



UGC Approved Journal



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

**Volume 6, Issue 5
May 2018
www.ijellh.com**

Midhu Mirian Alex
Research Scholar
Institute of English
University of Kerala
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala
Email- midhumirian@gmail.com

A Poet on the Crossroad: A Reading into the Migrant Experience

In Ouyang Yu's Selected Poems

Abstract

The overwhelming scores of migration have reoriented the formative foundation of Australian society by reconceptualising multiculturalism as the national identity of the country. The multifarious identity has eventually led to the inception of migrant literature, an indisputable compilation. Among the many, Chinese Australian literature is challenging the existing paradigm of Australian Literature by being vocal in recounting the migrant experiences of the Chinese population in Australia. Chinese Australian poet and author Ouyang, Yu, whose dissenting voice and writing style is testing new waters in the literary world of Australian poetry. The present paper is an attempt to address the preoccupied question of national identity of Australia by divulging more into the workings of the entangled cross- cultural psychic of the Chinese immigrants. Ouyang's poems will provide a genuine ground to unravel more on the concept and nature of multiculturalism. So that one can deduce whether the multicultural image that Australia is proclaiming across the globe is a fact or a facade.

Keywords – Migrant Literature, Chinese Diaspora, Multiculturalism, Australian national identity

The earlier nomadic life has passively given way to mass migration, a potent phenomenon that has drastically changed the global scenario of the present age. This tendency of human movement has been elaborated meticulously by Moslund as “a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meeting, [...] reshaping

the cultural landscapes of the world's countries and cities" (2). Similarly, the overwhelming scores of migration have also reoriented the formative foundation of Australian society by reconceptualising multiculturalism as the national identity of the country.

This progression from a monolithic identity to a multifarious identity has eventually led to the inception of migrant literature, an indisputable compilation in Australian Literature. Among the many, Chinese Australian literature is challenging the existing paradigm of Australian Literature by being vocal in recounting the migrant experiences of the Chinese population in Australia. Mainly their concern in retelling these stories is to rectify the stereotypical images of their ethnicity endorsed by preconceived Eurocentric imagination. Whereby the Chinese Diaspora can reinstate and make the world to identify and recognise their reality as an individual who profess a different and unique identity.

Featured as a hybrid art, Chinese – Australian Literature chiefly dwells on the premise of issues related to the yearning of the homeland, revival of the homeland history, nostalgia, memory, sense of alienation, question of identity, assimilation, marginalisation, and various policies adopted by the Australian state. These multicultural themes are emphatically encapsulated in the letters of the prolific bilingual contemporary Chinese Australian poet and author Ouyang, Yu, whose dissenting voice and writing style have made him “perhaps the most indecorous writer at work today” (Birns, 194), who is testing new waters in the literary world of Australian poetry.

This pursuit of Ouyang Yu is clearly pronounced in his twenty years of literary career where he has authored over more than 90 books that nearly comprise of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, literary criticism, and literary translation as well as publication of articles in magazines and newspaper across the globe. Ouyang is also credited to be one of the pioneering architect and editor in establishing Australia's only bilingual Chinese literary journal, *Otherland*.

Besides these literary merits, Ouyang judicious use of English and Chinese have accomplished him in translating the minute strands of the poetics and dynamics of two languages that is separated by their inherent linguistic, literary and cultural difference. Also his importance largely rest on the deep understanding that he has derived as a research scholar in Australia who has worked upon and published his study that dealt with the various aspects and viewpoints that the Chinese community in Australia reserves for the Australians and vice versa.

These specialities accompanied with very scant research studies done on this proficient poet have indeed been compelling enough for me in taking an instant interest in Ouyung Yu, the outspoken literary figure and his corpus of work that requires more scholarly deliberations. Following this line of research, the present paper is an attempt to address the preoccupied question of national identity of Australia by divulging more into the workings of the entangled cross-cultural psychic of the Chinese immigrants. This paper tries to get a glimpse of the lived experiences of the Chinese immigrants in matters related to their alienation, assimilation, belonging, exploitation as well as cultural dislocation in Australia.

For this purpose two poems of Ouyung is selected for analysis to understand the Chinese diasporic identity at close quarters that still endures marginalisation within the society. The examination of these poems will provide a genuine ground to unravel more on the concept and nature of multiculturalism; a policy that encompasses the co existence of pluralistic identities. So that one can deduce whether the multicultural image that Australia is proclaiming across the globe is a fact or a facade.

