

KOLUM KRITIKA

RESISTING BOUNDARIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM

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About the Interviewer

Lawrence L. Ypil teaches literature and writing at the Ateneo de Manila University. He has published poems and essays in local and international journals and magazines, and has won first prize in the Carlos Palanca Awards 2006 for his poetry collection *The Highest Hiding-Place*.

About the Interviewee

Suchen Christine Lim is the prize-winning author of *Fistful of Colours*, which was awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. Her fourth novel, *A Bit of Earth*, was shortlisted for the same prize in 2004. *The Amah: A Portrait in Black and White*, a co-authored play, was awarded the Short Play Merit Prize in 1989. Her other novels are *Ricebowl* and *Gift from the Gods*. In 1997 she was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to attend the International Writers' Program at the University of Iowa. She is the first Singaporean writer honored as the University of Iowa's International Writer-in-Residence in 2000.

Lawrence L. Ypil (Larry): In your talk for the Ateneo de Manila University Literature Conference, "Reading Asia: Forging Identities in Literature," you mentioned how the novel, *A Bit of Earth* (2000) began. You said it began with the character Wong Tuck Heng.

Suchen Christine Lim (Suchen): Yes. The image of a boy Wong Tuck Heng appeared in my mind from nowhere one day when I was working on my curriculum activities for the Singapore Ministry of Education. I lived with that boy in my head for about a year before I finally clarified who he was. And when I gave him a name Wong and I positioned him as a Cantonese boy and as someone from southern China because I saw him with a *que* (ponytail). And that told me that he was probably from the late nineteenth century when the Chinese started coming to Malaya.

Larry: Is that way you usually start a novel? Almost like a vision?

Suchen: Well the last two books were certainly like that. *Fistful of Colours* (1993) started with the image of a woman, a young woman, painting furiously on a canvas with her bare hands. I have no idea how that came about. That afternoon I was minding my son who was three years old playing at my feet and I was just being what I thought was a housewife and a mother when suddenly this woman came into my head and I had to write down what I saw. And that became part of the first chapter of *Fistful of Colours*. If you have read *Fistful of Colours* you will see that it starts there.

Larry: How do you decide when a character in your mind will become a character in a novel? Or, how do you decide when an image will be useful?

Suchen: I think it's the colour and the intensity of that image. I mean, all of us get images, you know, especially those of us who have acquired the art of meditation. When you close your eyes you see a lot of images – the past, the recent past, and things like that. But the two images that became part of my last two novels were certainly very intense experiences of scene and had no connection with whatever I was doing then. I thought I was writing syllabus material for the Singapore English curriculum, but this boy Wong came into my head, and luckily he was a boy, not a man! That might have been distracting!

Larry: That would have been a different matter! Do you find it easy to write? These characters have such a different life from yours. They have different nationalities, different histories, different social classes.

Suchen: No, they are not me at all. Because I saw myself then, and I still do, as young writer. Not in terms of chronological age, because I'm past that, but young in terms of the craft of writing. So I didn't know what to do with these images. I didn't understand the process. The process of the imagination and the process of writing (very different processes) are extraordinarily mysterious. Perhaps we'll never fully understand them. All I did then was to write down what I saw and eventually what I heard. Sometimes I hear also.

Larry: You hear what your characters say in your imagination?

Suchen: Yes. And it went on from there, sometimes I imagine. But when it comes to me the first time it is always vivid. Sometimes things come when I am doing something else. And that to me is the beauty and the mystery of writing. Of art, in fact. The creative imagination

is unfathomable.

Larry: In your novels, there is a very strong sense of history. *A Bit of Earth* especially is an historical novel.

Suchen: It was launched by an historian, Professor Wang Gung Wu, (Director of the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore) who is one of the respected historians of Southeast Asian history of Malaysia and of China.

Larry: Have you always been interested in history?

Suchen: Well, I am a history buff of sort. I am a magpie. I collect all sorts of history trivia. You never know when it might be useful in the writing process. Of course, the best histories—the most interesting, that is—is not always found in the official histories. You have to search to find the interesting pieces of history, like adultery. You have to search the footnotes.

Larry: You search the marginalia, for whatever escapes the headings.

Suchen: Yes. I look for the kind of history that mainstream historians would ignore because most historians write about people in power, people who have attained wealth, or have great knowledge and expertise. But they don't tend to write about the rickshaw-pullers, the coolies, the miners, the tin miners. These are the histories I am interested in for my books.

Larry: Why do you think it is important to talk about these seemingly unimportant minor characters?

