

## *Original Paper*

# The Living Predicaments of Chinese-Australians in Brian Castro's

## Birds of Passage

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Received: July 1, 2022

Accepted: July 12, 2022

Online Published: July 21, 2022

doi:10.22158/sll.v6n3p12

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v6n3p12>

### **Abstract**

*This thesis studies the two protagonists in *Birds of Passage: Lo Yunshan and Seamus O'Young*, analyzing their living predicaments and the fate of being discriminated against in Australian. With Said's *Orientalism* as its guiding theory, this thesis analyzes from two perspectives: individual and society. It reveals that the essence of living predicaments of Chinese-Australians is the imbalance of relationship between man and society, man and the self. Meanwhile, the loss of discourse power leads them to be discriminated against in the whites dominated society. The aim of this thesis is to enable readers to understand the living predicaments of Chinese-Australian in different times and inspire people to care about the living conditions of Chinese-Australian in modern times.*

### **Keywords**

*Brian Castro, Australian-Chinese, living predicaments, Orientalism*

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 Significance of the Study*

Brian Castro is a prolific and prominent writer in Chinese-Australian literature, who writes about the Asian immigrants' experience in Australia. Most of his novels are concerned about Asian "hybrid cultural identities and multiple national allegiances" (Liang, p. 283). Additionally, he also attaches great importance to language, racial prejudice and disorientation. His first novel *Birds of Passage* attracted widespread attention, which won the Vogel Prize for literature. This novel uses two parallel clues and the technique of parody to express the story of early Chinese immigrants in Australia. This research attempts to analyze the living predicaments of the two protagonists in *Birds of Passage* from the

perspective of Said's theory of Orientalism. Additionally, it argues that cultural identity is the most important issues for the Chinese-Australians. From the experiences of the two protagonists, it can be seen that they lost their discourse power in the society dominated by whites, which caused they are discriminated against in Australia. The significance of this research is to call on people pay more attention to the living conditions of Chinese-Australians in modern times and help Chinese-Australians to find their position among two cultures.

### 1.2 Thesis Statement

This thesis attaches great importance to the immigrant experiences of two protagonists in order to explore Chinese-Australians' living predicaments. The illusion and disillusion of Lo Yunshan proves the Australians' discriminations against the Chinese gold diggers. Moreover the frustrations of Seamus O'Young attest the Australians' stereotype images against ABC. The living predicaments of protagonists are caused by the imbalance relationship between man and society, man and himself. In light of the Orientalism of Said, the discriminations and the stereotypes against Chinese-Australians are caused by the losing of discourse power in the whites dominated society. As time goes by, Australians' prejudice against Chinese-Australians has been decreasing, but the cultural differences still exist. This thesis aims to inspire contemplation on the cultural identity and living dislocation.

### 1.3 Literature Review

Castro has always enjoyed high reputation both at home and abroad, and his literary works are popular among different readers. He had published eight novels which aroused many scholars' interests.

Karen Barker, a well-known literary critic in Australia, analyzes the characteristics of Castro's novels in his article "The Artful Man: Theory and Authority in Brian Castro's Fiction". Karen Barker claims that the theories of *Birds of Passage* are involved in the narrations, plots and themes instead of dialogues (p. 231). He believes that the unique approach of this novel subverted tradition and made narration become multiplicity and heterogeneity (p. 235).

Another critic, Professor Wenche Ommundsen makes quite a few comments of Castro's works on her book. She notes that Castro makes satirical comments on the nature of literary communication. Her book pays attention to the living background of Castro and the world history, especially after World War II (p. 36). Then, she analyzes the post multiculturalism which has been mentioned in Castro's works. Ommundsen also points out that cultural identity of Chinese immigrants is one of the most important issues in Castro's novels (p. 38).

Later on, Peter Pierce shows criticism of Castro's novels on his article. He states that *Birds of passage* is one of the most peculiar novels and it is the origin of Australian novels in the 1980s (p. 149). Additionally, Bernadette Brennan in "Drift: Writing and/of Annihilation" mentions that "For Castro writing is a series of fluid, migratory traces" (p. 39).

Alison Broinowski, from the aspect of colonialism, argues that Castro always attaches great importance to the problem of multiculturalism and cultural identity, which is probably related to his parentage (p.

