Re-visioning: Lee Tzu Pheng's Feminist Poetics

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In her influential essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," Adrienne Rich defines re-visioning as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," and insists that it is, for women

> more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society. (35)

Appropriating Rich, Lee Tzu Pheng outlines her own strategy of re-vision in the poem "Revisioning" as being one "to move through dead ends to horizons./ [...] to see new signs within old lands." More than simply informing her creative process, Lee's re-vision arguably also offers a "radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse" (35). This radical critique is aimed at challenging androcentric practices of reading, and offers in its stead what Patrocinio P. Schweickart refers to as "reading strategies consonant with the concerns, experiences, and formal devices that constitute [women's] texts" (620). While the kind of gynocriticism adopted here might appear outdated, this paper is itself also a re-vision of Lee's poetry, looking back at, and moving through, her first collection to her most recent, in order to address what I feel has been overlooked in critical analyses of Lee's work, namely the fact of her being a *female* Singaporean poet. Uncovering the marginalisation she felt as a female poet writing in the 1960s, a period when traditional patriarchal values informed female identity, can give us a greater appreciation of how far she has come as a poet, but more importantly, of the re-visionary feminist politics that inform her later poetry.

Writing Woman

The urgency with which Rich exhorts women to write themselves into literary history certainly resonates with the force behind Lee's poetic vision, particularly in the drive to self-knowledge. "Revisioning", which appears in Lee's fourth collection

Lambada by Galilee and Other Surprises, not only describes the growth process of her poetic craft over the course of her writing career, but constitutes the ideological thrust behind her poems that addresses female experience in one form or another. By her own admission, "[poetry has] been for me a way of knowing the person I am" (Chan 37), something she says she did not quite discover until her second volume, *Against the Next Wave*. Returning to composition after a fourteen-year hiatus, she emphasises in the third poem of the collection, "If You Must Know", the intimate relationship between writing, self-knowledge and the beginning of positive transformation:

> Making a poem is
> taking charge of yourself,
> your fears, incapacities, tears:
> being tough, taking yourself
> by the scruff and saying:
> say it, you fool,
> for how else are you going to know
> what a fool you are –
> which is,
> as anyone knows,
> the beginning of wisdom.

Felicia Chan has observed that by the time Lee came to write her fourth collection of poems, it is "almost as if some of the problems of self that the poet had been grappling with have already been worked out to some extent, and she is now freer to comment on the environment around her" (26). Forming a significant part of Lee's first collection, these "problems of self" are largely centred on her being a woman, particularly as it relates to her creativity. A survey of Lee's oeuvre reveals the female experience to be a central concern, and while not all poems addressing female experience are explicitly feminist in their tone (with the exception of several poems in the later collections) they do address the challenges faced by women living under patriarchal conditions. These woman-centred poems demonstrate the ways in which female identity is engendered by society, and how this might impinge on the development of the female poet and her craft.

According to Rich, one of the challenges faced by women writers engaging in the process of re-visioning, lies in the search for "language and images for a consciousness [women] are just coming into, and with little in the past to support [them]" (35). This situation aptly describes Lee's maturation as a Singaporean female poet writing in the 1960s, a growth process circumscribed by two major concerns. The first comprised having to write within a literary tradition that was largely Western and thus foreign, a conflict experienced in general by Singapore poets writing during this early stage of local literary development. In "Singapore