Suchen: I didn't have a plan to write about them, to say they were important. It just came about because when I look around they exist. It's not my fault if mainstream historians don't write about them. They only write about politicians and not coolies, they only honor the millionaire, the landowner and not the landless. So maybe I do like to look at the things that other people don't like to look at. For example, I like to look at earthenware, and brass, and coppers, not so much the butterflies that people collect. So somebody has to look! That is the job of a writer—perhaps it should also be the job of the historian, but the world isn't like that—yet.

Larry: In your latest novel, *A Bit of Earth*, most of your characters are male.

Suchen: I have a good explanation.

Larry: And yet I feel it is a novel about women. There are men in the novel, the major characters are men, but I get the sense that it is a novel about women really.

Suchen: Well, you are sitting in front of me. I see you. You are a male. You are a man. But behind you, I see your mother, your sister, your auntie. I can't help it! And that's a fact of life. I don't believe in writing a book and saying this is a feminist book. The reason why I write is much more complex than that. It's back to the mysterious processes of writing: some character comes jumping into my head and sometimes they're male. That I don't fully understand, and I don't think we ever will fully understand. But the conscious reason I had for writing more about male characters was because for the previous three books the critics said, "Oh, Suchen, you're a feminist writer! Because you talk about women and their troubles, and what have you." And I got quite upset because if *you* wrote about men no one would come up to you and say you are a "masculinist" writer. But they do that to women. Why? I am a writer like everybody else. I want to resist being labeled, and so I choose to write about both women and men.

Larry: So you feel the labels aren't important, at least for you as a writer?

Suchen: I want to be beyond labels. I come from a country, an island, full of boundaries and borders that we are not supposed to cross. I want to be free from all that. I would like to be a half blind person, or at least like someone wearing glasses, who can't see boundaries very clearly. So, away with labels that bind people and set borders around writers. I choose to write about the people I see and the people who come to me.

Larry: The other thing that I love about your novels is their settings. Your descriptions of setting and the detail you give seem like a character in itself. The land—explain to me the importance of land in your novels.

Suchen: I think, for me as a person and a writer, land is important. I tend to believe that the land, the geography, shapes the people. Perhaps the mountains bring about a certain generosity of spirit that people living on a tiny island with no hills cannot experience. I

grew up in Malaysia with the view of the Penang Hills and the Nakawan Range. I had a grandfather who took me out to sit on a rock and to look at the hills. I think that the daily gazing at trees and mountains does something to one's soul that you can't quite explain or control. My soul has been marked deeply by the land and that comes across in my writing.

Larry: There are many occasions in your novels where a character makes an offering to nature. The miners before they cut down the trees at one point. There's a relationship not only between the Malay and the Chinese and Indian, but also between these men and the landscape. There's a relationship between the people and the land.

Suchen: Hmm, well historically that kind of a relationship between the land and the people is an historical fact. Traditional cultures had a spiritual relationship with the land and with nature. That has not yet been fully lost to many of our Asian cultures. It's still rooted within us, even if we are losing it.

As for me, I do think that there is some value in the reverence of land as a gift. The land has a life of its own, that we the users of that land should honor and appreciate. It is a very old traditional value in Asia that we should honor. I hope we will not lose it, but with urbanization, large sections of the population have lost the feel of the soil beneath our feet, because we no longer walk on it. We no longer walk on earth, we walk on concrete. So maybe it's something I don't share with my fellow Singaporeans, because they're city dwellers, and I was born in the country and I grew up with ricefields.

Larry: So you would say your imagination was shaped more by Malaysia than by Singapore?

Suchen: No, I wouldn't say that. They both influence me greatly, though in very different ways. Certainly, I cannot say I am a Malaysian writer.

Larry: You stayed in Malaysia for how long?

Suchen: I was there for fifteen years. I grew up in Malaysia. So I think I have that relationship of sensibility to the earth that the traditional people had—those that worked the land. In *Fistful* and in *Rice Bowl* (1984) my first novel, there is a sensibility in terms of the relationship between the characters and the earth. So I think I am a dweller in both. In both the city and the land. In both Singapore and Malaysia. That's why I don't want to see too many

boundaries. Nor can you simply say that there is no appreciation for the land in Singapore—it is there, but it may be different. Nor can you say there is always an appreciation for the land in Malaysia—that's not true either. The world is too complex. Boundaries make simple divisions.

Larry: Did you go back to Malaysia often?

Suchen: Yes! Yes!

Larry: But you live in Singapore.

Suchen: Yes. You see, it is a complex relationship. Boundaries can make false divisions, where no division exists. Between the land and the human soul there was once no division, or at least, the boundary was thinner than it is today.

Larry: Was it you who migrated to Singapore?