52). Castro was born in Hong Kong. His father is a Portuguese and his mother is a half-caste. This parentage makes Castro become a typical example of the cultural integration and identity. Therefore, many critics, like Graham Burns mainly focuses on this perspective of Castro's works.

With the development of academic exchanges between China and Australia, some domestic scholars are paying close attention to this Chinese-Australian writer. The earliest scholar is Professor Wang Guanglin. His research focuses on Castro's creative thinking and identity issues. In addition, he argues that Chinese-Australian writers reduce the restriction of cultural identity through the method of heterotopic transplantation (p. 2). What's more, Professor Wang has interviewed Castro, which provided lots of valuable information for scholars.

Another critic, Gan Tinghui, argues that the *Birds of Passage*'s protagonists express themselves through the methods of postmodern which are different from the narrow nationalism theory. In addition, he points out that this novel also ridicules and criticizes the hypocrisy of Australian nationalism (p. 1). Later on, Zhan Chunjuan published an article of Castro's *Birds of Passage* on Contemporary Foreign Literature. She states that this novel has polyphonic features. It is also a transcendence of traditional novels (p. 1). In addition, Ye Shengnian makes comments on *Birds of Passage* in his book. He points out that there are several themes of this novel: cultural identity, spiritual home and survival dislocation (p. 12).

From the above, it can be seen that many scholars have studied on meaning, theme and writing skills of Castro's novels. So far, there have been fewer articles specially analyze the living predicaments of the protagonists in the *Birds of Passage*. This paper will focus on this aspect and use the theory of Said.

## 2. Orientalism

In this thesis, the Orientalism theory of Said is used to analyze *Birds of Passage*. Orientalism, as a discipline, born in 16-17centuries, is an important perspective for the westerners to study eastern culture. From 1850 to 1945, it became a normalized knowledge domain. After being adopted by the university, it became an institutionalized discipline. From the first look, Orientalism seems an objective description towards the East. In essence, it becomes a dogmatic orientalism through continuous replication, update and complement.

In 1987, Said published the book *Orientalism*, which has historic significance in post-colonial field. Said is a distinguished critic and enjoy high reputation in academic circle. Critic Wang Yuechuan states that Said combined literary with politics and emphasized their relationship, which has a unique contribution to cultural development. Qian Wenbin, Yan Taotao believes that Said developed the post-colonial cultural criticism and expounded the theory of cultural construction.

In this book, Said makes explanations of Orientalism, which has three meanings. The first meaning is that Orientalism is an academic discipline which is about the oriental history, cultural evolution and ethnic characteristics. Meanwhile, it is a kind of knowledge about the East which is used in the class,

court and book for people to study. Said states that Orientalism is the discourse power of colonial ideology and cultural hegemony. The second meaning is that “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’” (p. 58). It is always used to analyze the novel, poetry and theory which are connected with eastern culture. The third meaning is that Orientalism is a method of writing, vision and “as a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 58).

The meanings above are the fundamental points of Orientalism. It reveals that Orientalism is a tool used by the West to dominate the East. From the perspective of discourse dimensions, Said analyzes the narrative strategy of Orientalism and tries to show an authentic Orientalism to people. For a long time, the West is in a superior position, and the East is always placed at a secondary position by the West, which is caused the discourse power of the East is deprived. Said points out that in the eyes of the westerners, the East is filled with the original mystery. The East is totally imagined by the West. Then, he states that Orientalism’s significance is decided by the westerners’ will, which leads to westerners’ prejudice against easterners. The westerners create the “other” image of the East to reflect their superiority. They always think that the West is advanced and civilized, and the East is backward and uncivilized. For the westerners, the prejudice of the East becomes a stereotypical way of thinking. Therefore, when westerners mention the East, they always unconsciously take a position of imperialism and racialism.

In the light of Orientalism, it can be seen that Lo Yunshan is always regarded as “invader” and “the other” by Australians. As a Chinese, his identity will inevitably change with geographical space and cultural space. At that time, the Chinese immigrants are regarded as the symbol of jaundice. They are constantly discriminated against and persecuted by the whites. Although Shan tries to change himself and integrate into the white society, he is always rejected what makes him has to face the identity crisis of being “the other”.

Moreover, another protagonist Seamus, from the moment he was born, he is a person without a clear identity. The Australian’s prejudice and stereotype make Seamus feel painful, which has a huge impact on his living. When he lives in the orphanage, he is treated as an alien and teased by other people. When he goes to work, he is assigned to a storage room without any person. The end of *Birds of Passage*, Seamus is completely marginalized by the whites.

