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Identity and Friendship in Hsu-Ming Teo´s Behind the Moon *(2000)*

Catalina Ribas Segura
University College Alberta Giménez CESAG
Palma de Mallorca, Spain
catymallorca@yahoo.com

Abstract: In her second novel, *Behind the Moon* (2000), Hsu-Ming Teo explores the identity construction of three teenage friends and how they defy the notion of the 'ideal' Australian as a heterosexual, Protestant, white, English-speaking, Australian-born of British ancestry young adult person. Set in the western suburbs of Sydney in the 1990s, the three friends are an example of the multicultural society of the time: Justin Cheong, the son of a Chinese-Singaporean family who arrived in Australia with the Business Migration Programme; Tien Ho, a refugee girl of Chinese-Vietnamese and Afro-Cajun-Creole-American ancestry; and Nigel 'Gibbo' Gibson, the son of an Anglo-Australian father and an English mother. The novel tackles different relations among these characters and their families during their teenage years and especially as young adults. This paper seeks to analyse the evolution of the identities of Justin, Tien and 'Gibbo' through the notions of belonging, gender construction and sexuality. In order to do so, the main theories applied will be the insights on homosexuality and on masculinities of Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (1995) and Raewyn W. Connell (1995) and Manuel Castells' (2010) identity construction theory.

Keywords: Chinese Australian literature, identity, belonging

Introduction

Malaysian-born Hsu-Ming Teo was raised in Australia as she migrated with her family to this country in 1977, when she was 7 years old. *Behind the Moon* (2005) is her second novel and it was shortlisted for one of the New South Wales (NSW) Premier´s Literary Awards, which are given by the State Library of NSW in association with Arts NSW to "celebrat[e] achievement by Australian writers and [help] to establish values and standards in Australian literature" (*NSW Premier´s Awards* 2015). The novel is set in a middle-class suburb in Sydney in the 1990s and it focuses on the topics of

friendship, family relations, adolescence and young adulthood. The novel spans over a period of several years: from the main characters´ early teens to their early twenties. *Behind the Moon* also explores their rites of passage, which include three phases: separation, transition and reincorporation. The following discussion is organised into two main sections. The first explores the notions of belonging, especially through ethnicity, gender construction and sexuality, and the second introduces Manuel Castells´ identity theory and analyses the identities of the three main characters with this framework.

Belonging

Behind the Moon depicts a cosmos that moves around three main characters: Justin Cheong, the son of a Chinese-Singaporean family who arrived in Australia with the Business Migration Programme, a plan that started in 1976 and aimed to facilitate the entry of migrants who would become part of the internationalized Australian ruling class; Tien Ho, a refugee girl of Chinese-Vietnamese and Afro-Cajun-Creole-American ancestry; and Nigel 'Gibbo' Gibson, the son of an Anglo-Australian father and an English mother. The bonds among them are forged under different circumstances but Gibbo is their nexus, just as the Gibsons are the bond among the three families. The Gibsons are friends with the Cheongs because the piano teacher of their children is a family member of the Gibsons. Also, Gibbo´s mother, Gillian, feels more at ease with Justin´s mother, Annabelle, than with Tien´s, Lihn, because she has treated Tien as her daughter until Lihn arrives in Australia, which happens years after Tien does. Lihn had to stay in Vietnam because there were not enough seats for her on the boat that took the family away from the war, and Tien resented not having her mother with her all the time. Moreover, Gibbo´s father, Bob, also loves Tien as if she were his own daughter because he had met Tien´s mother and father during World War II and feels loyal to the experiences lived during those months. The relation between the Cheongs and the Hos is not close but they care about each other and all the parents love the three kids. The fact that the Anglo-Australian family becomes the core one can be read as a metaphor for overall Australian society: migrant families relate to each other through mainstream organisations, associations or organisms.

Nevertheless, rather than "reap[ing] the rewards of being an Aussie male", as Tien puts it (Teo 57), Gibbo feels inferior to other Anglo-Australians and he leans on Justin and Tien for friendship and a feeling of belonging. Justin and Gibbo become friends at piano lessons, while Tien and Gibbo meet at school and become friends as a result of a survival strategy against their being constantly mocked by other students. Then, Justin is expelled from his school and sent to Tien´s and Gibbo´s class. Once their friendship is established, they call themselves a "multicultural reject group" (Teo 61) and Gibbo feels part of a community because, as he says, "Two could still be the class rejects; three were a *gang*!" (Teo 54) (emphasis in the original).

