



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Mutating Identity in Meira Chand's *A Different Sky*

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Abstract

Meira Chand's historical novel *A Different Sky* (2010) is about Singapore during the crucial years 1937-1955, and the Second World War that came in between. She has brought many historical events and circumstances into light specifically the documented events: The First Communist Inspired Riot at Kreta Ayer in 1927 and Merdeka riot. The objective of the novel is to explain Singapore's history to the new generation. In the novel, people keep on changing their identity like the sky due to the compulsion of historical circumstances. The families of three characters, namely Mei Lan – a Chinese woman, Howard – an Eurasian, Raj Sharma – an Indian trader migrated to Singapore in search of their identities. The present paper focuses on how did they obtain their identity after facing issues related to psychological dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, survival, and cultural change.

Keywords

Mutating Identity; Meira Chand; *A Different Sky*.

The novel opens with a description of a clash in the Kreta Ayer neighbourhood on 12th March, 1927 between Police and largely Hainanese Kuaming Tang's supporters which is called as Chinese demonstration. Raj Sharma was sitting in the stationed trolley with the perceptions of Manickam's shop at Serangoon Road, where most of the migrated Indians live in Singapore.

Incensed by this show of defiance, the communist threw themselves anew at the trolley. The trolley swayed violently from side to side. Mr. Ho (a Chinese Biscuit Company owner) wheezed like a logged up pipe due to asthma who was assisted by Raj Sharma to his residence at Pearl's Hill. When Raj left Mr. Ho at his residence, at once HO'S BISCUIT COMPANY workers assaulted Mr. Ho by shouting 'Imperialist Ho'. After seeing the entangled condition of Singapore, Raj felt his life was precarious.

Raj reached the island when he was 12 years old and worked at rubber or pineapple plantations. After facing unbearable struggle, he had reached an island at Serangoon road where he begged for a job, stayed under a Banyan tree and eating the remains of some rice rolled in a piece of paper. He slept on the pavement with the overwhelmed thoughts of his grandma and sister Leila. After a long struggle, Raj had joined at Manickam's cloth shop. Illiterate Raj was educated due to Krishna's teaching. When he was in the position to get an identity in an island, Manickam passed away. After Manickam's death, it happened for Raj to stand alone without anyone's support. Ho induced Raj to widen his economic status with the support of Mr. Yamaguchi (Yoshika-Ho's daughter-in-law's father) Japanese shipping agent at Middle Road. Middle Road was home for many Japanese people in Singapore where Raj met Mr. Yamaguchi and Mr. Shinoziaki. Raj gradually adopted Japanese culture and language, learns and trades in the arms and ammunition. The affluent economic status of Raj routed a wed lock between Krishna and Leela (Raj's sister).

Raj willingly married Yoshika and became step father for her kids because Mr. and Mrs. Ho lost their son Luke in the wartime massacre of Chinese men. Mr. Ho asks Raj to look after his family after his death. Raj Sharma gets a new identity by marrying Yoshika. He is a supporter of Rajaram Mohan Roy's thought of widow remarriage. Raj and Yoshika successfully restart the biscuit factory which Mr. Ho had closed due to Britishers' domination.

Raj became a wealthy man because of his trade with Japanese military. His other businesses too flourished. British started to kill people who are associated with Japanese. At that time, Yamaguchi says to Raj, "War in Europe is now causing us Japanese in Singapore much trouble" (150). "Why should a war so far away affect you here" (151) Raj queried to Yamaguchi? "The world is just a large pond. When a stone is thrown in, the ripples reach everywhere" (151) Yamaguchi answered logically.

Raj could not hide his relationship with the Japanese Shinozaki. Yamaguchi and Shinozaki were arrested because Shinozaki brought Japanese soldiers to Yamaguchi's house. Raj loses his identity again; he could not work at Serangoon Road and Middle Road. He could not understand either world history or Indian history but decided to acquire historical knowledge from Krishna his brother-in-law.

Raj approached Shinozaki who is staying at Toyo Hotel on the invitation of Colonel Yokota from defence Headquarters. Mei Lan pleads Shinozaki to rescue her brothers and grandpa. "In December of 1941, soon after the first enemy air raid, all the Japanese in Singapore had been interned in Changi Prison, joining Mr. Shinozaki who had earlier been charged with spying" (197). Mr. Ho sends Yoshiko to Katong to hide from the British. Japanese Major General Kawamura nominates Shinozaki as Adviser to Defence Headquarters. He says that Shinozaki's duty is "To protect the good citizens of this town, and see no mistakes are made by our soldiers . . . [He] must wear the Defence Headquarters armband at all times, and . . . [he] may also have one car for . . . [his] use" (217). Shinozaki develops his relationship with Raj Sharma because

Raj Sharma helped him when he was in Changei Prison. Military Adviser Shinozaki plans to form an Indian National Army with the support of Krishna to defeat the British.

Krishna was well schooled in the writings of Marx & Lenin. Subash Chandra Bose's inspiring talk motivated him to become an anti-british activist. Self-effacing Krishna moulded Indian youth league in Singapore by his radical speeches on Indian History, World History and Indian philosophy. "We must prepare to defend India's pride and glory. We must end British rule. We must prepare to shed our blood and sacrifice our lives if necessary for the independence of our motherland" (104). Krishna's voice begins to rise and the words flows powerfully from him.

