

# Assimilation and Intergration of Cultures: A Study of Transnational Experiences in Selina Siak Chin Yoke's Novel 'The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds'

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**ABSTRACT**---*The evolution and transformation of human beings is a part of nature, but as human beings civilized, they started to migrate from one place to another to enhance their condition of existence. As time passed, migration has transformed into different frames and even people have transformed themselves according to advancements in technologies. At present, migration has become an ordinary occurrence due to globalisation. It is not that migration alone has transformed, but also the perspectives of the migrants; they have started to adapt to the migrated culture without giving up their origin culture. They maintain multiple connections with different nations without disturbing their origin. The theory of studying the multiple networks of immigrants and undergoing struggles in acclimatising and emerging with both the migrated culture and native culture is termed as transnationalism. "When people overcome the crisis by accepting, adapting and emerging with both the identities making dual identity and multiple connections with other nations they are termed as transnationals or trans-border communities". (Abirami and Alamelu, 2018, p34) Both men and women migrate, but when women migrate, they undergo infinite struggles in their migrated land. When women transcend nation, they are labelled as transnational women; many writers have penned and verbalised the tussles and challenges of immigrant women. Among those writers, Selina Siak Chin Yoke's novel The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds sets as a best model to interpret transnational women's experience. The objective of the present paper is to analyse the transnational experience and the tussles of immigrant women in the novel The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds through the lens of orthogonal cultural identification theory.*

**Keywords**—*Transnational women, tussles, cultural theory, acclimatisation, acceptance.*

## INTRODUCTION

Migration is considered as an essential part of human life which cannot be ignored or avoided. People migrate from one nation to another for various reasons and when they migrate, they encounter identity issues, alienation, isolation and chaotic state of mind in their migrated society. But at present, the perspective of the immigrants has been transmuted to a level that, they accept and acclimatise to the reality of the receiving society maintaining multiple connections with varied nations simultaneously. This character of an immigrant acclimatising to their receiving society is labelled as transnationalism. Levitt (2001) explores that, "Transnational networks were taking shape within fluid social spaces and were reproducing and creating

the being in two places simultaneously". Steven Vertovec (2009) states that "the collective attributes of connections, their processes of formation and maintenance, and their wider implications are referred to broadly as transnationalism". (Vertovec, 2009, p3) Both men and women migrate from their native lands but when both are compared, women confront many issues in their receiving society. Many writers have stepped into literature to verbalise and vocalise the speed breakers of immigrant women across the world and through these works they have exhibited the significant role of woman in a family. Among those writers, Selina Siak Chin Yoke, a Malayan-Chinese writer has expressed her views and experiences of a mixed identity woman through her novel The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds (2016). The objective of the present paper is to analyse the transnational experiences of an immigrant woman in Selina's novel, through an eye of orthogonal cultural identification theory.

## TRANSNATIONALISM – MOVING ACROSS NATIONS

Migration is one of the significant experiences of human existence. There are many migration theories in literature, but at present, transnationalism is the existing theory which relates directly to the present globalised world. Transnationalism is a social phenomenon which refers to people who are migrating to different countries and maintain multiple connections across borders. Vertovec (2009) states that, "Transnationalism studies explore networks pertinent to individuals across borders". According to Ozkul (2012) transnationalism studies the "migrant's attachments are flexible and their belongings are fluid". The word transnational was first introduced by Randolph Bourne in his article 'Transnational America', and later on, a study on the concept of transnationalism was imposed by the researchers who underlined that the immigrants can be active in two different countries and they acquire more than one citizenship who are identified as global citizens. Cirput (2008) asserts that, the transnational citizenship replaced an individual's single national loyalties with multiple nation states which was made visible in the political, cultural, social and economic realms. The perspectives of transnational migrants have been transmuted in a way that

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they consider the migrated land as home away from home. “There are depictions of individuals’ awareness of de-centred attachments, of being simultaneously in home away from home, here and there, maintaining several identities that link them with more than one nation”. (Vertovec, 2009, p6) There are several theories that can be applied to interpret transnationalism and one among those theories is orthogonal cultural identification theory, which is applied to study the adaptation and emergence of the immigrants in their non-native lands.