It can be seen that the two protagonists in the *Birds of Passage* lost their discourse power, which caused they experienced discriminated against and persecuted by the whites in the Australian.

### **3. A Chinese and his Pursuit of Australianess in Australia**

Lo Yunshan, a teacher in Guangdong province, was attracted by gold rush and hurriedly started his arduous journey to Australian. In Australia, he experienced a series of anti-Chinese events, which made him disillusioned. In the end he went back to China. In the discourse system of Orientalism, as a

Chinese immigrant, Lo Yunshan also experienced the identity crisis of being “the other”.

### *3.1 Lo's Illusion and Disillusion*

In the late Qing Dynasty, it had gone through two wars, which seriously damaged the economy of China and Chinese people lived a poverty-stricken life. Under such background, Chinese people were awakened from the state of self-isolation and began to learn advanced Western techniques.

Occasionally, Lo Yunshan was walking along the beach. He saw foreign troops and felt the advancement of western industry and military power. At that time, he started to admire the advanced technology and the wealthy life in the west. “I suspect immediately that their industry is a hundred times vaster and more precise than ours, that their penetration of China this time will be deeper and more violent” (Castro, p. 7). Once after class, Fook, the prize-pupil told Shan the news of gold rush which aroused Shan’s interest. “There is a lot of talk about gold in a land in the south. Some people have already returned from there with bags of it” (Castro, p. 18). It seemed to be a good opportunity for him to make a fortune in Australia especially when the terrible situation of Qing Dynasty made everyone disappointed. Therefore, Shan boarded on the ship to Australia, which was the first time that he felt the freedom and happiness. “I still remember feeling a strange premonition of being in touch with and confident of the future. I was becoming a modern man” (Castro, p. 21). He yearned to find a new self in the Australia, when he had a fantasy illusion for his future. However, he didn’t know that his illusion will be shattered by the long journey and uncertain life in Australia.

For Shan and his companion, the experiences on the ship were miserable. They lived in the bottom of the ship with terrible food. “A sailor in a heavy blue jacket gives us unboiled rice from a sack which he has placed on the deck” (Castro, p. 33). Additionally, they couldn’t communicate with the whites because they couldn’t speak English, which made their living conditions become more terrible. Before arriving at the destination, they suffered these awful lives for several months. Even though, Shan and his companions were dreaming about the life in the southern land. “We even had some rice wine, and we toasted one another with wishes of gold, luck and health” (Castro, p. 57). But they could not realize that all the miserable experiences were merely a start of their miserable lives.

They first encountered the racial discrimination and the hostility from the native in the new land of Australia. The whites called Chinese people “‘Celestial’ or simply ‘John Chinaman’” (Castro, p. 77). In their views, the yellow skin of the “dirty and unclean” Chinese stood for jaundice. What’s more, the Chinese immigrants were accused of “dirtying the water and spreading disease” (Castro, p. 76). Shan and his companions “worked hard, they struck new ground; they fossicked, crouching down our hands and knees in the hole” (Castro, p. 90). Gold seemed to be their only consolation on the new land. However, they got the worst news: the gold had dried up in this continent. “No gold! No gold! Go back to where you came from” (Castro, p. 85). Shan’s uncle also told him: “You know, the gold has dried up. There is no point looking here. The rush was on a few years ago” (Castro, p. 95). As a result, the dream of Luo Yunshan was shattered by both racial discrimination and the depletion of the gold. In the end,

Shan was disillusioned by the cruel realities. He roved for seven years in Australia and returned to China.

### 3.2 *Australians' Discriminations Against the Gold Diggers*

In the late Qing Dynasty, the corruption of the feudal system and the ravaging aggression of imperialist countries caused chaos in social order. Many people experienced the hardship of China, and fled to Australia for gold. But most of them suffered the racial discriminations, including Lo and his companions, which can be seen in many plots of *Birds of Passage*.