Writing in English: The Literary Tradition and Cultural Identity", Koh Tai Ann draws usefully on the work of Harold Bloom to emphasise the point that even an "attempt to escape influence is a recognition and a form of influence" (164). According to Koh, Singaporean poets felt compelled to remind the reader of the work's "local, native origin and character – that it is the product of the poet's personal history, ethnic or communal experience, and the impinging force of his local environment" (164). While being subject to these concerns, Lee, as a *female* poet, also had to contend with a Western literary tradition that was highly androcentric, in addition to a local poetic scene whose "lead [was] established by the men" (Koh 1994: 606). As Gilbert and Gubar argue in their re-assessment of Bloom's theory, the female poet experiences the struggle with her literary inheritance in much more antagonistic terms than her male counterpart, based on the simple fact that "she must confront literary precursors who are almost exclusively male" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 48). If the local poet in general felt compelled to stress the native character of his work in order to distance himself from his foreign Western literary heritage, then the local *female* poet had, and continues to have, the added task of setting herself apart from her male contemporaries by stressing her distinct female experience in the process of writing. When Lee alludes to the problems of creation and her struggle with words, she presents to the reader challenges faced specifically by a *female* poet, challenges emerging out of a personal history experienced as gendered. These challenges were largely the preoccupation of the first collection, *Prospect of A Drowning*, which Lee admits, upon hindsight, "was a very young person's writing – young in life, in the experience of life and in the art of writing. I see all the flaws there" (Chan 38). Her "flawed" work may in part have had to do with struggling to find her own voice, that of a woman writing within a male tradition, turning out "flawed" work because, in the words of Virginia Woolf, "she is at war with her lot" (Woolf 63).

Lee's awareness of being a female poet in a culture "whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are [...] both overtly and covertly patriarchal" (Gilbert and Gubar 45-46) is apparent in the poem "Orphans". While "Orphans" explicitly describes the female poet as being at war with her lot, even poems that do not overtly address the female artist's anxieties about her creative authority implicitly draw our attention to them. This is seen, for instance, in the poem "Point of View", of which the most striking detail is the fact that all the poets named are exclusively male: Chaucer, Donne, Shakespeare; authoritative forefathers of the literary canon. Studying them is a female student, "so young and so beautiful" in her submission, with her "eyes down, nun-like", donning a veil of "acquiescence" ("Point of View"). The patrilineal structure of literary inheritance is also invoked in the father figure of Lear, and the line to "find him in one's own father" affirms once more the patriarchal structures that enforce gender definitions across a wide spectrum of social relations, including those within the institution of art ("Point of

View"). If, as Chan suggests, this is Lee the teacher reflecting on her relationship with literature, then it is also the teacher as female poet, coming to terms with her literary precursors, who are all male. In "Orphans", the aspiring female poet likewise finds herself in a similar situation of confronting patriarchal authority ("my race" and "my people"), whose assumptions regarding her gender definition are in conflict with her own sense of self. The poet struggles against society's definition of her as a woman, and its denial of her right to create, except biologically as a mother. The poem is an affirmation that "a woman writer does *not* 'fit in [...] indeed, she seems to be anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider" (Gilbert and Gubar 48). That the female poet does not fit in is also reflected in the structure and tone of the poem, both of which insinuate the destructive psychological effects of her marginalisation as an aspiring poet. The first and last stanzas are reflections of each other, and suggest an inwardness that supports what Gilbert and Gubar view to be an experience common to female artists, being that of "isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to [women's] literary subculture," (Gilbert and Gubar 51):

> being woman
> what would I want
> with mind-children
>
> [...]
>
> with mind-children
> what would I want
> being woman
> ("Orphans")

Reading Woman

"Orphans" exposes what Gilbert and Gubar define as one of the main struggles faced by the female poet, which is patriarchy's reading of her that not only conflicts with her own sense of self, but reduces her to silence ("words/ against my mouth/ dry silent"). The silencing of the female artist is however not limited to denying her right to create, but, as reader-response criticism informs us, also includes practices of reading that obscure the subjectivity of the woman whose experience is being read about. Schweickart argues that "an androcentric canon generates androcentric interpretive strategies, which in turn favour the canonisation of androcentric texts and the marginalisation of gynocentric ones" (Scheweickart 620). Androcentric readings of a woman's work fail to recognise "the 'voice' of another woman," (Schweickart 622) and perpetuate an identification with a male, assumed universal, point of view. This implies that a stronger presence of women's writing in the