### ORTHOGONAL CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION THEORY

Orthogonal cultural identification theory deals with the pluralistic environment where individuals are identified with dual cultures without disturbing their origin culture. Oetting and Beauvais asserts that individuals may identify with more than one culture without necessarily sacrificing one cultural identity for another. (p1156) It is an interrelation between the culture and the individual. According to Eugene Oetting and Fred Beauvais (1990-1991) this theory “acknowledges the influence of a pluralistic environment and normalized experiences of identification with multiple cultures, and reflects the dynamic and fluid nature of cultural identification”. (p1157) This theory deals with family life, personal life, family success, personal success, family cultural traditions and personal cultural traditions. It highlights the bondage between an individual, family and culture.

The present paper is an outcome of amalgamating transnational theory and orthogonal cultural identification theory to interpret Selina’s novel.

### A REVIEW OF LITERARY ARTICLES

Jennifer Guglielmo’s (2010) article opens a window to transnational feminism by focusing on activism of the Italian-immigrant working-class women in America. Feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) has written that the act of recuperating repressed, submerged histories is deeply significant, because they provide an “antidote to alienation, separation, and the amnesia that domination produces.” (Guglielmo, 2010, p13)

Sarah Habib (2015) states that the paradigm of transnational feminism positions women in a global perspective. Sarah Habib (2015) explores the portrayal of non-western women living in western discourses and studies the transnational realities of women in their migrated state. Habib projects the illustrations of female experiences and patriarchal oppressions in fictional works by Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie and Tahmima Anam. Habib (2015) states that “transnational feminism – under the post-feminism phase – is a response to the global feminist frameworks: it seeks to examine the curious interrelationships of culture, race, geography and history that intersect with the political, social and economic factors of influence, and looks at where gender fits in it”. (Habib, 2015, p5)

Sepali Guruge and Enid Collins (2007) investigates the work experiences and mental health of Canadian immigrant women. Guruge and Collins “explore how multiple identities—such as age, race, gender and class—among other

social identities—intersect to influence immigrant women’s mental health”. (p15) Guruge and Collins (2007) finds a solution that, “To effectively care for immigrant women as clients in the mental health care system, professionals need to move beyond the singular focus on culture to understand their individual experiences”. (2007, p15)

Marie-Antoinette Sossou (2011) studies the issues of Ghanaian women using the method of phenomenology. Sossou also studies the stereotypes of Ghanaian women which suppresses the gender equality and considers women as inferior and second-class citizens. Sossou (2011) states the reality that, “Women were taught to accept their position through the socialization process, including their initiation rites. They were taught to be obedient wives and to respect their elders”. (Sossou, 2011, p2)

Most of the researchers have dealt with the suppression of global women in political, economic, religious and social aspects. The present paper varies from other research articles by analysing the tussles of immigrant women and their emergence with finding a solution to their tussles in the novel *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds*.

### THE BASE LINE OF THE NOVEL

The novel *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds* written by Selina Siak Chin Yoke was published in 2016. The novel gyrates around a rebellious female character, Chye Hoon with a mixed identity as Malayan-Chinese, referred to as Nyonya. The novel starts from Chye Hoon’s childhood days where she yearns to attend school and educate herself just like her brother. But since she is a girl child, education is denied and she is married, at the age of sixteen, as a second wife to Wong Peng Choon, a Chinese man living in Malay. She mothered ten children- seven boys and three girls. Yielding a boy child gave much pleasure for both Chye Hoon and Peng Choon. After the tenth child, Peng Choon moved to China to pay a visit to his native land and to his first family, leaving behind Chye Hoon with their children in Malay. Unfortunately, Peng Choon passes away in China and Chye Hoon is forced to take care of her ten children through the profits of her Nyonya culinary skills. She widens her business of merchandising Nyonya kueh to Ipoh and nurtures her children by giving good education, at first in Chinese and later on in English. She conceded her daughters to study in English medium. She witnessed the growth of her children and grandchildren who adapted themselves to the British culture in Malay. Chye Hoon has acclimatised to both Chinese Malayan cultures and she instils the significance of Nyonya tradition and permits her children to acquire British language. Chye Hoon passes away leaving her first daughter-in-law to take over the whole family, believing that she would follow her footsteps in leading a family.

