REWORLDING ASIAN FEMALE LOCATIONS THROUGH LITERATURE:
AN ANALYSIS OF THREE NOVELS BY ASIAN WOMEN WRITERS

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Contemporary notions of the "world" and related notions of "worlding" are said to originate from Husserl with his emphasis on "World-Belief," "World-Horizon," and his concepts of *Realität* and *Wesen* (or essences), which he also terms "universals" (Russell 22-3; Welton 17 and 107). However, the term "worlding" itself is usually traced back to the philosopher Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. What Heidegger calls the "worlding of the world" is no longer understood as a process of world-making but is rather a movement of the concealment and disclosure of things into which art lets itself go. Heidegger's notion of the "worlding" of things, by which a thing is what it is—for example a pen is a pen rather than a piece of plastic by virtue of writing—is then a move away from anthropocentrism, removing the "thing" from its relation to the human and focusing on its "isness." Another influential philosopher, Dooyeweerd, with his notion that "aspects pertain and transcend humanity" (Basden n. pag), appears, like Heidegger, to reiterate the move away from anthropocentrism. However, both their emphases are centred on the notion of "worlding" as involved with being in the world yet not of it. This idea is also connected to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's, whose notion of "worlding" evolves directly from Heidegger's yet is more immediately pertinent to the Asian context.

Spivak approaches worlding from the perspective of colonialism. She focuses on the "epistemic violence" done upon postcolonial subjects under imperialism. In the following passage from her article entitled "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," which is an analysis of Emily Bronte's

Jane Eyre, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Spivak portrays such imperialism as a "worlding" process that attempts to disguise its own workings so as to naturalize and legitimate Western dominance:

> not only in the study of British literature but in the study of the literatures of the European colonizing cultures of the great age of imperialism, we would produce a narrative in literary history, of the 'worlding' of what is now called 'the Third World.' To consider the Third World as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized in English translation fosters the emergence of 'the Third World' as a signifier that allows us to forget that 'worlding,' even as it expands the empire of the literary discipline. (259)

Spivak points out that the colonies are thus brought into existence as part of a world constructed by Eurocentric perceptions, even as they are simultaneously relegated to European peripheries. For Spivak, worlding becomes an act of psychological dominance since it initiates not just material but also ideological conquest, a form of narrating and inscribing colonial power that has an immediate connection to the very process of "historification." In another essay, "The Rani of Sirmur," Spivak calls worlding "the reinscription of a cartography that must (re)present itself as impeccable" on "uninscribed earth" (141) from which previous histories have been wiped out. This impeccable re-inscription becomes "the condition of the worlding of the world" (133) such that the colonized consciousness can apprehend itself only in and through colonial systems and knowledges.

Taking up this notion of worlding, other theorists such as Arif Dirlik talk about "the worlding of [the United States of] America" seen as a process through which USA, which has viewed itself as an uncontested superpower after the collapse of USSR, has to recognize itself as part of the world. For Dirlik, worlding involves locating USA within the world by questioning its exceptionalist self-idealization (292). Other critics like Susan Gillman et al., bringing the notion of worlding closer to the world of art, conceive of worlding as

> an active and vigilant critical and poetic process of bringing nearer the *thinging world* and the *worlding world* of plurality and multiplicity, at the same time as it entails the process of pushing

> to the horizon of consciousness and dwelling place, those things, forces, instruments, signs, and objects that threaten this building-up and renewing of the regenerative life-world and species being. (Gillman, Greusz, and Wilson 262)

Here the term "worlding the world" is conceived as a kind of double-movement—i.e. while it draws the world into the realm of the cognizable by establishing zones of possibility, relation, and encounter within which the world can become "worldly," it relegates to the boundaries of social existence those aspects that seem to threaten this process.

This perception that Gillman et al. discuss in relation to the situation in USA posits how particular ideas of it are legitimized and the process involves delimiting peoples and cultures that threaten such constructed hegemonic versions of USA. Others such as John Muthyala and Michael Scheuer discuss these ideas extensively in their texts finding it deeply problematic that such perceptions of USA distance it from the world at large, and are reified in varying degrees by historians, politicians, and sociologists. I find that these ideas are useful in discussing worldings of Asia, albeit in slightly different ways. During imperialism, the process of "worlding" legitimized to the imperial powers particular versions of Asia while at the same time disavowing cultures, literatures, and values that went contrary to this vision. Recognizing the nexus of imperial vision and global economic discourse in "worlding" Asia then becomes an important first step in "reworlding" it.

