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## Autobiographical Influences in My Fiction Writing

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From the start, I have been asked whether my fiction is autobiographical, whether the female protagonists in my novels are me, including Sandra Yansen in *Timepiece*, June Lehall in *The Last English Plantation*, Alice Wong in *Chinese Women* and no doubt, the same question will be asked about Joan Wong in my recently released fourth novel, *The Last Ship*.

The answer is yes, there are autobiographical influences in my novels but this does not mean that the fictional protagonists are me. I do draw on my own background to write my fiction but the thing I have drawn on primarily, even when not directly, is the sugar estate environment in Canje where I was born and spent my early childhood and youth, at the height of the British colonial era in British Guiana. In my first novel, *Timepiece*, this background is not clear but implicit in that the village that Sandra Yansen comes from is named Pheasant, a reference to the Canje Pheasant, the national bird of Guyana that is found in the Canje rainforest and appears on the coat of arms of Guyana's flag. In my second novel, *The Last English Plantation*, the village in which June Lehall lives is named New Dam, which actually is a 'real' village in Canje where the Indian workers of Rose Hall estate were rehoused after their range logies were destroyed as part of a drive to improve their living conditions and discourage them from voting for Cheddi Jagan when he was campaigning for their votes in national elections. When I wrote my first two novels, I was not certain why the Canje backdrop was so important to me, and it has taken a lifetime for me to fully understand why, and the writing of my new novel, *The Last Ship*, completed in 2014, has finally brought me to a firm understanding and realisation about why I have had such a strong sense of being rooted in the sugar estate culture of Canje. Before this, I just had a sense that it was an important part of me and of Guyana and its history and culture.

When I was nineteen years old, I left Canje to live in the capital, Georgetown. I had a momentous sense that in leaving Canje, I was leaving something important behind. I experienced a sense of loss that I tried to repair by writing about it in my first draft of *Timepiece* as soon as I settled down in Georgetown. In *Timepiece*, when Sandra Yansen moves to Georgetown, she has a sense of dislocation and uncertainty about herself and this reflects my own uncertainty and dislocation as I tried to settle down in the capital in 1966. When she meets people in Georgetown, especially the male reporters she works with, she realises that they do not recognise who she is in terms of where she comes from. In fact, one of them, Bradley, almost accuses her of coming from the affluent middle class of Georgetown. This is because in Georgetown, the Chinese were always identified as an affluent, successful middle class and because I appear Chinese, I was always taken to be from the Chinese middle class. When I tried to tell people I was not, that in fact I came from a poor rural sugar estate in Berbice, no one believed me, because the rural sugar estates were assumed to be inhabited only by very poor Indian people, and Indian people were assumed to be backward and uneducated. They preferred to slot me into the Chinese middle

class; they could not see me as having Indian peasantry ancestry or as coming from “Coolies” as such people were referred to.

In *Timepiece*, Sandra Yansen is finding her way in Georgetown, tentatively and cautiously treading the hidden landmines of the class system. When she meets the middle class young man, Son, who is attracted to her, he introduces the theme of class into their conversation when he tells her that his father was a lowly civil servant who suffered from class discrimination in his job. Son is referring to the urban class system of which Sandra is unaware and telling her how aware of it he is. He is telling her that he comes from the lower middle class. When he visits her in Berbice, he senses he does not belong there while she does. He is the only one from Georgetown who might be capable of understanding that she has no social standing in Georgetown, she has no place in the urban class system. This is why, when June Lehall in *The Last English Plantation*, asserts to her new middle class classmates in the urban town New Amsterdam that she is Indian, and by implication, that she is proud of this identity, they laugh in derision. It is clear in both novels that the rural environment Sandra and June come from has exerted a very strong shaping influence on them but the details of this influence, namely, the specific experience of being rooted in sugar estate culture, is not spelt out fully. Only in my third novel, *Chinese Women*, do the details of the kind of sugar estate they come from emerge fully for the first time in my fiction, in the portrait of Alice Wong, the young Chinese woman who the male Indian Muslim protagonist, Albert Aziz, is obsessed with, and then these ‘Chinese’ details are more pertinent to the character of Albert Aziz than they are to Alice Wong, in that he idealises and attributes to her special Chinese qualities that it suits him to idealise, because of his own psychology. He wants to see Alice as belonging to the Chinese middle class since he himself longs to escape from the sugar estate environment. He admires the Chinese for their ambitious drive to rise in the colonial class system particularly since he suffers from the colonial race and class prejudices that oppress him.