Chye Hoon functioned as a bridge between her culture and her children. She preserved her Chinese Malayan culture and passed it on to her next generation. She allowed her children to get educated in English medium schools because Malay was one of colonies of the British, and so the influence of the colonisers engendered a great impact in the



lives of Malaysians. Selina has beautifully interweaved the dual colours of Chinese Malaysian cultures and had added beauty and light to the Nyonya identity by composing this novel.

#### **THE MAIDEN EXPERIENCE OF CHYE HOON AS A TRANSNATIONAL WOMAN**

The protagonist of Selina's novel, ChyeHoon experiences gender inequality in her mother land, China where, learning, reading and writing were denied by her father. She becomes a victim of gender inequality in her homeland because her father insists her to learn the household works since girls are born to serve men and take care of the family. ChyeHoon was not treated equally in her homeland, but luckily her husband PengChoon was very understanding and transformed her life more positively. In spite of her happy married life, ChyeHoon had difficulties in adapting to the new land initially, but later on she gets accustomed to the new culture. Her road to transformation had certain speed breakers which she overcomes it by accepting and acclimatizing the facts and realities of British Malaya.

#### **LONELINESS AND LONGINGNESS OF CHYE HOON IN MALAY:**

After joining hands with PengChoon, ChyeHoon moved to Malaya, a new place which is completely different from her native land. She had lived with family and friends in her native land, but in Malaya there were no one to share her time except her husband, and so she feels a sense of loneliness and longingness in Ipoh. "In those first lonely months my husband also became my best friend...I was desperately missing Penang. I longed for the sea". (p68) Being a homemaker, she stays at home for hours together which made her to feel the pain of being alone.

He would leave our house at seven every morning and return only around six in the evening. The hours in between were painful; the change from our house on Ah Kwee Street came as a shock. There I had always had others for company...after moving to Ipoh I was alone inside a silent house for hours, and sometimes days, on end...In those early months I longed for the hour of his return. (p72)

The above words of ChyeHoon assert loneliness because of relocation in Ipoh. Within a limited period of time ChyeHoon and PengChoon have adopted and acclimatised to the mixed cultures of China and Malaya. "PengChoon had already been introduced to Nyonya-Baba culture. He had a natural affinity for the Malay customs we adopted". (p71) ChyeHoon acclimatised to her new life within few months and she perceives a transformation in her life. "It did not take long for me to get used to Ipoh. As I became familiar with the town, I understood what my husband meant: things were happening". (p73) Transformation was not only happening for ChyeHoon but also in Ipoh. For ChyeHoon and PengChoon, their mixed marriage is not a hindrance for their happy life. It was less complicated and challenging. "our mixed marriage never created difficulties" (p71). The first few days were demanding challenging, but as time ticks the challenges were won by ChyeHoon.

#### **ACQUIESCENCE OF CHYE HOON AS BRITISH MALAYAN:**

ChyeHoon on one hand loved the beautiful nature of Ipoh, and on the other hand she hates Ipoh for it is a muddle with coolies running around and unordered houses. "I loved looking at them even on that first day...my impressions of the town were far from favourable. I found Ipoh chaotic after the orderliness of Penang". (p66) The town of Ipoh seemed to be new and different because Malaya was evaded by the British Empire and so Ipoh was filled with Whites, Malays and more of Chinese. ChyeHoon acquiesces the fact that Malaya is a British colony and whites were their rulers. She abhorred the British rulers and she frequently indicates them as 'White Devils', but she accepted to live under their rule as a symbol of acceptance. "They were our rulers, a fact I accepted...their rule accepted because it was our fate; tolerated, but never fully welcome". (p74) ChyeHoon has learned to adapt herself to live in British Malaya. Even though she hates the British rulers she has accustomed to the reality of Malaya.

ChyeHoon's life before marriage was miserable because education, food, reading and writing were all denied but later she resolved all these knots in her husband's land by accepting and adapting the reality of new land. Every denial in the life of women is a knot in a woman's path. Some women remove it and some women live with the unremoved knots till their last days. ChyeHoon has both removed and unremoved certain knots according to her circumstances.

