

Literary onomastics in a postcolonial context: Catherine Lim's short stories

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1. Literary naming

Literary texts are in the business of creating new worlds. In the parlance of Text World Theory (Gavins 2007), literary texts are all about the creating of text worlds. To do that, we need world-building elements that can identify time, place and characters. One of the ways in which these (especially place and characters) can be identified is through naming. However names often do *more* than merely identify. These names need not be transparently descriptive for them to convey information about the place or person – for instance, their status or the category they belong to. Indeed, the names will not only be significant in the text world, but also in the *discourse world* (in other words, the world shared by the author and reader or audience) in that it indicates how the author wishes a place or a character should be seen.

As hinted above, names can range from explicitly identifying the function of places and names, or may only alluringly and allusively hint at them, or as Auden puts it, 'Proper names are poetry in the raw. Like all poetry they are untranslatable' (1970: 267). Here, Auden is not even focussing on literary names; he refers to names in general. The phenomenon becomes even more complex when we consider literary names. Fowler, in a lecture in Oxford, concluded:

[W]e can say that literary names have often strategic functions, organising themes and associations, and providing an interface between fictive and historical worlds. Naming is the mind of fiction, the directory of allusion, and the soul of association. Its significance consequently warrants more concentrated attention than it has generally received. W. H. Auden called proper names 'poetry in the raw': one might add that literature's names are also its haute cuisine. (Fowler 2008: 112–3)

There is of course an ontological difference between literary names and non-literary names. 'Literary names are not inherited: they must be found or invented. And writers find it hard to find the right name, one that relinquishes shadowy alternatives and embraces a definite character' (p 99). As Coates (2018) puts it, the names originate from the author to fulfil a range of functions. Authors therefore write from a position of knowledge of the function and destiny of particular characters and can choose to match the name to that knowledge. Parents, when naming a child can only hope about the child's function and destiny, and the naming is on the basis of hope rather than knowledge. This is not to say that parents have no knowledge; they have knowledge about the child's culture and society, and their choices will generally indicate how the child fits and belongs to that culture and society. They, however, lack knowledge of the child's destiny.

The status of literary names has traditionally been distinguished between those that have tended to be more descriptive or transparent and those that have tended to be less so. Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* makes a useful point on the matter. The focus is on 'the correctness of names', and he makes the distinction between names reflecting the true identity of the named – the view advocated by Cratylus – on the one hand; and names that were arbitrary – the view advocated by Hermogenes. Anne Barton's book maintains this distinction and she talks about cratylid and hermogenean names. The etymologies of the names are essential to understanding traditional Greek dramas, so these names are

cratylid; however New Comedy naming is hermogean, but she is quick to add that this is in ‘a special and qualified sense’ (p 29), because these names acquire meaning through association and previous use. It looks like even she would concede to Fowler’s position above, that *all* literary names are meaningful, and the difference must surely be in the degree of obviousness and the *degree* of ambiguity of the meaning. Smith (2016) sees names as semiotic (and therefore meaningful) in nature; he follows the distinctions made by American semiotician Charles Peirce and examines three semiotic associations: the iconic, indexical and symbolic associations.

Finally, Gibka (2018) in theorising the functions of character names in fiction gives the *identifying* function as the primary function which is the only obligatory function, and a whole range of secondary functions. I will not go through the range of functions, but will highlight the *semantic*, *sociological*, *localising*, *expressive* and *didactic-educative* functions later. I am assuming these labels to be fairly self-explanatory and will not offer any glossing at this stage.

2. Catherine Lim’s short stories

Catherine Lim came into the limelight in Singapore with her first collection of short stories *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* in 1978. She has been described by the magazine *Asiaweek* as ‘the ebullient doyenne of Singapore letters’ (20 October 1989, cited in Wicks 1991: 70). She has authored nine collections of short stories and five novels. She is known for her satirical examination of life in Singapore. In this paper I shall only focus on three stories from *O Singapore! Stories in Celebration* (1989). This collection of eight short stories do not always follow the traditional narrative form, and might imitate an essay, or an extended dialogue. The stories show her affection for Singapore; at the same time, however, she critiques Singaporean values, behavioural traits and their attitudes towards government pronouncements.