literary canon can only be achieved following a change in reading practices, to one that is informed by a "dialectic of communication...a matter of 'trying to connect' with the existence behind the text" (627). The marginalisation of women's texts brought about by androcentric practices of reading as described by Schweickart, is also apparent within the development of Singaporean poetry. Koh observes that the critical stance towards Singaporean poetry in English during its early years of development "privileged and universalised the poetry in English as the expressive vehicle of national consciousness and identity" ("The Sun in Her Eyes" 606). We can thus conclude that this process marginalised the poetic output of women, who were more inclined towards the private and the personal. According to Koh, "[the] critical stance, the engagement with social, political and cultural issues – indeed, these were almost its *raison d'etre* – set the agenda, too, for the poetry in English by Singaporean women poets" ("The Sun in Her Eyes", 606). To accept this model is also to accept as a consequence the exclusion from the local canon of poetry which is personal and private, as well as poetry centred on the experiences of women. More importantly, to read according to this androcentric model is to ignore the "'voice' of another woman" (Schweickart 622), and to deny her female subjectivity.

Lee is perhaps most well known for her poem "'My Country and My People'", which earned her the title "national poet," a "big label" (Chan 53) she however does not identify with: "Not at all. [...] I don't think I would write if I did" (Chan 52). She attributes her rejection of such a designation to a simplistic and narrow understanding of the word *national*, and the universalising and homogenising tendencies a national discourse effects, which her poetry consistently resists: "we tend to think of "national" as somehow representative of the *nation*, but when you think of what this *really* means, I think you come up with something quite vague and amorphous. How do you define who it is you're speaking for?" (Chan 52-53). Eschewing the narrow definition of *national* Lee explained that what might "make [her] 'national' is, ironically, an awareness [she has] of the sheer plurality of who we are as a nation" (Chan 53). Debates surrounding the "function of writing" (Thumboo 60) in relation to the responsibilities a poet owes to the nation, have over the years been exhausted by literary critics, resulting in all factions largely agreeing with Thumboo, that "writers have functions combining large commitments and a necessary attention to the demands of the craft" (Thumboo 60). Gender as a determining factor in the way writers relate to the social, political and cultural, or in the way writers might commit to the demands of the craft – demands determined largely by a masculine literary tradition – is however absent in the debates. An omission of gender and an absence of a feminist perspective in such critical discussions perpetuate the marginalisation of women's writing as representing a particular female experience, precisely because the critical model itself does not accommodate, or acknowledge, the experiences of women. If, as Kirpal Singh

points out, our literary critics, being the "so-called guardians of literary standards" (71) play a central role in what we read, but more importantly in how we read, then, as Schweickart argues, a gynocentric literary tradition can only be sustained following a change in the critical models used to appraise literature.

In their critical survey of some of the most influential literature on national identity formation and nationalism, Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See conclude that nations, nationalism, and nationalist movements have largely been treated as non-gendered phenomena[1]. Such treatment gives the impression that women and men experience national identity similarly, thus serving to privilege particular forms of identity and social relations (such as ethnicity and class), while subordinating, even obfuscating, others (such as gender and sexuality). Such treatment forgets that the development of national identity, like all forms of identity formation, is itself a gendered process[2]. Clarinda Choh's analysis of Lee's poem, which appeared in Volume 2 of *Interlogue Studies in Singapore Literature* in 1999, exemplifies the effacement of gender in a discussion of the national that Racioppi and See speak of, as well as of the homogenising effect of a "national identity" that Lee emphatically challenges. Rightly reading the poem as one that "raises issues on the politics of nationhood and the self in the years following Singapore's independence in 1965" (Choh 173), Choh however proceeds to analyse the poem without once reflecting upon the experience of a specifically gendered "self." The politics of the "self" in her discussion appear to be apolitical as far as gender is concerned, and supports the argument made by Raccioppi and See that a discussion of national identity often ignores gender, precisely because the national is assumed to be representative of a collective identity. While "'My Country and My People'" is hardly a feminist poem - one that expresses a political belief about women, as do some of her later poems which take on a discernible feminist register – it does represent a particular female experience, specifically that of a female subject attempting to define her relationship with her country and her people. It is thus surprising that Choh's analysis of the poem hardly touches on the aspect of gender, reading the "I" of the poem as the general Singaporean subject of a particular time, rather than a particular *female* Singaporean subject of a particular time.