It was only in the writing of *The Last Ship* over several years that the autobiographical influences in my writing became manifestly clear to me in the emotions I was working through in the writing; and these emotions pertained to the influences of my mixed Chinese and Indian background. Especially my Chinese background has posed a difficult challenge to me because it has cast me as a middle class Guyanese person, when I always had a different sense of my class, as someone rooted in the sugar estate. It has taken me several years to write about this in the themes of *The Last Ship*. In a sense, I was gradually coaxed into writing about ‘Chinese’ themes in *The Last Ship*, when well-meaning individuals would tell me I should write about ‘the Chinese’ because I am Chinese. I do appear to be Chinese so people can be forgiven for having assumed that I am; they had no way of knowing that I am actually mixed, part

Chinese, part Indian, with a Chinese father, and a mother who was half Chinese, half Indian.

So, Chinese and Indian influences intersected in my life in highly conflicting and controversial ways, dictated by race and class prejudices typical of colonial British Guiana. I have struggled to reconcile this conflict all my life; and there is no way I could draw on the influence of one without the other in bringing their autobiographical influence to bear in my writing. In *The Last Ship*, I have resolved why the influence of the sugar estate has been so important in my writing, and understood that the sugar estate influence is also very tied up with the influence of my Chinese and Indian background. The Guyanese-Chinese and Guyanese-Indian people share in common their historical roots in the country's history of indentureship and their Guyanese beginnings and origins in the sugar estates of British Guiana. As far as I am concerned, the sugar estate environment unites my mixed Chinese and Indian background. It was the difficult nursery into which they transplanted their Asian roots and grew new Guyanese Creole ones, and therefore, I have always regarded my own sugar estate upbringing as the nursery of my own origin, regardless of how this conflicted with the middle class status to which my Chinese background automatically assigned me. In *The Last Ship*, I explicitly portray Joan Wong as confronting and reconciling this history. The difficulties of race and class prejudices in this novel are focused in the conflicting characters of Joan's two grandmothers. The paternal grandmother is Chinese and chauvinistic about her Chinese ancestry and culture, while the maternal grandmother is also Chinese but rejects this identity in favour of identifying with Indian culture and adopting an Indian identity. In other words, she accepts the process of creolisation. This portrayal mirrors exactly the attitudes and behaviours of my own two grandmothers.

In *The Last Ship*, Clarice Chung is loosely based on my paternal grandmother, Sarah Wong, who, it was said, sailed when she was only five years old, on the last ship to take the Chinese to British Guiana. I did not know her, (she died the year before I was born) but her reputation, and the myths about her, made her a larger than life figure in my imagination. She left a powerful and fearful legacy as a domineering, despotic matriarch in the memories of those who knew her or were close to her; but some of her descendants regard her legacy with nothing but pride and admiration. She had claimed to be part of the wealthy Evan Wong clan of British Guiana on whose family tree one genealogist had placed her, while another genealogist has knocked her off this perch and deemed her a Wong A Qui and not an Evan Wong. Had she been told this in her lifetime, she would never have accepted it since she placed great store by being part of the Evan Wong family and some of her descendants still do, so this is a highly contentious issue in my family. The less said about it, the better; perhaps best to say nothing about it, or as little as possible.

In *The Last Ship*, Clarice Chung arrives in British Guiana in 1879. She is shocked and horrified to see Chinese people who do not speak Chinese or eat Chinese food and practice Chinese culture. They have intermarried with the Africans and Indians; their children are mixed race; they eat the food of African and Indian people; they have no memory of China. What she witnesses is the creolisation of Chinese people in British Guiana. She does not like it and vows never to become creolised like them, and this decision shapes her attitude to British Guiana as a place she rejects, while she exaggerates the value of China and her lost Chinese culture. It is inevitable that she will lose her Chinese culture, and she does, but spends her life in Guyana embittered by this loss. On the other hand, Susan Leo, the other grandmother, who is based on my maternal grandmother, does not romanticise China like Clarice but accepts that China, Chinese people and Chinese culture have no value for her, and she must adapt and accept her life in British Guiana. She adapts through the process of creolisation, by assimilating to Indian culture. She has six children with an Indian Muslim man but he abandons her to raise them alone. She finds a new lover in an immigrant Indian Hindu man who helps her. He teaches her to speak Hindi, she adopts his Hindu religion and culture and he introduces her to Bollywood movies. In my own life, my way of reconciling my grandmothers' differences was to see them as having similar origins in indentureship and in their struggle to adapt to colonial British Guiana, and to see them as simply having made different choices, the kind of choices all the Guyanese races were faced with when they had to learn to adapt to a new life and forge a new identity. In *The Last Ship*, Joan Wong also reconciles herself to the differences between her two Chinese grandmothers by understanding that one has made a Creole adaptation and one has not and this is the core meaning of their differences