One way of accomplishing this is by "revisioning" artwork. I return once again to Heidegger and his article "The Origin of the Work of Art". In this article Heidegger uses concepts of being and truth to explain art. He asserts that art not only expresses the truth of a culture but also *creates* that truth by providing a medium for expressing it. Hence, works of art or "artworks" are not mere representations of the way things are, but actually help produce a community's shared understanding. Thus, every time a new artwork is added to a culture, the meaning of what it is to exist is inherently changed. Heidegger argues that the artwork and the artist exist in a dynamic where each is necessary for the other and neither is without the other. At the same time however, neither is the sole support of the other. Art, a concept separate from both work and creator, thus exists as the source for them both. So, it is not the artist who controls the artwork. Rather art becomes a force that uses the creator for its own purposes. Likewise, the resulting work must be considered in the context of the world in which it exists, not that of its artist. This brings about the complex hermeneutic circle where we find that without knowledge of the essence of art, we cannot grasp the essence of the artwork, but without knowledge of the artwork, we cannot find the essence of art. So, one way of approaching artwork would then be as "whatever reveals the rupture of the familiar, the predictable, and the intelligible with the unfamiliar, the unpredictable and the unintelligible."[1]

Using this as a platform, one way of "reworlding" Asia would be to interrogate the processes by which particular ideas of Asia have been given hegemonic force that reify certain versions of Asia, by examining cultural signs or "artworks," and attempting through our readings to disturb and realign these hegemonic images. Insofar as it is acknowledged that literary studies involves a "relationship" to the world, and since all texts represent a world in the strict sense of aesthetic mimesis, literature involves multiple acts of "worlding." Literary texts reflect their world of production and reception. In doing so, they bring "worlds" into being in historical, psychological, and aesthetic realms among others. Thus, by examining the relationship between the "world" projected by the text and the "inhabited" world of the text, one can discuss ways in which a text reconstitutes or reconfigures the world and the impact and the extensive ramifications of this process. It is with this intention that I examine three texts by Asian women writers—*This Place Called Absence* by Lydia Kwa, *Joss and Gold* by Shirley Lim, and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai—to examine how they each attempt to realign and reassign the relations among space, time, and memory to subvert colonial imaging(s) of Asia.

I begin with Kwa's novel. In *This Place Called Absence*, the entire narrative is in the form of journal entries by four different women: Wu Lan, a jaded lesbian psychologist living in Vancouver who fled Singapore 20 years before, leaving behind a family that understood neither her insatiable hunger for knowledge nor her desire for women; her mother Mahmee struggling with the restless ghost of her husband, who has been haunting her since his recent suicide; and two women, Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui, who, for different reasons, came to Singapore at the dawn of the twentieth century to seek their fortunes and ended up working as *ah ku*s or prostitutes. Their opium-drugged and venereal disease-ridden bodies have left them depleted of all their hopes until their only solace is in the love they find in each other's arms. The voices of these four women, reconstructing their stories, form the narrative. In the "Author's Notes" at the end of the novel, Lydia Kwa acknowledges that the creation of these fictional characters was inspired by James Francis Warren's article "The Ah Ku and Karayuki-San of Singapore—Their Lives: Sources, Method and a Historian's Representation" (121-34). Warren's article exposes the relentless poverty and oppression that these voiceless subaltern women experience as their daily fare. Lydia Kwa's novel then becomes an example of an artwork that attempts to "revision history" by realigning and reassigning the relations among space, time, and memory to subvert colonial imaging(s) of Asia. By giving voice to four women in the fictional narrative, three of whom—Mahmee, Lee Ah Choi, and Chow Chat Mui—are established voiceless subalterns—traditional "objects" not "subjects" of history—and in attempting to tell their stories in the first person, the novelist, Kwa, co-opts their stories. For instance, when Lee Ah Choi, an ah ku, shares her experience of being caned by her owner in the passage below:

