

# The Necessity of Reinterpreting Identity in Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last Ship*

Abigail Persaud Cheddie

Department of Language and Cultural Studies, University of Guyana, Guyana

**Abstract** — This paper examines how Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last Ship* deals with issues of West Indian immigrant identity set in a post-colonial Guyanese society. The essay explores how *The Last Ship* offers a strong suggestion that the immigrant's reinterpretation of identity is crucial to his survival and holistic well-being on the 'immigrant landscape.' Through the examination of major characters in pairs – Clarice Chung and Susan Leo; Frederick Wong and Mary Leo; and Lorna and Joan Wong, the degree to which the six of them reinterpret their identities and arrive at a sense of ease and fulfilment is evaluated.

**Keywords**— West Indies, Guyana, Identity, Immigrant, Shinebourne, Reinterpretation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last Ship* provides a portrayal of the immigrant experience in Guyana. This portrayal includes concerns about identity faced by three generations of immigrants – from the time of arrival on the ships, to the time of some third generation immigrants' departure from Guyana to live in other countries. In the novel, the characters' complex ethnic heritages and immigrant experiences require a reinterpretation of their identities and ultimately a reconstruction of their individual ontologies. The text shows how a failure to successfully reinterpret one's identity results in an experience in which the self remains in continual conflict with itself and its environment. Reinterpretation, in this essay's context then, includes the individual's ability to see himself afresh through the dynamic lens of his multi-ethnic immigrant life experiences, rather than through the old inflexible lens of race and status.

So while many West Indian narratives show how the claiming or reclaiming of racial heritage and ancestral ties provide positive stimuli for the interpretation of the individual's self in the world, Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last Ship* examines how too much of an aggressive claim over racial heritage and old ethnic ties can confound and often demolish the formation of an immigrant's holistic identity. In fact, Frank Birbalsingh sees the novel as Shinebourne's continuation of her "exorcism of demons from a troubled, Guyanese-Chinese

past." [1] The characters seem to exist in a space in which their very existence depends on their attitudes towards outward looks, i.e. physical features determined by race and genetics, as well as symbols of status – presumably, some of the 'demons' to which Birbalsingh refers. Interestingly, Anne-Marie Lee-Loy's interactions with Shinebourne at a conference at the University of Miami in 2007 also seem to prove that these attitudes towards appearances are not only confined to the text but even to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have expectations of others based on our interpretation of what they 'look' like:

...as the conference progressed I began to sense an underlying tension regarding how Shinebourne presented herself and how we, the conference attendees, wanted to see her. We wanted Shinebourne to somehow "show us Chineseness," a positioning that she seemed to resist....We wanted her to perform Chineseness in the coded gestures that we were familiar with – identifiably Chinese foods, language, cultural heritage and history – but in this regard, she left us unsatisfied. We were expecting her to be both the face and the voice of a Chinese Caribbean literary landscape. She had the face, but the voice that many were expecting remained bafflingly silent. (1) [2]

The 'face' and the expectations that Lee-Loy mentions seem to run parallel to the interpretation of what 'racial heritage' also means in *The Last Ship*; it really means that whatever you 'look' like will define what is expected of you via an old standard of outward 'codes' like food, language, dress and even intelligence. And so the novel sets out to test how these old expectations can become detrimental to an individual's holistic identity when they are imposed on another or even imposed on oneself.

Through the pairings of six characters – Clarice Chung and Susan Leo; Frederick Wong and Mary Leo; and, Lorna and Joan Wong, *The Last Ship* explores how crucial the reinterpretation of identity is to the immigrant's holistic survival. The characters seem to be naturally paired: to begin with, Clarice and Susan, are compared through Joan's eyes as her two grandmothers, whose very existence seem to oppose each other and who share, to her discomfort, a final resting place in the

graveyard together (103) [3]; secondly, Frederick and Mary are paired as spouses and as Joan's parents; and then it is obvious that Lorna and Joan's paths in life are paired by their connections as sisters. Each pair represents a generation and it is evident that every successive generation inherits the condition of the one/s before. Clarice and Susan inherit the variables of their fore parents' arrival status, while Frederick and Mary inherit Clarice and Susan's battles for identity and finally, Lorna and Joan bear the burden of identities imposed on them by Mary and Clarice's ideologies. Ultimately, through these three pairs, *The Last Ship* shows how a successful reinterpretation of identity from the old lens of race and status, allows for a much more fluid existence in which the individual remains at ease with himself and others.