Ouyung poems have always scrutinized the supposition of multiculturalism's authenticity advocated by the Australian Government. This is because Ouyung, himself has been denied the opportunity to be a part of the Australian academia, though possessing the credibility for the post. In McCarty's article, *Thank Yu*, Ouyung acidly remarks that "I look at the composition of teaching staff and laugh" cause "You can count the numbers of Chinese on a few fingers" fittingly convey the poets cynicism towards the state of affairs of the country. Surprisingly this remark bears relevance when we realize that the Chinese diaspora constitute the third largest ethnic residential group in Australia. This racial prejudice that each Chinese immigrants has to undergo is arrested in the few selected lines of Ouyung's representative poem "An Identity CV" as follows

By blood:	han nationality for the last 46 years including this year but uncertain if going further back; there could be some other bloods mixed; a dna test would be needed to determine the purity or percentage of purity...
By mistake:	getting caught by two, wanted by none, hated by most...
By nationality:	Australian for the last couple of years;

Chinese for the first 43, unashamed of
either; having a bit of problem with

Here the poet is vehemently declaring that multiculturalism - the much hyped practice has failed miserably as a result of its lack of conviction where an individual is forced to present a resume to detail his identity in order to stay in this place. This shows the gap in Australian national identity which is pervasively preventing from accommodating as well as acknowledging the presence of multiple ethnicities. Though staying very long in the land and owning an authorised Australian citizenship still makes them perplexed about their “stateless” and “statusless” space that they occupy in the society. Caught between two cultures but belonging neither to both disturbs them deeply where each Chinese migrant is trying to figure out the pertinent question of Who am I.

By occupation : a stateless and statusless poet;...
By race: hard to define at the moment; some sort...
 yet unformulated new theory
 would be needed;
By the way: i haven't had a decent job for the last 11
 years; would you consider taking me on?

Inevitably the above mentioned lines highlight the insecurities that prominently dominate the realm of racial discrimination directed towards this ethnic group. This confused response mainly arises as an after effect of marginalisation brought about by displacement and identity anxiety respectively. Furthermore the title of the poem “An Identity CV” appraises a throbbing question of one’s identity, where an individual’s personal space or precisely one’s integrity has been thwarted and exploited when a identity CV is highly recommended to decide whether you belong or not.

The second poem *Alien* highlights the “unwelcoming eyes” and “unsmiling noses” of the mainstream white settlers who have successfully imbibed and injected the spirit of uneasiness into the mindset of the immigrants. These people have prevented the Chinese from associating and integrating into the Australian society so as to become an integral part in sketching Australia’s multicultural national identity. The poet’s cryptic words that convey his sceptic sentiment is reflected in as

I stand on this land
that does not belong to me
that does not belong to them either
alone like the land itself ...

I don't care
being alien
I stand alone
impervious to questions like
when are you going home ...
etc. etc. Irrelevancies.

These lines argue on the ideology of 'ownership'; a solemn inquiry put forth by an immigrant who wants to elucidate the position of the White settlers in association with their social strata in the Australian society. If the Chinese migrant can readily accept the status of being an alien, then Ouyang immediately reminds the white settlers who appears to have selective amnesia about their history of arrival, that they too are migrants who have settled in this No Man's Land by usurping the aboriginals the original masters of Australia. By strategically positioning the Chinese immigrants as aliens, standing alone and content, the poet is exposing the hidden imperfection of Australian society that boast about upholding the so called cultural allegiances to the ideals of egalitarianism.

Thus Ouyang's poetry always betrays the falsehood notion of Australian multicultural spirit by pinpointing the fissures and dearth upon which the enterprise, multiculturalism has been conceived and operated. This faulty line is reverberated by spilling out the clash between the white settlers and Chinese immigrants who are exhibiting two divergent traditions and cultures. And simultaneously also disclose the in-between spaces that the hybrid identities (Born and brought up as Chinese Australians) have secured. Overall, this dissenting poet is pushing the boundary of Australian national identity by revolting against the standard norms of defining who an Australian is, by broadening the individual spaces to welcome a new yet ancient Chinese Australian voice and identity that duly deserves to known across.

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