3. Postcoloniality and naming in Singapore

The notion of postcoloniality has to be grappled with in any consideration of Catherine Lim simply because her life spans the colonial and postcolonial eras. Catherine Lim was born Catherine Chew Poh Imm in 1942 to a Hokkien Chinese family in colonial Malaya; she grew up speaking English so English could be described as her mother tongue (or one of her mother tongues). She received a western education in a Catholic convent school, then in the prestigious Penang Free School, and subsequently obtained a first degree at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur and later a PhD in Singapore. She moved to Singapore in 1970 and took up Singaporean citizenship. (See Lim 1991, Quayum 2006, 2007 and Wicks 1991.) Malaya gained independence in 1957, and Singapore became independent in 1965.

Naming has been seen as an important way in which the structures, patterns and assumptions established by colonial powers can be dismantled. The aim in postcolonialism is ‘to question, dismantle and subvert the binary hegemonic constructions that have supported and justified colonialism’ (Casagrande 2018: 7). Clear examples of this phenomenon would be place and street name changes such as has happened in Kuala Lumpur. For instance, Swettenham Road is now Jalan Sultan Salahuddin. The language has changed. And the person being commemorated has changed too. (See Isa and Kaur 2015.)

However, personal naming in the Singapore context has in fact become *more* English (see below), and the manifestation of postcoloniality is less cut and dried and betrays some ambiguity. The link between postcoloniality and onomastics can be explored in our examination of Catherine Lim.

4. Names in short stories

The opening story of *O Singapore*, 'The malady and the cure' focuses on the model civil servant, Mr Sai Koh Phan, who obeys all the rules and applies government recommendations to his family – including the style of haircut, the number of children to have, employing pinyin names – until he finds himself beset with a malady that fills him with pain. The cure proposed by Dr Sindoo is for Mr Sai Koh Phan to cross over to Malaysia and disobey all the rules. The point being made is presumably that the Singapore government rules are physiologically unnatural, and the story therefore presents a critique of the zealotry with which the Singapore government prescribes all manner of rules of behaviour, and of those who blindly follow those rules.

The obvious onomastic point from the outline given is that the two names are charactonyms – in other words, they are descriptive. So Mr Sai Koh Phan is a *sycophant*, and Dr Sindoo advocates *doing 'sinful'* deeds. They are like names in Greek dramas and are cratylic and perform a semantic function. There is nothing particularly subtle or poetic about these names. Here, we have the narrator (or the author) telling the reader how to interpret these characters. The main clue is that Mr Sai Koh Phan is always named in full in the story, so that the link to 'sycophant' is always made.

What is interesting is that this is a name in the text world (the story world), but only *resembles* names in the discourse world (the real world). In the discourse world we are more likely to encounter a **Sindhu** than a **Sindoo** (note the spelling difference), although to English speakers those two forms will be homophonic. Sindhu is a name from Sanskrit meaning river or ocean. Based on the name, we understand the doctor to be ethnic Indian, but the semantic element is attached to the English (rather than Sanskrit) values of the name. The quasi-Sanskrit form points to its sociological function in identifying the ethnicity of the person.

Similarly Sai Koh Phan resembles the structure of an ethnic Chinese name: typically the surname takes up one syllable, and the given name two syllables. Theoretically, he could have been addressed by surname (Sai or Mr Sai) or by given name (Koh Phan), but this never happens in the story. It is not clear which Chinese words those syllables represent, but the pattern is sufficiently clear for readers to conclude that the character is ethnic Chinese. The semantic element is again attached to the English value of the name, and the sociological to the Chinese form.

In so far as the ethnic Chinese and Indians form significant portions of the Singaporean population, the choice of such forms can also be said to perform a *localising* function.

Naming itself is thematised in the story. In the 1980s the government advocated the use of names based on the pinyin Romanisation of the Mandarin Chinese versions of personal names, especially for younger Chinese Singaporeans. (Prior to this, Romanisations were based on other varieties of Chinese, with no standard Romanisation method, but roughly based on English values of letters. See Tan (2004).) In the story Mr Sai Koh Phan tells his sons they will no longer be known as Ricky and Chester. Their Alsatian dog Bonzo is to be known as Xiu. And their canaries Goldie, Chirpie, Louie and Randy are rechristened Jin, Xuan, Lie and Ran respectively. Bonzo, we are told, undergoes an identity crisis with the new name.

These name changes of course illustrate the sycophantic nature of Mr Sai Koh Phan. These names again fulfil a sociological function. The *language* of the original names tell us that the *owners* are English speakers. The *language* of the new names tell us that the owners are Mandarin Chinese speakers, and the use of the pinyin style Romanisation aligns the owners to the position of the Singapore government at the time: the names serve a political function (with a small 'p'), and in that name change is to be seen as a teaching point, the names perform a *didactic-educative* function. Again, there is not a whole deal of subtlety about how this is to be interpreted.