Suchen: No, my family. My grandfather was from China. He migrated to Malaysia. Back in those days, the boundaries were a lot more fluid. You know, in that generation I suspect many were illegal immigrants. They crossed the borders much more freely than we do today. And the border between their daily life and their spiritual sensibilities was a lot thinner too.

Larry: You mentioned that your grandfather worked as a coolie on the land. Has that influenced your writing?

Suchen: I honor his spirit and the spirits of those like him who worked the land in *A Bit of Earth*. In a sense, it was a new land that he discovered. As a young man, he was from a rice-growing village in China. He and the people like him were very close to the land. And in the new land, they maintained their close relationship and respected the land that fed them and their families.

Larry: You mentioned once that you were never confident in your understanding of the Malay language. Yet the issue of language is very important in your work.

Suchen: Since I live in a multicultural, multilingual, multi-religious society, I think that the

variety of languages, customs, and religions are part and parcel of my inner landscape. I think that I celebrate that variety of languages and the variety of people in my work. It is not an easy task to maintain a truth to your roots and your heritage, and yet remain open to the Other. Language offers us a way to negotiate our loyalties and our openness. Language certainly reflects where we are from, but it also reflects how far we are willing to go into the culture and traditions, into the identity, of the Other. Despite needing to remain open, we do need a connection to our own self, to our own roots.

Larry: Here in the Philippines, when we learn to speak English the task is to make sure that your Filipino accent is erased.

Suchen: So how are you supposed to speak? Like the Americans?

Larry: On the one hand, there is the rise of the call centers that demand a certain accent. They're forcing people to have an American accent as part of their job. So it is very interesting for me to read your works. You write your characters' language as it is spoken. I can hear their accents. You write in their language instead of transcribing your characters' language into standard English. You seem to be saying that it is possible to speak in English and yet maintain...

Suchen: Your Asian sensibility?

Larry: Your "Asian sensibility" and the more local sensibility, not only of the province but also of the village.

Suchen: Yes it's possible. I think accent is an acquired thing. Like an acquired taste for durian, or cheese. But if you really get down to it, so long as the English is comprehensible internationally and grammatically understood by everyone else, then whether you speak in this accent or that accent is just dressing up. The main thing is, are you understood? Are you speaking English in a grammar that is common to all? At least comprehensible to all?

Right now we're talking about a kind of international English. Now that would be something we could use for call centers, for example, or the opening of a seminar. It would require that all the various English speakers be open to the varieties. Everyone would have to learn to adjust to the varieties of accents and grammars and lexical variations. At the moment, many

are not willing to be so open. Some want to continue to impose their variety. That won't work any more in an international setting. Our world is too small. We need this international English in today's world.

But when I am with you, I can speak in another register. I know your Asian ear can understand me. So I am freer with you to speak my own more local English. This is what I used once in the seminar and my characters use it in my books. We understand one another and our local English allows us to express our identities and culture.

A student once asked me if it's alright to use Singlish, which is the Singapore street language. A lot of people, especially politicians and administrators, tend to say don't do that, it's ungrammatical. But if you look at it, I think you should be flexible. We have a variety of table manners. When you're invited to dine at the Marine Hotel, an expensive French restaurant, you will learn to use a fork and knife and spoon, a champagne glass, and so on. But if you dine at the hawker center you won't be doing that. You'll be using your hands and chopsticks, wearing shorts and loafers and slippers. And the whole wonderful thing about education is that we learn to be flexible, and when to be flexible. When to be formal and when to be informal, and to be able to make that switch. The whole idea of school and education is that we teach students, who have their own local English, to be able also to use that more international register of language of English so that they can move up and down the social scale. To be just as comfortable in Malacanang Palace as in the...

Larry: ...in the shanty right beside it! Yes, in the barrio, and why not? So the person who is fixed on a single "correct" register of language, now that is a sad thing whether he is a King or Prime Minister. You cannot just go up the scale. You have to be able to go down too—to communicate in the various local Englishes.

Suchen: That's it exactly. And that's why I think it is so important to have books written and published that contain local varieties of English. We need the experience, the exposure, of reading other varieties. And we need to be able to see them in novels so that it is a way of saying, these too have a right to their own use of English. It gives dignity.

Larry: Finally, in relation to the whole conference—the construction of Asian identity. It's a volatile topic. For example, there are people, on the one hand, trying to set boundaries, trying to define what makes them "them." It's necessary for people to define themselves

and to assert their own culture. Yet, on the other hand, there's the need to put on that open, international identity. You realize that the moment you get in touch with other people, you have to let your own boundaries go. There's a kind of flexibility necessary also in intercultural dialogue.