The construction of this small community is made in opposition to what others expect from them, thus, the characters question race relations and show alternative associations. In the case of Justin, Gibbo and Tien, each of the characters tries to defy

the notion of "being" or "becoming" Australian because they do not feel comfortable in it. The 'ideal' Australian, critics Ghassan Hage (1998 and 2003) and Gillian Whitlock and David Carter (1992) state, is constructed as a heterosexual, Protestant, white, English-speaking, Australian-born of British ancestry young adult person who follows the concepts of 'fair go' (that is, giving others equitable opportunities or reasonable chances) and 'mateship' (that is, a way of relating to others based on friendship, loyalty and equality, usually applied to a bond created among males), and who is keen on sports, nature and barbeques. In the novel, Justin is a homosexual Chinese-Australian teenager who excels at sports and at school. Gibbo is a chubby, clumsy and bad-at-socializing heterosexual Caucasian teenager who claims Chinese ancestry. Tien is a girl who arrived in Australia as a refugee, who lived with her Chinese-Vietnamese family because her mother could not escape when she did and never met her Afro-Cajun-Creole-American father. She cherishes the English lessons given by Gibbo's mother, speaks with the Strine, or broad Australian, accent taught by Gibbo´s father and yearns for an Anglo-Australian family. The three of them try to make themselves likeable and reach the expectations set on them by their families, society and by themselves. Dislocation is, thus, one of the bonds among these friends.

In the case of the adults, Gibbo´s father instils the notion of "being Australian" in Gibbo, Justin and Tien and he questions his own father´s notion of "Australianness". As he considers,

> To the young Bob, his father was a man´s man. Every cliché in the book was true about Gordon Gibson. Tough as old boots, he loved his country, did his stern duty in war and never failed to provide for his family. He was a man made for wearing an Akubra… He was harsh but fair to his kids. He disciplined them and instilled in them the self-respect to transcend their working-class roots and scramble into the ranks of the professions. (Teo 279)

But Gordon Gibson had a "virulent antagonism towards Asians" (Teo 278). On the one hand, he often made racist comments about them and considered them to be "the Yellow Peril" (Teo 279) while, on the other, he made his family visit the Yipsoons "several times a year, particularly at Chinese new year, and he had maintained a sullen respect towards old Mrs Yipsoon" because, as he explained to Bob, "`They´ve been here since the gold rushes. They´re practically Australian. They´re the exception that proves the rule´" (Teo 279).

Bob Gibson also had mixed feelings when he was a soldier in the Vietnam war: he was surprised by the cleanliness in their homes, their hospitality and generosity, especially by that of Lihn Ho´s family. At the same time, he felt puzzled by their rudeness when they did not speak English in front of him and the dirtiness of streets, among other things. All in all, Bob did not trust them while he was fighting in the war. Once he was back in Australia, he married Gillian and had Gibbo. Some time later, he received a letter written by the Hos asking for help to migrate to Australia. He did everything he possibly could to make sure that they settled in good conditions. No one knew about it, neither his father nor Gillian, because "he did not want his own father to know that he had gone soft where Asians were concerned" (Teo 282) and, later on, it "would only have made everybody uncomfortable, him most of all" (Teo 282). Bob Gibson seems to

have broken with the racist discourse of his father. Besides, the fact that his son´s two best friends are of Chinese heritage seems to indicate that the idea of "Australianness" that the grandfather tried to pass on to the following generations is no longer valuable. The novel reflects the change undergone by Australian society: from the White Australia policy and the narrow definition of being "Australian" to the acknowledgement and celebration of Australia´s multicultural society and the questioning of "Australianness" in order to look for a more inclusive meaning.