Many Chinese immigrants as indentured laborers in Australia, but they were viewed as disease carriers, especially small pox and leprosy. The whites stated that their yellow skin manifested jaundice. Chinese were described as a hybrid species. "Be accused of dirtying the water or spreading disease. Any of these accused will be used for driving you from the field" (Castro, p. 76). During the gold rush, the hard-working Chinese found more gold than the whites, which arouse the whites' jealousy. Later on, a series of anti-Chinese events broke out in Australia. "The Chinese have been blamed. There is talk among the whites of forming an anti-Chinese league" (Castro, p. 76). Chinese people lived at the bottom of society, and they were always persecuted by the whites. What's more, the whites posted a notice about the Chinese immigrants. In that notice, it mentioned that how to get rid of the hated heathen. "First, pull off his pigtail if on the horseback. Second, hang him head down over a mine shaft. Third, burn his tents" (Castro, p. 118). In the eyes of white gold diggers, the Chinese immigrants were nearly equal to animals. The Chinese immigrants didn't have the basic guarantee of live, let alone personal dignity.

However, the worst thing for Shan was that his companion Tzu was murdered. "He was dragged over some bushes. A rock split his mouth. He lay panting on the ground. The blood tasted like water from the inside of a fish" (Castro, p. 112). What was beyond people's expectation was that the cause of this tragedy was only because Tzu stood in the mid-stream of a creek to collect water. The miserable experiences against the Chinese immigrants manifested the unfairness and cruelty. Although they worked hard and kept on the rails, they were still rejected by the whites. Lo Yunshan and his companions never realize that they were considered as invader and "the other" in Australia.

In light of the Orientalism of Said, the discriminations against Chinese-Australians are caused by the losing of discourse power in the whites dominated society. The Chinese were viewed as an inferior race and connected with many infamous vices, in particular perjury, drug addiction and the theft. In the eyes of the West, the western culture is superior to the Eastern. It is the center of the world culture. Said states that Orientalism's significance is decided by the westerners' will, which leads to westerners' prejudice against easterners. The westerners create the "other" image of the East to reflect their superiority.

#### 4. An ABC and his Pursuit of his Chineseness in Australia

Seamus O'Young, an Australian-born Chinese, is another protagonist in *Birds of Passage*. He believed that his real name was Sham Oh Yung, because he couldn't find any information of his parentage. He was trapped between two cultures, which made him very painful, so he didn't know where he came from and where he could go. In the context, the identity of Seamus is unclear since his birth. But the world around him is an absolute "Other". All his life is a journey to pursue his identity. In the end of the novel, Seamus found the diary of Shan. In his view, he regarded Shan as his ancestor. Finally, he deciphered Shan's diary, understood the emotions of Shan and realized his transformation of identity.

##### 4.1 Seamus' Confusion and Frustrations

Seamus was an orphan and adopted by an Australian couple. He had the appearance of both westerners and easterners—blue eye, "moonface with black hair sticking out of the top" (Castro, p. 10), a flat nose and yellow skin. Despite he has an Australian name, the natives always treated him as an alien. Meanwhile, the Chinese never regarded him as a member of Chinese community because he could not speak Chinese. He was alienated by both communities and, the sense of puzzlement made him painful. "Yes. ABC. I am a refugee, an exile. My heart and my head are in the wrong places. There was no country from which I came, and there is none to which I can return" (Castro, p. 8). Therefore, he was anxious to find his identity and a place where he belongs to.

Seamus liked travelling, because he hoped to reduce his emptiness and find more information about his identity in the white-dominated society. When he went to Chinatown he felt "at one with the people, but the strange tones of their language only serve to isolate him" (Castro, p. 9). Wenche Ommundsen states that "Seamus, like many of Castro's characters, and of course, like Brian Castro himself, has the kind of identity which in ethnic and cultural terms straddles categories and confounds classification" (p. 23). Without any information about his family background, Seamus didn't know where he belonged to. He always took his passport with him. "I couldn't do without it. It was constantly under the threat from the other self" (p. 58). In his opinion, this passport stood for his identity. He worried that the identity will slip out of his hands. When he took travel, he preferred a train instead of a bus. In his view, train was more private than the bus and on one would look at him with a strange sight.

Occasionally, Seamus found out the manuscript of Shan in the back of mirror. He was attracted by the contents of the manuscript, and expected to find his Chineseness by studying and deciphering Shan's diary. In Seamus' view, he felt his connection with Lo Yunshan who lived over 100 years ago. Although they never had a face-to-face communication, their ideas were coincidences. Both of them struggled to live with language barriers and lack of the sense of belonging. Shan's diary not only provided a method for Seamus to learn the history of his ancestry but also a direction for him to find own identity. Because of other people's sarcasm, Seamus started his self-imposed exile from the real world. He wanted to link his experiences with Shan's experiences in order to find the common ground between them. Sometimes he imagined that he was Lo Yunshan, and he eluded to Shan's diary to seek the answers for his identity.

