tony, whom the narrative seldom criticises, is permeated by relations of domination and subordination. This reinforces and legitimises male power and requires women to be passive, domestic and submissive to men, and Tony finds it hard to accept women such as Liu Sun who do not fit in this category.

As I have suggested, Liu Sun is represented as suffering more from sexism than from ethnocentrism. Actually, Tony is quite sympathetic towards those Asian people who are suffering from the Japanese invasion. He thinks that “Chinese eyes [are] the most beautiful eyes in the world” (76). Tony is captivated by the Chinese wisdom represented in Dr Chang, who is endowed with the most ideal virtues: he is intelligent, profound and a humanitarian. Lambert also suggests

that the resilience and ultimate unconquerable nature of the Malayan people whom the British, the Japanese and the Communists (he believes) cannot change in any basic way or permanently enslave.

To sum up, Lambert's description of the Chinese woman in *The Dark Backward* is determined by prejudices which are more patriarchal than racial. Liu Sun, in Tony's eyes, is an "Other" more because of her gender than because of her ethnicity.

Works Cited and Works Consulted:

- Bennett, Bruce, et al., eds. *Crossing Cultures: Essays on Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific*. London: Skoob Books, 1996.
- Broinowski, Alison. *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*. 1992. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. *The Body in the Text*. Carlton South: Melbourne UP, 1995.
- Gerster, Robin, ed. *Hotel Asia: An Anthology of Australian Literary Travelling to the "East."* Ringwood, Vic: Penguin Books Australia, 1995.
- Gunew, Sneja and Longley, Kateryna O., eds *Striking Chords: Multicultural literary interpretations*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992.
- Harasym, Sarah, ed. *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Ileto, Reynaldo C. and Sullivan, Rodney, eds *Discovering Australia: Essays on Philippine-Australian Interactions*. Townsville: James Cook University, 1993.
- Lambert, Eric. *The Dark Backward*. London: Frederick Muller, 1958.
- Landry, Donna, and Gerald Maclean, eds *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Macherras, Colin. *Western Images of China*. ed. Nancy Viviani. Australi-Asia Papers No 41. Brisbane: Griffith University, 1987.
- Meaney, Neville. "'The Yellow Peril', Invasion Scare Novels and Australian Political Culture". ed. Ken Stewart. *The Bulletin: the 1890s Australian Literature and Literary Culture*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Post-coloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Mohanty, Chandra. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." 1984. *Feminist Review* Autumn. 1988: 65-77.
- Ouyang Yu. "Charles Cooper and the Representation of the Chinese in Australian Fiction." *Westerly* 38.4(1993): 65-73.
- . "The Other Half of the 'Other': The Image of Chinese Women in Australian Fiction." *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 11 (June 1994): 75-90.
- Pettman, Jan. *Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* 1978. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Tiffin, Helen. "Asia and the Contemporary Australian Novel." *Australian Literary Studies*. Ed. Laurie Hergenhan. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984. 468-479.
- Wang, Gungwu. "The Australia Asians Might Not See." *AQ Summer 1992*: 350+.
- Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.
- Zhang, Longxi. "The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West." *Critical Inquiry* 15. 1 (Autumn 1988): 108-131