Ethnicity and belonging

As it can be seen, race relations are explored at personal and inter-personal levels. The three children are of different ethnicities and even Gibbo claims he is a fourth-generation Chinese Australian, although he looks Caucasian. This situation leads to a paradox among these characters: while Justin and Tien would like to be Anglo-Australians, Gibbo asserts his Chinese ancestry in order to feel closer to his friends and their families. With their assimilatory intentions in mind, Justin and Tien take speech lessons from Gibbo's mother and Tien tries to imitate Gibbo's father's Strine accent, while Gibbo copies Justin's mother's Singaporean expressions and learns how to cook and eat Singaporean food. These three friends are trying to acquire what can be described as cultural capital. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1986), Ghassan Hage (1998) explains that cultural capital "represents the sum of valued knowledge, styles, social and physical (bodily) characteristics and practical behavioural dispositions within a given field" (53). This capital is not cumulative, each characteristic has a different fluctuating value and a non-mainstream person will never get the total capital. By trying to master as much cultural capital as possible, migrants aim to accumulate national capital because it leads them to being "recognised as legitimately national by the dominant culture" (Hage 53) and, thus, to national belonging. However, the fact that a person acquires cultural and national capital devalues the capital itself: because the migrant was not born with it, and does not have the 'essence' that the national aristocracy possesses (Hage 62). While Justin and Tien try to acquire "Anglo-Australian" cultural capital, Gibbo tries to get "Chinese" cultural capital. The three friends, then, have to develop their own identities based on another factor, and each one of them turns to their gender construction, sexuality and yearning to be loved.

As a fourteen year-old boy, Justin tries to negate and hide his homosexuality from his parents and friends, as he thinks they will stop loving him if they know. Consequently, Justin creates a façade of the perfect son, student and friend, and does not allow anyone to know his emotions, feelings and worries. Years later, he makes himself vulnerable to Gibbo during a camping excursion without Tien. Gibbo feels guilty because he does not know how to handle the situation and they become distant. When Justin is twenty-one, Gibbo's father exposes Justin´s sexuality, and he does not deny it. Justin decides to be open about it also with his extended family but he is mainly rejected, stereotyped and not understood. Justin does not have role models or texts to learn about what he considers to be "practically an oxymoron" (Teo 141): Asian or Asian-Australian homosexuality. As Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (1995) explains in her "'A Rainbow in my Heart': Negotiating Sexuality and Ethnicity", there exist a number of difficulties lesbian and bisexual women face. These difficulties, which have been listed by Ruth Baetz, can

be applied to gay and bisexual men of non-English speaking backgrounds, These so-called "weapons" are silence, lies, isolation, intimidation and physical violence (Pallotta-Chiarolli 136). Baetz also explains four difficult situations, which she names "cross-roads": coming out to parents and siblings, religion, culture and therapy (Pallotta-Chiarolli 137). Some of the items in these lists make reference to media distortions, to the lack of role models and of ethnic literature, to the difficulties in creating a community or in sharing one's feelings because of the fear of ostracism, physical and verbal abuse by/to one's family and to one self. These cross-roads shape the life of many migrants, some of whom decide not to tell their parents about their gayness, lesbianism or bisexuality in order to avoid hurting and disappointing them after all the sacrifices made for their beloved children.

Justin has clearly gone through this process and deciding not to negate his homosexuality and being open about it with his extended family is a turning point in his life. He starts to explore his identity as a young homosexual of Asian origin and he has two main partners: one is a Malaysian university classmate, and the second one is an Anglo-Australian divorced father of two teenage children, who loves him, understands him and gives him space to grow up and know what he really wants. In the last chapters, Justin is intimidated, physically abused and sexually assaulted by strangers. He is left in a coma and suffers multiple external and internal injuries. The reader does not know whether Justin will wake up from the coma and, if he does, under which conditions. Nevertheless, this is the catastrophic event that leads his friends and families towards a reunion.

This evolution in Justin´s identity is logical: when he overcomes his fears, he starts to look for his niche in this new community. First, he tries to feel close with another Asian university student so, at first sight, their identities have many commonalities (ethnicity, interests, hobbies, sexuality). When it does not work, he feels disappointed and turns to another stereotype, that is, older white men who fancy younger Asian men. Justin is trying to find his place in the homosexual community, without acknowledging his own prejudices and feeling of restlessness.