The fact of the female subject having to come to terms with living in a society informed by a traditional patriarchal structure is hard to miss:

> So I stayed in my parents' house,
> and had only household cares.
> The city remained a distant way,
> but I had no land to till;
> only a duck that would not lay,
> and a runt of a papaya tree
> which also turned out to be male.
>
> ("'My Country and My People'")

That it was missed demonstrates a number of things: if, as Koh points out, the engagement with social, political and cultural issues set the agenda for the *writing* of poetry in English, then, it also set the agenda for the *reading* of poetry. This brings to mind Schweickart's claims that reading and writing practices have a symbiotic relationship, and that a stronger presence of women's writing in the literary canon must follow from a transformation in the way we read women's writing. If this is indeed a poem about a female subject's attempt to participate in the creation of a collective national identity, then what the poem suggests is that there is no place, either in the city or at home, for the female subject to participate in any kind of creative process. In ignoring the female perspective, Choh's reading ironically further alienates the female subject from participating in this process. This is not to say that to read for gender would necessarily preclude any discussion of national identity. It would simply mean having to admit that what Lee says here about the experience of national identity formation can apply only to a group of people (women), and within that, further limited to women of a particular class, ethnicity, sexuality, and any other social substratum.

Edwin Thumboo's brief analysis of the final stanza of Lee's poem stands as a contrast to Choh's reading of the poem. In an essay addressing the necessary balance between the personal and the ideological in poetic creation, Thumboo cites Lee's poem as being exemplary of how "larger themes of political, social and cultural cohesion are present, not as anxieties and planned action, but as intrinsic in the poet's awarenesses, perceptions and controlled idiom" (Thumboo 66). Without privileging either the personal or the ideological, Thumboo's reading of the poem focuses instead on the "nature of broad recognition, of shared responses, of *understood differences*, of images and symbols that work because they are common possessions," (Thumboo 65; [italics mine]) evident in the final stanza of the poem. While Thumboo's analysis does not specifically identify the personal as the gendered experience of the female "I", his reading does at least draw attention to the necessary dialectical relationship between the personal and the ideological, the individual and society. Placed next to Choh's analysis, Thumboo's position as a leading figure in Singapore literature, more significantly the "dominant male literary figure and patriarch of the local literary scene" ("The Sun in Her Eyes" 606), marks this gesture with a certain irony. If we take into consideration Lee's claim that this was a "very personal poem" (Chan 53), coupled with her understanding of the "sheer plurality of who we are as a nation" (Chan 53), we get a better idea of what constitutes identity for Lee:

> Yet, careful tending of the human heart
> may make a hundred flowers bloom;
> and perhaps, fence-sitting neighbour,
> I claim citizenship in your recognition

of our kind.
My people, and my country,
are you, and you are my home.

("'My Country and My People'")

Rather than look to a nationalist agenda premised on an exclusionary practice, adhering to a strict distinction between "us" and "them", for Lee, "my country and my people", later "my people, and my country/ are you [my fence-sitting neighbour], and you are my home." Eschewing the solipsistic practice of identity formation conventionally associated with nationalist discourse, traceable also to Enlightenment humanist, masculinist discourse, Lee's poem looks instead towards a relationship with others in her search for identity. The final stanza reveals recognition as dialectical, and relational, and informs the ironical gesture in the parenthetical title " 'My Country and My People' ", often missed by readers who overlook the parenthesis that form part of the title – one of whom is Choh – thus missing the poem's "quietly interrogatory spirit, apparent right from the opening lines" ("The Sun in Her Eyes" 606).