By studying two main components, I will explore the necessity of reinterpreting individual identity while being situated in an immigrant experience. Firstly, I will assess whether the characters initially view themselves mostly through the old lens of race and status or through the new lens of their multi-ethnic immigrant experiences. I will judge whether they construct their identities from the old viewpoint or embrace a paradigm shift to the new viewpoint. Secondly, I will evaluate whether a reinterpretation of identity is overall a more holistically sound choice for the individual's existence. To measure the outcome of this choice or lack of it, I will consider: a) descriptions of the characters' self-fulfillment, b) the positive impact they leave on others and c) their ability to achieve a visible level of creative or productive output in the social environment. To do so, I will:

- i) compare the degrees to which the two first generation immigrant grandmothers, Clarice and Susan successfully readjust their lifestyles and perceptions of self in order to operate fluidly in a new immigrant experience
- ii) examine how Frederick and Mary's inherited life experiences influence their type of identity reinterpretation, which in turn affects their level of ease achieved in their lives
- iii) analyze how Lorna's level of detachment from herself is as a result of unchallenged imposed identity, while her sister Joan's level of psychological comfort is a result of her conscious evaluation of positive and negative attributes of her ethnic heritage and of her family's immigrant experience.

## II. HOW THE GRANDMOTHERS INTERPRET THEMSELVES

Both Clarice Chung and Susan Leo must negotiate their identities by reinterpreting the roles of their racial heritage and status awareness in their immigrant

experiences. While one grandmother chooses to use her Chineseness overtly to construct her identity and inform her relations with others, the other chooses to subtly retain her awareness of her Chineseness but informs her relations instead by remodeling her identity through her acceptance of ethnic elements also adapted from her migrant environment.

Of the two grandmothers, Clarice is the one seemingly more at odds with herself and more maladapted to her socio-cultural environment. Her life-long preoccupations with race and status force her into a box into which she is locked away from full relationships with her family.

By using her arrival and race, her assumed social class in her country of origin and her occupation as the main lens through which to view herself and others, Clarice debilitates the process of reinterpreting her identity. Her constant declarations like: "I come from China, I is real Chinee" (20) [4] emphasize her desperate need to construct a fixed identity. Once constructed as a 'real' Chinese, she claims for herself a standard ontology, which affords her the opportunity to reject everyone else who deviates from that way of being. She rejects, for example, the ornhi-wearing Chinese Susan, by saying things like: "I is still like how I was when I come from China. I is a real Chinee; you no real Chinee" (21-22) [5]. Clarice's arrival as a Chinese from China and her assumption that her family were aristocrats in China serve to establish the backdrop against which she constructs her identity. Additionally, her occupation functions as her contemporary measure of existence in Guyana, where she views herself one-dimensionally as shopkeeper, more notably as a Chinese shopkeeper, and uses her position to wield control over others. In the shop, "she guarded the money drawer" (9) [6] and when Susan and her hungry daughters arrive "Clarice did not offer them anything to drink. They had to understand from the start that she did not give anything away for free" (19) [7]. Throughout her life, Clarice employs her racial and economic inheritance quite aggressively and often solely to communicate her identity to herself and others. She interprets her identity in an unwaveringly rigid manner as Chinese and as Chinese shopkeeper and so prevents herself from reinterpreting who she is or could be on the new landscape.

Because she views herself in this inflexible manner, Clarice's roles as mother, grandmother and mother-in-law suffer gravely when they do not fit snugly into her standard equation. Clarice's main preoccupation to be Chinese shopkeeper forces Anna and her fits, for example, outside of Clarice's periphery. From Clarice's perspective, there is no usefulness to be had from Anna. Not being able to help in the shop and not being well enough to be paraded as a perfect Chinese product, Anna fits nowhere into Clarice's equation. As a result, Anna

'cancels herself' out of Clarice's existence, and through death hopes to gain her mother's approval by spiritually going back to China on the water (96) [8]. In addition, the other children Norma, Harold and Frederick only keep themselves in the equation because of their willingness to continue working in the shop and their hopes to marry someone of Chinese heritage. As Norma ages and it seems that she will not marry a Chinese man from Hong Kong as was envisioned, she appears to be 'phased out' into her East Indian common-law husband's house, and her connections with her mother become ambiguous. Clarice also openly rejects her other family members: her daughter-in-law Mary's preparation of African dishes, for instance, and Norma's mixed Chinese and East Indian daughter and even her own late husband's Hakka Chinese heritage. They all fall outside of her equation. They complicate and confound her construction of her identity, and so there is no room for them to operate freely within close proximity of her existence. She appears to have an existence that grates against those who come into contact with her, thereby exacerbating her own feelings of alienation. Her refusal or inability to reinterpret herself to include others prevents her from having fulfilling family relationships and a more holistic and fluid identity.

On the other hand, Susan Leo is representative of the other extreme, in which she manages to forego overt claims over her Chinese heritage. So muted are her claims over her Chineseness that she puts up little defense to Clarice's assessment that Susan's Chineseness is 'diluted'. She defies what she looks like by dressing as an East Indian, talking and cooking like East Indians, working among them and having common-law marriages with two East Indian men.