Gibbo has a different construction of masculinity. He is heterosexual and yearns to have a family of his own. However, he is not assertive, does not retaliate when he is bullied or insulted and lacks some interpersonal skills. Raewyn W. Connell labelled the different positions men could have while relating to others. In her well-cited text *Masculinities* (1995), Connell introduces four types of masculinities: hegemonic, complicit, marginalised and subordinated. Following this systematization of masculine types, Gibbo's masculinity is not hegemonic, as he is not a dominant man; neither is it complicit, because he does not take advantage of the benefits of his masculinity; nor is it marginalized, as he is a white middle-class member of the Australian society and does not belong to a marginal group. In my opinion, when Gibbo is a teenager, his masculinity is subordinated, not only to that of other men, but to women as well. However, as a young adult, he feels more comfortable with himself and moves towards a complicit masculinity, taking advantage of being a male. Like Justin, Gibbo does not have a role model to follow, as his relationship with his father is almost non-existent until he turns 21. Their approaches to masculinity seem to lack a common ground: Gibbo is not good at sports and his father, stereotypical as he is, does not know how to communicate with another man directly, without playing with a ball or doing

something. After a series of unfortunate events when Gibbo is 21, Lihn decides to set an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against him, which she later discharges. Gibbo realises he does not know how to convey his feelings, just as his father. During this process, Gibbo and his father start having a healthy relationship and they realise they are not as different as they had previously thought.

At this moment, Gibbo starts to explore his identity and masculinity. He moves into a flat with other young people, creates his second "multicultural reject group" (Teo 298), becomes a vegetarian, finishes his studies as an engineer (Teo 110), starts working at a pub and he seriously considers becoming a chef. When Justin is in hospital, Gibbo supports the family by cooking for them or spending time with his friend so the Cheongs can rest. Gibbo also helps Lihn and Tien, as much as he can, just as his father did. The comparisons between Gibbo and his father continue with their feelings of disloyalty. On the one hand, Gibbo´s father felt betrayed by Justin´s and Tien´s distance from his son when they finished school and by Lihn when she set the AVO against him. On the other, Gibbo felt deceived by Justin´s and Tien´s attitude towards him when they started university and by Tien´s encouragement to Lihn to set an AVO against him. Both Anglo-Australian men seem to have ambivalent feelings: on the one hand, they want to love their Asian friends and feel accepted by them, but, on the other, there is a barrier they cannot overcome: the kids have become adults and their experiences and insecurities have led them away from one another.

This development of the two main white Anglo-Australian men can be metaphorically read as the uneasiness that two generations of white males feel concerning Asian migration. On the one hand, Bob can be seen to represent the traditional white heroic Anglo-Australian who was raised during the White Australia Policy, with a clear mentality of the binaries "us vs. them", which had been instilled in him by his father, who only considered the Yipsoons to be the exception to the rule. However, during his time in the Vietnam war, the limits of these binaries became blurred and Bob does not know how to convey this situation. On the other hand, Gibbo finds comfort in the idea of being a fifth-generation Chinese Australian as his identity as a white Australian male does not correspond with that of his father and he tries to belong with his friends. Gibbo is raised during the policy of multiculturalism but he is troubled because he is trying to come to terms with it and the personal implications it has for him. He has two "multicultural reject groups", which implies that he has an inclusive mentality, not organised in binaries of "us vs. them". Nevertheless, he has to find his place in society as an individual, not as part of a group.

As regards the third main character, Tien is fond of her two friends but she has special feelings for Justin. However, these feelings are not mutual and they become distant after the graduation ball. Eventually Tien starts going out with Stan Wong, a Chinese-Australian medical student and artist. After getting married, they migrate to the United States of America so that Stan can further his studies. Tien tries to be compliant and behave as the obedient 'Asian' wife because not only does she understand the implication of filial piety expected by his family, but she is also eager to make the relationship work as Stan is the first man who asked her out. Tien is not happy but she hides her feelings and thoughts from both Stan and her mother. However, she finally decides to divorce Stan and, as soon as learns that Justin is in hospital, she goes back to Australia. She acknowledges the fact that she has always loved Justin and that her

marriage was bound to fail because her friends and their families were not part of her life anymore.