Challenging such androcentric practices of reading, Lee's work offers an alternative way of reading based on the mutual recognition of "understood differences" (Thumboo 65), particularly in poems that call attention to the symbiotic relationship between writing and reading. This is apparent in her later poems that address the value of silence, particularly in the way silence opens up a space for what Luce Irigaray refers to as "listening-to". Felicia Chan's analysis of Lee's use of silence in *Silences May Speak* studies her use of silence as a way of maintaining that "what is *not* said can be as important as what is actually articulated" (64). Chan also points out that while Lee is aware of the limitations of the English language, there remains a need to "at least *try* to communicate effectively with words, because they are the only available tools we have" (65). What I want to propose is another reading of silence in her poetry. Silence in Lee's poetry is not simply an alternative means of communication, construed as an attempt to speak on the poet's part, but serves also as a condition of listening. It enables an intersubjective construction of the relationship between reader and text, where reading "becomes a mediation between author and reader, between the context of writings and the context of reading", (Schweickart 627) where the voice of the reader, and the voice of the woman behind and in the text, can both be heard. Lee indicates that an appreciation of her poetry depends on "the reader's capacity for *receiving* a sense of those other silences that are behind that poem" (Chan 42; [italics mine]). Commenting on the "intransigency of words" in her experience of writing, Lee has also said that she is "very much aware of this silence that needs to be reached," (Chan 43) both by herself, and by the reader. This idea of reaching towards and receiving silence resonates with Irigaray's notion of "listening-to", which she defines as "listen[ing]

to the present speaking of the other in its irreducible difference with a view to the way through which we could correspond to it in faithfulness to ourselves" (*The Way of Love*, xi). Irigaray contends that "listening-to" "thus requires that I make myself available, that I be once more and always capable of silence. To a certain extent this gesture frees me, too. But above all, it gives you a silent space in which to manifest yourself" (*I Love to You*, 118). In Lee's poem "Fourteen Years", the act of receiving silences is applied to the artist, figured both as a creator and, more significantly, as a reader/ listener. This poem contrasts two different attitudes to composition. The beginning of the poem exposes writing as appropriation, apparent in the intrusiveness of "my questionings", in how the poet "demand[s] answers", as "I try to look into you." "You", literally the subject of her poetry, is silent because offended, its silence a form of resistance. The "voice once heard" remains "ignored, stifled up, without/ meaning" for fourteen years. This is contrasted to writing later, where the poet seems to have relinquished all authority, allowing the silence ("those seasons infernal") to "tell" her what to write. What this suggests is that silence on the poet's part becomes necessary to creation. It is only when she makes herself available to silence that she is able to write again, thus drawing our attention to the symbiotic relationship between writing and reading:

> Today I read for another's survival
> that not to love any more is hell.
> If writing is loving, then truth writ large
> In those seasons infernal tell
> me to study the price of
> an anguish remembered, a grief compelled.
> ("Fourteen Years")

If we accept that reading is a form of writing in the sense of inscribing and re-inscribing a text, then the author here is first and foremost her own reader, and by extension, the external reader a co-author of the text. While she is the first to acknowledge the importance of "listening-to" in the act of writing, Lee also recognises the central role a reader plays as a participant in "listening-to": "For me, behind every poem or maybe within every poem, there is a kind of large silence. By which I don't mean a *void* – the silence is not a void. It depends on the reader's capacity for receiving a sense of those other silences that are behind the poem" (Chan 42). This is most evident in the poem "Neanderthal Bone Flute: A Discovery," found in *Lambada by Galilee and Other Surprises*. The title of the poem alludes to two discoveries: the Neanderthal woman's discovery of artistic expression, but also to our discovery of her art, her flute being a relic of female artistic expression. The ambiguity of the title thus signifies the complex nexus that links reader, writer and text. Referring both to the Neanderthal woman's discovery, as well as to our discovery of her, the poem that we read is also the woman's own

story. The concurrent narrative threads developed by the poem – the Neanderthal woman's discovery of art on the one hand, and our discovery of her art on the other – demonstrate precisely the symbiotic relationship between writing and reading, as well as the dialectic of communication Schweickart identifies as being necessary to a practice of reading women's writing that will ensure the continued survival of a female literary heritage.