Personal names in Singapore's relatively short history have been subjected to much change. This means that the choice of a name might reveal age, social class and possibly religious affiliation. Confining ourselves to the ethnic Chinese population, we can say names before the 1980s employed non-standard Romanisations and subsequently the pinyin Romanisation based on Mandarin Chinese began to be employed more. Before the 1980s English-based given names were in the minority. Currently the majority of Chinese babies are given English-based given names. These names follow the general global trends with regard to fashionableness. Therefore, a Dorothy in Singapore is probably an older person than a Chloe. Finally, having more than one English-based given name might also take the person up a notch socially. (For details, see again Tan (2004).)

One of the stories specifically mentions the change in personal naming patterns in Singapore. In the story 'A Singapore fairy tale', the Wise Man has volunteered himself to answer all manner of difficult questions, including this one.

'What percentage decrease has there been in the choice of the name of "Ah Kow" for male babies over the last fifteen years, and what percentage increase has there been in the choice of western names over the same period?'

'Now that's a difficult one,' thought the crowd, and looked anxiously at the Wise Man. The Wise Man, by now enjoying the aura of genuine admiration that had gathered around him, said with a benign smile, '65.7 decrease in relation to "Ah Kow"; 68.4 per cent increase in relation to western names.' ('A Singaporean fairy tale', pp 99-100)

This of course shows Catherine Lim's awareness of naming trends, so that they are available for indexical (or 'poetic' and allusive purposes). 'Ah Kow' is her representative Chinese name with non-standard Romanisation. 'Western name' refers to what I have called English-based given names earlier.

The name choices are easily illustrated in the story 'In search of (a play)', where a woman engages in conversation with a Confucian sage, complaining about the man that the state dating agency has assigned to her. So Sharilyn Zelda Lee Swee Mei is paired up with Mr Chow Pock Mook. She talks about her old flame Mr Vernon Alexander James Wu. All three names recognisably belong to ethnic Chinese personages – the surnames are clearly Chinese: Lee, Chow and Wu. The surnames provide the *localising* function. The difference in the given names signals their belonging to different sub-groups within Singaporean society: the *sociological* function.

The woman has English-based and Chinese-based given names. She also belongs to the more 'progressive' group with two English-based given names, and that those are from among the less common list of given names. All of this betrays her more western outlook. This outlook tells us more details than just social group, and in this way, it could be said that the names provide an *expressive* function. Indeed, in the story, Sharilyn is described as loving English literature, particularly British literature.

The assigned date (Chow Pock Mook) has only Chinese-based given names. 'Pock' also has negative associations in English, so that he appears to be the target of humour. The name points towards his more parochial and less cosmopolitan outlook.

Finally, the old flame (Vernon Alexander James Wu) looks super progressive with three English-based given names, although this time two of them are from the common or classic list of given names. His name matches the woman's name more.

And so Sharilyn finds no joy with Mr Chow and hankers after Mr Wu. Their names seem to indicate their destinies.

It seems clear that in both 'The malady and the cure' and 'In search of (a play)', the personal names of the characters are significant clues given to the reader. Understanding the onomastics of the short stories is necessary to appreciating what the author is trying to convey.

5. Conclusion

Literary names provide us with signals about how these literary works can be interpreted, and Catherine Lim's short stories are not exempt from this dictum. In fact, it appears that she relishes engaging with personal names in her short stories along with many other writers. As Fowler noted above, it opens up all manner of possibilities for the reader.

In addition to the obligatory identifying function, names serve semantic, sociological, expressive, localising and didactic-educational functions. The semantic function appears to operate in the discourse world level – in other words, they are the author's signal to the reader; whereas the other functions operate within the text world (or the story world). Certainly Catherine Lim's stories illustrate how these functions are active in her onomastic forays.

Do the names betray postcoloniality? I have mentioned how the surnames and some of the given names indicate Chinese ethnicity, and therefore perform a localising function. In that the points of reference have changed, this element can be linked up to postcoloniality. This, together with the sociological function, shows different prioritisation and values from the colonial one.

However, the ironic aspect of names in Singapore is that the continued promotion of the use of English in the nation and the force of globalisation has meant that English naming styles (mainly through the adoption of English-based given names) have become more popular. This 'western' outlook can be seen to counter the movement towards postcoloniality.

And we see all of this in Catherine Lim's stories.

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