Tien is uneasy with her body, her skin colour, her features and her sexuality. After Justin's negative response, she felt unlovable, and hung onto Stan for security, even if it meant negating her own identity. Like Justin and Gibbo, Tien does not have a suitable role model, in her case, of a second- or 1.5-generation[i] Afro-Asian-Australian woman to be inspired by: Gibbo's mother, Gillian, who she calls mum and visits often until Lihn arrives in Australia, is English and arrived in Australia "in the late 1950s as a ten-pound immigrant" (Teo 114); Lihn and her aunts are Vietnamese, and arrived in Australia in the 1980s as refugees, and Justin's mother is Singaporean and migrated to Australia under the Business Migration Plan in the 1970s. None of the female characters are born in Australia, maybe as a means to emphasize the masculinity of the "ideal Australian" and of the concept of "mateship" and to question the role, perception and position of Australian women in society. While in the United States, Tien looks for her father´s family and she finds them, but she does not have the courage to introduce herself to them. The character of Tien represents a new generation of Australians whose roots cannot be defined in traditional terms and who have to create their own place, maybe taking inspiration from strategies different peoples use in order to create their own.

Identity

Justin, Gibbo and Tien each try to belong to a community (homosexual, vegetarian, respectably married, respectively) and, in order to do so, they explore their ethnicities, their gender constructions and sexuality. In his *The Power of Identity. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Manuel Castells (2010) introduces three types of identity: legitimizing, resistance and project. Castells defines legitimizing identity as the one "introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination *vis à vis* social actors" (8). This identity can be considered mainstream or normative, as it follows the processes imposed by the nation-state and it produces a civil society. The second type is resistance identity, which tries to resist mainstream organisations and coordinates its members in alternative communities, which may in turn resist other alternative communities. Thus, this type of identity implies "the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded" (Castells 9). The third form is project identity, which takes place "when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure" (Castells 8). This third type is not a synthesis of the previous two categories. Project identity aims to create a new society by negotiating its terms with others. Therefore, Castells explains that "new *project identities* do not seem to emerge from former identities of civil society of the industrial era, but from a development of current *resistance identities*" (422) (emphasis in the original).

An analysis of the three main characters in *Behind the Moon* shows that during their teenage years Justin and Tien try to have a legitimizing identity while Gibbo has a resistance identity. On the one hand, both Justin and Tien try to fulfil the expectations of their families and the wider society as they intend to behave as it is expected from them:

Justin is the good, obedient and perfect son, whereas Tien struggles to perform her filial obligations while craving for the love of a mother. On the other hand, Gibbo is happy excluding those who exclude him as long as he has his two friends. As a young adult exploring his homosexuality, Justin seems to have a resistance identity because he defies mainstream society, specially his closest acquaintances (family, friends), and tries to be part of another defined community: first, the Asian gay community, and then the gay community in Sydney. Nevertheless, when he is being assaulted, he realises he is beyond the definition of "gay", "Asian" or "Asian-Australian" and, in my opinion, he begins to move towards a project identity:

> He no longer needed the external markers of identity, the first thing people saw or learned about him and judged him by. He was not reducible to his ethnicity or his sexuality or his occupation or geographical location or even his family. Somewhere between the surface of his skin and the creases of his soul, in the interstice of mind and matter, there was a void in which he simply was (Teo 333-4).

However, the novel has an open ending as Justin is still in a coma and the reader does not know whether or not Justin will survive and, if so, under which conditions. The reader is told that Justin is supported by his family and friends and that they have all accepted Justin´s former partner, Dirk Merkel. As Justin´s father says to Tien:

> "They broke up, you know. But I tell you what. Gay or not, he really loves my Jay [Justin]. He comes to visit every evening after work and stays for hours."
>
> It was the only thing that he and Anabelle [Justin´s mother] could take comfort in just then. The fact that their son meant something to these people [the Gibsons, the Hos and Dirk] who came day after day. All debts were cancelled, all offences forgiven, simply because Justin was loved (Teo 340).

This implies that they have come to terms with Justin´s sexuality and would not try to change him or judge him. Consequently, Justin has managed to create a new micro-cosmos where all-embracing love and support among its members seem to be its core characteristics.