I was very close my maternal grandmother Sarah Leow (Sarah was a very popular name among colonial Chinese women) and loved her dearly. In *The Last Ship*, I replicate Sarah Leow almost exactly in Susan Leo. Again, anything I say about Sarah Leow, can be contentious, for within my family, we are not united in how we regard her. I am biased in my love and admiration of her while others are critical of her choices, especially the choice she made to identify with Indian culture – a choice that some condemn, but one that I see as resourceful and creative. Because of her, I feel, overall, the Indian influence has been stronger and more positive than the Chinese one in my family, because, in spite of the low status assigned to her Indian identification, she used it to rise above her disadvantages. She did not allow the racial and class prejudice against East Indians (the “Coolies”) to prevent her from finding love and happiness. Conversely, my paternal Chinese grandmother, Sarah Wong, maintained a chauvinistic pride and prejudice in being Chinese and saw being Chinese as the reason for the success she achieved in her life, while in fact, she made a success of her life and rose above her disadvantages by settling herself and her family in the midst of a community of poor Indian sugar estate workers at Rose Hall Estate in Canje, Berbice. It was customary for the Chinese to prosper only by

leaving the sugar estate and settling in the capital, Georgetown, where the Chinese formed a prosperous middle class. She did not succeed there, but did so at Rose Hall where the Indian community embraced her and her children with the greatest affection. She lived by a double standard, claiming to be superior and successful because she was Chinese, while living amongst Indian sugar estate workers and depending on them for her livelihood.

When I was born at Rose Hall estate, it was a village that housed four range logies, packed full with many Indian extended families that included grandparents and great grandparents who had come from Uttar Pradesh. They spoke mainly Hindi, mainly the Bhojpuri dialect. My paternal grandmother was widowed in Georgetown and moved to Rose Hall with her children and opened a small shop there. The business prospered and the family prospered. My father was particularly good at relating to the people from the logies. He adapted to Indian culture very easily. He learned to speak Bhojpuri, and he ensured that the shop catered for their needs. He stocked all the ingredients and spices they needed for their cooking, everything they needed for their festivals, including the dyes they needed to celebrate *paghwah*. He loved the people who lived in the logies. He found his boyhood friends there and first girlfriends. He felt rooted in their community. My father was so rooted in the Canje community of sugar estate workers that he lived there all his life and refused to ever leave it. When he became very ill in old age, we could not persuade him to move with us to Georgetown. Our efforts to persuade him to leave Canje distressed him so much, he broke down in tears. He told me that he had lived there all his life, all his friends lived in Canje, he could not bear to leave it; he said his navel string was buried in Canje, he could not live anywhere else.

My father gave me a strong sense of belonging to Canje where my navel string is also buried. He was completely integrated into the life of the sugar estate. He did not identify with Chinese culture but with Indian culture, not because he consciously chose to do so, like my maternal grandmother, Sarah Leow did, but because it chose him. I have been in a similar position. I was born in our little cottage at Rose Hall, next door to a logie. I grew up there intimate with the life and people of the logies. I became deeply attached to Ivy Mahabir who came from the logie. Her father had died when she was four, our mothers became friends, and Ivy became our babysitter. She came to us to help my mother look after her five children when she herself was only a child, and she stayed with us for many years until she left permanently to get married and live on the Corentyne. I loved Ivy deeply. My mother was often impatient and bad-tempered with me because she was so immersed in the business of running the shop. I did not feel loved by my mother, but young Ivy never failed to be loving and kind to me. I clung to her for security and thought of her as my mother until she left us in 1962. When she left us permanently, I was inconsolable. She remains embedded in my memory as a maternal figure who, in my memory, is still able to give me a sense of security. For as long as I live, she will be a symbol

of emotional security though she died in 2013. As a child growing up in Canje, like my maternal grandmother Sarah Leow and my father, I found love and comfort in the Indian community. Because I was always deeply aware of this, I could not bring myself to be like my paternal grandmother and exploit the high status of the Chinese to my advantage.

This was the conflict I always faced in colonial British Guiana: whether to identify with the high status affluent Chinese middle class or the low status “Coolies” of the sugar estates. I lived in British Guiana feeling caught between the two, my heart with the latter, fearful of the former. I feel so rooted in rural, sugar estate Canje in Guyana because my origins are there, as were the origins of my father, in its sugar estate culture, and so were the origins of his mother, although she insisted that her origins were in China.

Guyanese are too accustomed to seeing their differences in racial instead of cultural terms because they fail to acknowledge how much they have assimilated each other’s culture and in this way become creolised. In my portrayal of the differences between these two Chinese grandmothers who are based on my own grandmothers, I have come to realise and understand that their choices were not racial or ethnic. In choosing to adopt Indian culture, Susan Leo is not making a racial or ethnic choice – it is not possible for her to change her ethnicity from Chinese to Indian. The choice she makes is to become creolised, like most Guyanese, to assimilate, while Clarice Chung refuses to become creolised and assimilate. My grandmother never reconciled herself to her origin in Guyana’s sugar estate culture, and I think in this novel, *The Last Ship*, I have tried to reconcile her to it.

17 January, 2015