"Neanderthal Bone Flute: A Discovery" shares some concerns with "Orphans" of *Prospect of a Drowning* – namely the discovery of artistic expression by a woman bound by "her assigned role." Unlike the earlier poem, artistic creation appears to be successful here. If the anxiety of authorship that female poets face constitutes "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her," (Gilbert and Gubar 49) then this poem presents not only a successful female artist, but one who is able to play the role of precursor, whose work survives into the present. The responsibility for the survival of the work is however the reader's. There are suggestions throughout the poem that we are not just reading about a woman's discovery of art, but reflecting on our reading and interpretation of the female creative process itself. Like the title, the perspective of the poem is equally ambiguous, suggesting a reader's perspective in an act of interpreting the bone flute, and recomposing its story. Do we, as readers and discoverers of the bone flute and the woman's song, engage in a "listening-to" of the song/ poem, or do we engage in a kind of listening that appropriates the song/poem as a fetishized art object? If re-visioning involves "listen[ing] still for voices, pay[ing] them heed,/ but fashion[ing] from their words our own responses," ("Revisioning"), Lee's poem opens up a space for the woman in the text to exist, while enabling the reader to respond to the silence in the text. The end of the poem invokes silence as imperative to the survival of the woman's song for future generations to be "savoured anew":

> Now she has many voices; and not one
> needs to speak to be heard. Her silence
> dusts off millenial layers to recompose
> her story. They must listen to her now, learn
> to savour anew the air which moved them,
> the land singing, earth's fruit on her tongue.
>
> ("Neanderthal Bone Flute: A Discovery")

While the poem recognises that reading is necessarily subjective, it also demonstrates that "one must respect the autonomy of the text. The reader is a visitor and, as such, must observe the necessary courtesies. She must avoid unwarranted intrusions – she must be careful not to appropriate what belongs to her host, not to impose herself on the other woman" (Schweickart 620). The need for the reader, who is merely a visitor to the song/poem, to respect the voice of the other woman,

is also alluded to in the archaeological conceit employed by Lee. "Listening-to" the voice of the woman in, and behind the text, is crucial for the survival of a female literary heritage, achievable only through engaging in a practice of reading that is based on a dialectic of communication and mutual recognition, between the subject reading, and the subject writing.

Re-drawing maps for our children

In her essay, Rich had described women writers as experiencing an awakening to "the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored" (35), a utopian gesture that is echoed in Lee's poem "New Country":

> We re-draw the maps for our children,
> daughters *and sons*, that this island-
> nation may be a new country
> far larger than boundaries show:
> truly free, in being truly human.
>
> ("New Country")

While it is widely accepted that the question of reclaiming an autonomous female subjectivity is central to feminist writing, one needs to question the usefulness of such a project, particularly since subjectivity and its notions of a singular, autonomous self can be traced back to Enlightenment humanist, masculinist, discourse. What might better serve feminist writing is the possibility of a subject who can recognise the existence, intentions, needs, and independence of other subjects. Wondering at "the heart of man," "New Country" exposes the failure of men to recognise women as being "also human". The final stanza of the poem recalls the broad recognition invoked in final stanza of "'My Country and My People'", and the same interrogatory spirit of the earlier poem is not lost in this later poem. Lee remains uninterested in exclusion, but seeks an all-inclusive vision of what it means to be "truly human", and continues to maintain that mutual recognition is necessary to "make real a hard-won vision". In challenging a male perspective ("the heart of man"), Lee does not simply seek its replacement with a female view. She offers instead a plurality of experiences, perspectives and voices that include both those of "daughters *and sons*" [emphasis hers]; of understood differences that must be extended to the way we read texts. If writing, particularly women's writing, is to continue not as "an exercise in futility but in genuine commitment" (Thumboo 60). then perhaps this must first of all begin with the gesture of "my" commitment to recognising "you", and the sheer plurality of your experiences.

Notes

[1] Racioppi and See, 21

[2] Ibid., 33

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