> Sum Tok … reappears with the rattan cane.
>
> "Take your samfu top off." She points the weapon at me.
>
> I feel light-headed with fear. I've never been caned before … she draws closer, her mouth in that menacing scowl I detest.
>
> I turn my back to her, unbutton my top and lift it up over my head. I feel her body move behind me, and when the cane reaches me, the sound of it striking my body and the sting of my skin are one and the same wound. I make no sound, but bit into my lower lip. My skin is alive with pain. (139)

Her first person narrative allows us entry into her pain. Again, when Mahmee whispers to herself "I'm tired. Scared of *this* living by myself. A person's fate can be so twisted, I never thought he die before me. I the one with aches and pains, he the one who didn't say much" (162), as readers, we empathise with her bewilderment and fear. Thus, through the use of their first person narratives we get under the skin of these otherwise voiceless subalterns. Through this act of giving them a direct narrative voice, there is an opportunity for their subjectivities to be resurrected. The ah kus, who in Warren's article are assigned to a space of silence, their docility and their outcaste status being the predominant images, now, by the inscription of a personalised story, emerge with these characteristics transformed into metaphors of strength and endurance rather than remaining as tropes of subalternity. Their personalized narratives reworld their histories, restoring subjectivity to their lives, which were previously hidden, marginalized, or worse still, forgotten by the larger imperial narrative. Through differentiating their histories, the heterogeneity of their lives is foregrounded, highlighting their unique individualities. Near the end of the novel, Wu Lan queries—attempting to bridge the gap between fiction and history—"Aren't all stories true? To intuit the meanings of what is left unsaid" (208), thereby further lessening the gap between the histories of the subalterns and their more empowered sisters.

As Spivak and several other postcolonial theorists point out, because the subject of history—empire—remains at the level of impersonalized, institutional forces, the agent of empire's history—Europe's hypermasculine subject—can remain uncriticised and can continue to assert his views and presence with unmitigated assurance. As for those who bear the real burden of empire, they are further marginalised to become mute witnesses to their dispossession. This perversity at the centre of imperial discourse is reflected even in some recent works on Empire, as of the British historian Niall Ferguson's *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. As the historical critic, Muthyala points out, Ferguson's thesis reinforces the ideals of Empire by positing Euro-American modernity as a blessing to the world (4-10), which it doubtless is in many ways. However, the problem in his worldview arises when you realize that in his rendering, the *historicity* of those the empire colonized and controlled—non-Europeans as agents of history, as human actors endowed with critical potential—can be given or taken away by imperial edict. By tracing American nation-formation from British imperial moorings, every competing claim, every antagonistic presence and agonistic perspective to such a narration of USA and its nation formation traced back through the workings of empire, is effectively rendered meaningless.

It is here that efforts such as Shirley Lim's in *Joss and Gold* become effective counter narratives to Ferguson's worlding of America that is based solely on an Anglo-American paradigm. Published in 2001, the novel's first section begins with the racial riots in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 and depicts how individual lives, caught in the political transgressions of the time, also show evidence of other personal and social transgressions. At the centre of the text is the trope of the abandoned Asian woman. Li An, a Malaysian Chinese lecturer at the University of Malaya, married to a Chinese-Malaysian scientist, has a liaison with an American social worker, Chester, who has come to teach carpentry to Malaysians. In the aftermath of the civil riots, when Chester, ordered to return home by his voluntary organisation, returns to USA and soon falls in love with and marries a white American woman, he is understandably not interested in acknowledging either his previous illicit liaison with Li An or his illegitimate daughter born of it. But several years into their marriage, Chester, who had earlier persuaded his young American wife to undergo an abortion, and in later years, after being in turn persuaded by her to undergo a vasectomy, albeit reluctantly, suddenly feels insecure after the procedure and yearns to see his daughter from his previous illicit liaison in Malaysia. He traces Li An to Singapore and goes there to seek her out and his (hitherto unacknowledged) daughter after more than a decade has passed. Doing the "generous white man act," he expects to find a grateful Li An. Instead, in a classic reworking of the Madam Butterfly trope, he finds his pre-constructed notions shattered when faced with a highly professional, economically autonomous Li An, who seems to have no time for him and appears in fact to resent his interference in the smooth running of her successful life. In subverting a time-worn trope of the downtrodden Asian woman and of the white male as saviour, Lim's novel appears to approximate conceptions of feminist ethics formulated by Alison Jaggar, who perceives the re-visioned feminist narrative as practical, transitional, and non-utopian, an extension of politics rather than a retreat from it, and subverts women's subordination (119-210). In the novel, Li An's individual autonomy is enmeshed with the national economic discourse of Singapore such that one informs the other. In elaborating the economic success of Li An, the spectacular economic success of Singapore is foregrounded. What is interesting to note is that Chester's thoughts in the novel reinforces the negative impact of this subversion of roles on the white male: "He did not want her [Li An] to be indifferent to him … He wanted to get to know her all over again, a new woman in the fresh new Asian city, who was too busy to meet him, too successful to remember their friendship (Lim 197). Here, the pathos at the centre of the "Madame Butterfly" formula is turned into bathos, at least for the readers. Now it is not the Asian woman who is desperate, destitute, and eager for the American male's company but Chester, the white middle-class male, who feels lost and dependent on his relationship with Li An. Yet, in the final analysis, *Joss and Gold* does not emerge as merely inverting former tropes, but in fact questioning the very binaries on which such tropes are constructed, foregrounding the vision of an evolving, shifting relationship between Asia and America, the acknowledgement of which enables re-visionings of both continents.