The character of Tien also is open-ended. The young adult woman tries to equate her identity to her role as wife. Tien's identity and conduct as an adult are not defined as she needs to get to know herself before she can have a pattern of behaviour that can be classified as legitimizing, resistance or project. Tien loves her friends and tries to revenge Justin. She finds one of his attackers and plans to poison him. However, Lihn stops her. Tien finally faces her anger and frustration and asks her mother for help. It is suggested that Tien will try to face her fears, treat her mother and friends well, find a job and, probably, try to be part of the community.

Finally, the character of Gibbo seems to be an example of resistance identity throughout the novel. He discards the Anglo-Australian aspect of his identity because he feels rejected by other Anglo-Australians and, as a defence technique, he tries to exclude all those who exclude him, that is, those who consider he is not good enough, fit enough and assertive enough. Gibbo enjoys being part of "multicultural reject groups" and tries

to live in alternative communities, as a child and teenager with his Asian-Australian friends and families, and as a young adult by becoming vegetarian and following his wish of caring for others. While Justin is in a comma, Gibbo realises that Tien's and Justin's friendship will last as long as they do not have partners and that, despite the fact that they care for one another, their wishes to be loved are more alluring than the need for their friends. However, the reader is left unsure of his future: whether he will continue having a resistance identity or he will develop it into project identity. After the AVO, it can be assumed that Gibbo will not impose his identity or ideas on others by coercive means, but he will use negotiation as a tool to reach his dreams.

Conclusions

Hsu-Ming Teo´s *Behind the Moon* explores the notions of friendship, identity and the rites of passage of three friends. These personal journeys include Justin´s acceptance of his homosexuality, Gibbo´s development of emotional intelligence and Tien´s acceptance of her ethnicity, origins and feelings. During their teenage years and early adulthood, these three characters learn to stop lying to themselves, accept their feelings and explore different lifestyles. Manuel Castell´s identity theory provides a theoretical context in which to analyse and compare the patterns of behaviour and construction of these characters´ selves.

However, the novel can also be understood to question the definition and construct of "Australianness". The three young characters defy the idea of the heterosexual, Protestant, white, English-speaking, Australian-born of British ancestry person who follows the notions of "fair go" and "mateship". Belonging, ethnicity and sexuality are the key concepts analysed in this text. Furthermore, the construction of the families follows some stereotypes: the Cheongs want Justin to excel in life by means of studies and a reputable career, the father is a businessman and the mother a housewife; the Hos are thankful for the opportunity to live in Australia, are middle-class workers who have a restaurant and cannot spend as much time with their children as if they were upper-middle class; the Gibsons are upper-middle class and have respectable professions: Bob is a surgeon and Gillian is a singing teacher and an elocutionist. Under this apparent stereotype of middle-class families, Teo also questions the notion of "Australiannes": no female character is born in Australia and the three Anglo-Australian men (Gordon, Bob, Gibbo) represent the country's ambivalent relation with "Asia". Grandfather Gordon Gibson represents the White Australia policy, as he understands Chinese migrants as "the Yellow peril" except families who arrived in Australia in the 1850s-1880s, who are "the exception that proves the rule" (Teo 279). Bob Gibson participated in the Vietnam war and questioned the stereotypes based on personal experience, which led him to help those he became close with. Bob represents the lessening of the policy and the opening of the country. Finally, Gibbo represents the policy of Multiculturalism, as he relates with non-Anglo-Australians on a daily basis, is close to them and feels eager to be accepted by them. The open ending of the novel provides room for the development of the characters, their relationships and that of the country.

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Catalina Ribas Segura is a lecturer in the English Department at the University College Alberta Giménez (CESAG, Palma de Mallorca). She wrote her MA thesis on Greek-Australian literature and her PhD thesis on Greek-Australian and Chinese Australian literatures. She has taught a number of courses on language and cultures in English-speaking countries. Her main interests include migration, identity and contemporary Australian literature. She is a member of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona.

[i] According to Wenche Ommundsen (2012), the migrant or refugee child who is schooled in the host country is termed "1.5 generation".