Suchen: Yes. You get nearer to the Americans and the West. You wear certain branded boots like Nike, right? But, you go somewhere else and you might want to wear a sarong. On certain occasions, you might want to wear a barong shirt. Other times, you can wear no shirt at all. And language, once you are confident about yourself and your identity, you can use language like a "clothes change" and we can all be multi-language communicators.

Larry: Does this give you ideas for new work?

Suchen: I was just thinking, maybe that's what literature does. Literature celebrates not just the grand themes, but also the little lives, in the village, in the barrio. No history book, no sociology book, no business book will celebrate that. That makes literature superior. May I use the word "superior"? At least, it makes literature more interesting to read!

Larry: The way it can explore the languages of these various peoples?

Suchen: Yes. And then we use language to indicate all these things, you know, and that is the clay. The potter uses the clay to make his pot; the writer uses the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet to do that.

Larry: When did you decide to write in English, or was it a conscious choice?

Suchen: I really hadn't much choice! I failed Malay in school. My Chinese is not very good, you know. I was sent to learn Cantonese, you know, but Cantonese was banned in Singapore. I had to be good at something—in those days, a woman had to have some little learning. My mother had great hopes that I would learn how to sew and embroider, since I was no good at languages. She sent me to the Irish nuns but I didn't learn to sew, I picked up English and literature.

Larry: Do you see a point when you will be writing in another language, like Chinese?

Suchen: I don't think so. I think that there is still a lot to explore using English as a medium for international communications. I think our future will be to deepen and to widen that particular audience. And I don't know if my other languages will ever be good enough!

Larry: Do you have a particular reader in mind when you write your novel?

Suchen: When I first started, no. I was just so happy that I was able to write. So it was just an incredible gift. It took me all of ten years to accept it. Now when I think about it, if you ask me about an audience, I hope it will be a Southeast Asian audience and then the rest of the world. I write in Singapore and you in Manila read it. I'm so happy you understand it, which means that there's a connection. Yes, we can tango.

Larry: Perhaps writers here in Asia, for example, the ones writing in English, almost always seem to be writing for the West. There's an almost inherent understanding that the ultimate market is the Western market—the American or the UK market. It almost seems that all the writers are writing for the people outside Asia and not for each other. Is it surprising for you that a Southeast Asian, like a Filipino, will respond to your writing?

Suchen: Yes and no. In the sense that we share the same colonial history, it's not surprising that you can easily understand my writing. But if I think about colonizers, I think strictly of British, not Spanish. So, it is surprising that you can understand. And then I think of Malaysia because we in Singapore have a shared history. I think of Indonesia because it's so close to us in Singapore. And the Philippines is further north. So in that sense I am surprised again. But again, I am not surprised because we have a shared linguistic heritage in terms of English, the common language, despite our various colonizers. Ultimately, I see us all as part of Southeast Asia. I always maintain that I am a writer of Southeast Asia. I am Chinese, but I am Southeast Asian; not Chinese Chinese but a Southeast Asian Chinese. That's the flexibility of my boundaries. A strong local sense, but open to flexibility.

Larry: Is the novel an important formulation for you?

Suchen: Ah, yes!

Larry: Are you confident that it will be an important part of this new Asia?

Suchen: Yes. And I think it will live. Novel writing might take other forms, but it has a kind of narrative strength that will help it to survive. It is eternal, whatever.

Larry: Do you think Southeast Asia needs the novel?

Suchen: Yes. The novel because of its capacity for breath and for depth in terms of time gives you, the writer, a way of staying and sharing something in a written breath or depth that you can't find, let's say, in a poem or in short story. You don't have to know me in order to be able to understand *A Bit of Earth* or *Fistful of Colours*. Whereas, I think for poetry, you have to know the poet a little bit and his context and so on, his philosophy, to get the full flavor of poetry, right? So in that sense for me, writing the novel is where I am most satisfied. Or maybe I've lived a long time with it, I don't know. We're like an old married couple.

Larry: Suchen, we've talked a lot! We've wondered about the mystery of the creative process, where your characters come from. We've noticed your interest in history, especially the marginal characters who don't get written about in official histories. You've said you resist being labeled a feminist, but you do see the importance of women in life. You resist, in fact, all boundaries and borders that limit people. And so you maintain a spiritual connection with the land, minimizing the boundaries that separate, and instead focusing on the deeper union between the human spirits and nature. We explored a little your origins as an Asian writer, but again you defy the borders that would categorize you. And, we had a good discussion on the varieties of English: the need for an international English and also the need to appreciate local Englishes.

It's been an interesting discussion, Suchen. Thank you very much!