Reworlding Asia, however, is not only about subverting time-worn tropes. It is also intimately linked to rethinking the terms in which modernity, and therefore globalization have historically come to engender and authorize particular meanings of Asia. It means rethinking modernity as making both visible and invisible a clashing of dissonant modernities in Asia; it means tracing the lines of continuity and rupture that shape the material and discursive forms of national belonging and cross-cultural transference. In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, the dissonance at the root of globalization is starkly exposed by demonstrating the fact that economic globalization can never become a route to prosperity for the downtrodden. Through her clear delineation of the various individual histories affected by global movements, beginning with colonialism and tracing it to the current trend of globalization, notions of multiculturalism and its breeding of economic inequalities and issues surrounding fundamentalism and terrorism are all explored with Desai reaching the conclusion that "Profit could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other" (91). Thus, in the novel, Judge Jemubhai's capacity for love is shown as being stifled, even rendered sterile by his social inadequacies and his anxiety to shed his "Indianness" to be accepted in the white colonial world. The problem is one that affects all classes. Jemubhai's cook, for instance, in his desire to share in a portion of the economic pie, sends his son Biju off, penniless, to the USA, hoping he will return a rich man. Even the youthful protagonist Sai, Judge Jemubhai's granddaughter, placed at the centre of a turbulent civil unrest between the Indians and the Nepali Gurkhas, and in her unrequited love for her Gurkha tutor, Gyan, who dies a sad and unromantic death faced with social and racial differences, learns that all destinies are intermingled and that the greatest historical movements affect the smallest human existences and hence no one can be exempt from guilt. Unfortunately for her, Sai reaches her wisdom a trifle late in the day: "Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own mean little happiness and live safely within it" (323). But this plural world, with its co-option of parallel and alternate realities, though offering the only way forward, is not presented as positive but is shown as a dissonant world full of desperate people. Thus, this particular textual reworlding redefines in crucial ways notions of identity and subjectivity, both local and global.

In conclusion, rather than offering a clear alternative historical or intellectual tradition with which to reworld Asia, I have chosen to indulge in a form of disruptive textual play at those discursive sites where the many worldings of Asia have been and continue to be textually articulated in the moments of negotiating the values and cultures of various nations and communities in different parts of Asia. By doing this, I reconceptualise Asia here as "Asias," a plethora of discursive formations whose overlapping, competing modes of narrative address give rise to other ways of articulating the multiple meanings of Asia. This reconceptualization amounts to a refusal of other dominant worldings that attempt to normalize themselves in public imagination and discourse. It is a mode of discursive contestation in developing a critical vision for interrogating and revising the terms in which the literary and cultural history of Asia has come to be articulated and for re-imagining the "Asias" in their pan-continental dimensions.

Note

1. For more on this, see Chloe Humphreys. "A Breath of Empty Space: An Examination of Empire Through Capitalism, Technology and Power." *Human Condition Series: Annual International Multidisciplinary Conference*. Barrie, Ontario, Canada. May 2007. Retrieved 14 Jan. 2008 at <http://humancondition.files.wordpress.com>.

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