Krishna's dream about INA becomes threadbare due to Bose's death at Tatwan. Psychologically depressed, Krishna consumes alcohol to get rid of unacceptable death of Bose. Krishna became member in Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) a newly formed multicultural political party who were vehemently opposed to the continuation of colonial rule. Krishna was arrested at Waterloo street house due to anti-british activity. Krishna was again arrested at St. John's place with MDU cadres (Malayan Democratic Union). Raj and Leila implores Krishna not to involve in anti-british activity. But Krishna writes articles for *Freedom Times*, which is completely hated by Raj. After sometime, Krishna is killed at his residence by unknown youngsters.

Howard was not allowed to use the toilet at Great World due to discrimination. The Kreta Ayer police station tragedy has left a deep scar in his heart. Howard was working near Collyer Quay at Belvedere. He was required to go on the ships, to learn the work of quay and the management of labour.

Later Howard joined the army to protect the city from bombardment. While he was fighting, Japanese shoot on his shoulder. He was rescued by Mohammad Abdullah, who worked for Malai's development. Later, Japanese were trying to sentence Howard for listening Delhi radio. Howard approaches Cynthia to rescue him from Japanese arrest. Cynthia sends Howard with

Broketooth to join his Guerrilla camp which was headed by Wee Jack. Howard faced a lot of difficulties in the camp with the thought of his mother, sister and Mavis. He learns the real meaning of life at the camp.

Howard departs from Wee Jack and reaches Lionel. The war and life in the jungle had changed him and he joins in harbor. He is promoted as section manager for low wages. He goes to Australia to study Politics and Economics at the University of Sydney. Howard joins in social welfare department and plays the role of drawing graphs, editing material, writing numerous reports, even rechecking interviews and so on (418).

“The future lies under a different sky,” Howard thought logically. The war and his time in the jungle had deepened with realisation nothing but experience could bring, while education and few years abroad had added polish and insight. Howard took up part time job with the suggestion of Raj to work in local government election for the Progressive party. Howard canvasses people and works hard for the first election of Singapore. Howard gets an opportunity to work at David Marshall (Chief Minister’s) office. He joins with Marshall to rectify Marshall’s challenging problems. Mei Lan approaches Howard to find out Greta.

Mei lan struggles to come out of traditional Chinese culture. Most of the Chinese girls were sold to rich men like her second grandma.

Gold and Silver and Little Sparrow must all have been sold by their parents for a bag of rice or a few coins when they were seven or eight years old, just like Ah Siew’s sisters. Now, Little Sparrow was already fifteen and Gold and Silver thirteen years old. Sorrow for the girls and horror at their plight blew hot and cold inside Mei Lan. What would she feel, what would she do if her parents decided to sell her? Worse than this was the realisation that it was her own grandfather who had bought the girls as a present for Second Grandmother? That one person could be bought as a gift for another filled her anew with distress. (51)

Second grandma sold her at the age of 5 and ancient master (Mei's grandpa) bought her for more money for her feet. People could be sold like onions or fish or a length of cloth. Her own grandfather had paid money for children and then filled Little Sparrow's body with a baby. And Second Grandmother too had been sold at five and sold again at thirteen to Grandfather (57).

Boon Eng (Mei's father) created monstrous debts due to gambling and sold a part of Lim Villa. Second grandmother thought about Mei Lan's marriage and expressed it. Motherless Mei Lan was not interested in marriage life. She secretly hoped that she might win a Queen's scholarship to go to England to study law. Mei goes to Belvedere to give Chinese Relief Fund booklet to Wilfred Patterson where she meets Howard. Mei and Howard are separated by their parents and the situation forces Mei to go to Hong Kong with her father to study secretarial course. They send letters to each other which were secretly hidden by Mei's father. As Mei Lan couldn't receive any letter from Howard, she thinks that Howard does not love her. Howard also thinks in the same way. After returning from Hong Kong, Mei Lan joins Medical Auxiliary Service as the Japanese bombs Singapore. Mei Lan and Howard continues their love relationship at Cousin Lionel's place. Mei Lan approaches Howard because JJ, Bertie and other slave girls were arrested by Japanese.

Mei was arrested by Japanese. Howard approached Raj to release Mei Lan from the prison. Shinozaki refused to help in this case. She was made to kneel on rough logs, unmoving for hours at a time, a block of wood between her legs to keep her knees apart. Her legs lost all feeling, pain burned through her body. Every time she toppled over she was viciously hit. They came the beatings with a long bamboo cane, usually on those soft parts of the torso where there would be bruising but no internal injury – the calves, the buttocks, thighs, and inner arms. She screamed for them to stop. No comb, no toothbrush; she rubbed her teeth with a finger, straightened her hair with her hands and then gave up as it knotted with sweat and filth; her clothes hung upon her, rank and torn, she stank of blood, pus and urine.

“For many weeks after being released from the YMCA she lived as a ghost in the east Coast Road house, seeing nothing, passing as if invisibly from room to room, from hour to hour. Nakamura stood everywhere, pulling her back into his dark arc as she tried to live again” (334). Mei Lan finishes the law course in London and she works in the office of the law firm in London. She returns to Singapore. Richly evocative, *A Different Sky* paints a scintillating panorama of thirty tumultuous years in Singapore's history through the passions and struggles of the characters.

Work Cited

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Devi, Sudha. M. “Mutating Identity in Meira Chand’s *A Different Sky*.” *Literary Quest* 1.6 (2014): 237-243. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.