Finally, he understood Shan's emotions, hopes, fears and difficult situation. He thus completed his pursue of identity and found his Chineseness.

In general, Seamus' identity crisis derives from his ABC experience. Everyone ignored his existence which made him completely lost and was afraid of communicating with other people and was eventually losing his ability to talk. In the end of *Birds of Passage*, Seamus' story is intersecting with Shan's. Shan's diary helps Seamus find the sense of identification which has been undergoing a long pursuit.

#### 4.2 Australians' Stereotype Images against ABC

Although Seamus lives in modern times, in his living environment, the stereotypes of Chinese-Australia still exist. At that time, the White Australia policy was implemented as a national policy. People of non-European descent immigrant are restricted in Australia. Later on, these policies were designed to exclude people from Asia, especially China immigrant to Australia.

Seamus was an orphan and adopted by an Australian couple. Seamus adoptive parents by default, always cooked rice for him, but they didn't realize that his favorites are western food. "She was surprised when I told her one night that I don't like rice dishes and that I like pies, steaks and chips" (Castro, p. 14). When Seamus walked on the street, the children would sing insulting nursery rhymes to him. "You are a bloody pervert, O' Young" (Castro, p. 29). When he passed customs in the UK, the staff looked at the half point of his passport, and shouted: "So you are one of the bloody Chinese-born Australian" (Castro, p. 8). In addition, when he was applying for a job, although he explained that he is Australian, his employer still stereotyped him as Chinese. "Seamus O' Young. Such a funny name for Chinese" (Castro, p. 24). In the reading test for the scholarship, the examiner naturally thought Seamus could speak fluent Chinese. No one was aware that he couldn't speak Chinese and never be taught before. However, when he wanted to learn Chinese, he was mocked and doubted by many people. Due to those deeply rooted stereotypes, Seamus in effect, had fallen into a state of social abandonment. When he worked in a clothing factory, he was allocated to a remote workplace where no one attended, and he couldn't enjoy the benefits of native employees.

Seamus, an ABC with obvious Asian features, shares similar experience with Brian Castro in Australia. It can be seen that Castro regards Seamus as his prototype appearance in the *Birds of Passage*. Castro was born in Hong Kong. His father is a Portuguese and his mother is a half-caste. When he was eleven, he went to Australia to study. This parentage makes Castro become a typical example of the cultural integration and grants him a special perspective on cultural identity. As a Chinese-Australian author, the label of "Chinese" also restricts Castro's creation, so the cultural identity has been become a main theme of him. Because of his culturally mingling characteristics, Brian Castro inclines to transfer his own experiences onto the two protagonists. In the novel, both of Lo Yunshan and Seamus O'Young are suffering the same pain of living dislocations as Castro. This novel is written to arouse more attention to Chinese-Australians' living predicaments and help them to break the limits.



## 5. Conclusion

In the *Birds of Passage*, Brian Castro illustrates the two protagonists: Lo Yunshan and Seamus O' Young, which have miserable experiences in Australian.

The experiences of Lo Yunshan demonstrate the racial discrimination against the Chinese immigrants in Australia in the 19th centuries. Because of the corruption of the feudal system and the ravaging aggression of imperialist countries, the Chinese are always viewed as an inferior race by the West.

The experiences of Seamus O' Young prove the stereotypes against Chinese-Australian still exist. In the time of Seamus O' Young's life, the White Australia policy is implemented as a national policy. A series of policies is designed to exclude people from Asia, especially Chinese immigrants to Australia.

In light of Orientalism, it can be seen that the East is always judged by the West. During this process of judging, China is elaborated as a backward and uncivilized country. Then, the West always unconsciously takes a position of imperialism and racialism. Therefore, the loss of discourse power leads the two protagonists' tragic fate in the whites dominated society.

Nowadays, although the prejudice of Chinese-Australians is significantly lessening, the cultural differences still exist. The purpose of this research is to inspire Chinese-Australians to contemplate on how to alleviate the agony of dislocation and how to find their position among two cultures. Meanwhile, it reminds people of more concerns about the living conditions of Chinese-Australians in modern times.

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