#### **CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND DUAL IDENTIFICATION**

Being an immigrant woman, ChyeHoon accepts both the identities and she acclimatises to both the cultures of China and Malaya. On seeing her Father, she learned to acclimatise herself to the different cultures. "She said I would dress in Malay clothes but worship Chinese gods, wear my hair in a chignon and become known for spicy cooking". (p13) when ChyeHoon visited the temple in Malaya she feels it as home and her inner mind was filled with peace. The flashes of past come to her often when she sees things often resembling her hometown. "It was in atmosphere that Pa Lo Old Temple excelled. I felt at home at once...I was spellbound. Sometimes, when all was quiet, I could hear the water of the Kinta River as it trickled past". (p79)

"As I looked at Mother and SiewLan, I was reminded of our boisterous kitchen in Ah Kwee Street, where women had congregated to gossip, giggle and make delicious food. A longing for times past hit me. I was suddenly proud of my kitchen, of what I could do inside it. This, I thought, is what being a Nyonya means. Deep within my bones I felt my culture stir – the calling of my ancestors". (p87)

The above incident states that ChyeHoon feels pride of her Malayan kitchen which often reminds her of her past. She not only feels pride of her kitchen but also her identity as a Nyonya. Though she feels her Chinese culture within herself she has also accepted the Malayan culture and lives

with the dual identity. “A Nyonya...is a woman who breathes two worlds – not just one or the other, not more one than the other, but both equally. My two worlds were alive: Chinese and Malay rolled into one, blended by the centuries that had passed”. (p36) These words of ChyeHoon suits as a best example for orthogonal cultural theory, where she accepts the Malayan culture without sacrificing her Chinese origin. ChyeHoon has transformed completely with her Malayan tradition and had acquired a dual identity as Chinese-Malayan. PengChoon was torn with two families in Malaya and China. Though he was split between the two countries he was too close with Malayan family.

“PengChoon was pleased with the attention showered on Weng Yu and me. Yet in a strange way his profound satisfaction also caused turmoil, because his loyalties remained split between Malaya and China...with the birth of a son in Malaya, the contrast between his two families was magnified, and PengChoon was torn”. (p96)

ChyeHoon and PengChoon was expecting a Malayan born son and she sets cruise towards their world of dreams in setting a happy family in Malaya. “It was what he wanted – a Malayan-born son. We both hoped it would be for real, that we were indeed moving towards that world of his dreams” (p84) Making of *angkookueh* is one of the traditions that has been done by Malayan women and ChyeHoon seems to be happy in making kueh in her kitchen which symbolises the acceptance of Malayan culture in Malaya. “Making *angkookueh* was an activity I had enjoyed since accepting my destiny as a Nyonya...the spirit which pervaded my kitchen that afternoon has stayed in my mind. Life seemed so much less complicated then”. (p95) ChyeHoon have excelled not only in cultural transformation but also in earning money by blending her business with culture.

### CHYE HOON BLENDS HER CULTURE AND BUSINESS

Women has stepped into business to prove themselves that they are equal to men. In Selina’s novel, ChyeHoon has sewed her business and tradition together to make a successful career. She is proud of embracing her heritage and feels confident that she can predict her bright future of her family. ChyeHoon’s words exhibits the satiation of saving her family by her beam of hope. “On that first day of kueh making, I was so glad I had embraced tradition. I breathed in those familiar smells and gave thanks to my Nyonya heritage, convinced it would save my family”. (p161) Whatever business ChyeHoon does, her centre of motif is to save her family. “the idea of selling rolls of cloth came to me. Even if successful, the profit would have fed my family for no more than a week, but given where we were I had to try everything”. (p169) Through these words ChyeHoon proves her curiousness to explore new heights in enhancing her business through her Nyonya tradition. Though she has migrated from China to Malaya, ChyeHoon has well-adjusted with both the cultures and lived successfully between family and business.

### CONCLUSION

A transnational female is a collective noun for the sweet and salt experiences of an immigrant woman. Transnational women experience difficulties in their receiving society, but they overcome the issues depending on their circumstances. Transnational women play a vital role in preserving cultures and passing it on to the next generation. The features of transnational feminism like gender inequality, cultural integration of women, maintaining dual identity and overcoming the issues in the receiving society are all seen in Selina’s novel. Like a double shaded saree, ChyeHoon has interweaved her two shades of cultures and tradition and looks gorgeous as a Nyonya woman excelling in family, business, immigrant society and her Nyonya tradition.

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