Susan's choice of clothing is very telling of her openness to change and adapting to new spaces and things: "Susan Leo looked Chinese but she was dressed like an East Indian; she was wearing the short white organza ornhi that Indian women wore on formal occasions, along with a nose ring, gold bangles, earrings and necklaces" (18) [9]. Even though her small frame seems weighed down by all the jewelry, Susan's "pristine white" ornhi and her "pale cream floral dress" (19) stand in contrast with Clarice's silk pajamas that she wore like a "uniform" (19) [10]. This soft airy image of Susan is a reflection of her fluidity, her ability to reinterpret her identity and reinvent her image in a manner that is suitable to her lifestyle and choices. Clarice's unyielding statue image prevents any flexibility on her part.

In addition, Susan learns to be at ease with her physical environment. Instead of cursing the land like Clarice, Susan becomes familiar with the capital city, Georgetown. She gets acquainted with the landscape, where she works for some time as a vendor in Stabroek

with her stall: "...at the market Susan had become part of the community of Indian peasant farmers..." (98) [11], showing that it was possible to be Chinese and belong to a community of Indian peasant farmers. To Susan, there are no ontological contradictions in that arrangement. She is able to distinguish her racial heritage from her overall ethnic heritage, which she sees as comprising of elements such as language and food and relationships forged with other racial groups in Guyana, her only home. Through her reinterpretation of heritage, she becomes capable of redefining herself. It is easy to see how something of this nature could be inconceivable to the rigid Clarice.

Further, in comparison to Clarice, Susan has several functional and loving relationships. She reinterprets her identity into a type of caregiver, a maker of lively and beautiful things. She embodies the ability to synthesize, like an artist. After she moves in with Mary and Frederick, she makes sweets for the shop, creates a vegetable garden and buys "chickens and ducks that she look[s] after lovingly" (96) [12]. After Susan dies, she leaves signs of life and love, which Joan is able to detect: "The mango tree was full of ripe fruit. There were bunches of bananas to be picked, and guava, corn, pepper and squash on the vines. Joan sat and looked at the fruits of Susan's labour and felt her presence there in the garden. The chickens she loved and gave names to pecked around at her feet" (104) [13]. In her ability to weave herself in and out of spaces and create an identity for herself and others, Susan is unlike the unyielding Clarice who would not give anything from her shop – goods or conversation, and who would not accept anything new from others – Mary's food or her grandchildren's mixed racial heritage.

In addition, Susan's love stories, though painful and ambiguous because society rejects them, are hauntingly beautiful. Her relationship with James Abdul is depicted as one where love was present though he succumbs to society's pressure to leave Susan and take an Indian wife. Many years later, their love is still evident; on their visit to see James in the hospital, Joan observes their emotional connection: "Susan leaned forward to be close to him....they held hands under his pillow, and there were tears in their eyes" (97) [14]. In addition, Susan's second common-law husband, Motilall, shares a bond with her that represents the epitome of intimacy and union: they embraced as they slept, and bathed together, and they "sat in the garden drying and combing each other's hair, and massaging each other's hands and feet with coconut oil" and they held hands and embraced at the cinema (99). With a "Bindi on her forehead" (99) [15], Susan's full acceptance of Motilall with his Hindi speaking impoverished vendor image, represents the beauty and wholesomeness of a 'marriage', a fusion of two

immigrant groups currently sharing the same landscape and making it their home. Through Clarice's lens though, James Abdul and someone like Motilall would only be 'coolies', not full people worthy of having any substantial relationships with.

However, it is not solely Clarice's fault that she finds it difficult to reinterpret her identity. She inherits the variables of a migrant's experience, many of which are difficult to process, especially as a child: "Clarice just wanted to be invisible and silent and spent her childhood in British Guiana trying to pretend she did not exist, trying not to speak because she found life in British Guiana incomprehensible and confusing" (25) [16]. As she grows older, she must insert herself onto a foreign landscape with which she has no intimacy: "The most painful thing about coming to British Guiana was never to be understood" (24-25) [17]. This is why to begin with, she feels the need to protect the identity with which she arrived: "Only Clarice knew the truth, and in Canefield she remained a mystery so no one could take advantage of her. This was her biggest fear" (14) [18]. Clarice's immigrant history then seems to create her fears and then by extension, establish the identity that she creates in order to survive; this is why she appears harsh and unapproachable, when for instance, she "did not want Susan Leo and her daughters to think that she was as soft-hearted as her son, so she spoke severely, to show that they could not take advantage of her" (21) [19]. Clarice's migrant experience is difficult and destabilizing. This is why she tries to stabilize herself on the two pillars that she knows: racial and occupational heritage. But these two elements force her further into a tumultuous relationship with herself and her socio-cultural environment.

And yet, just like Susan, it is Clarice's innermost desire to communicate herself with the world. On one memorable occasion, she reveals a 'softer' side and attempts to build a bridge, albeit through a glass wall, from herself to her unclaimed grandson, Winston, "the little black boy with Chinese eyes" (15) [20], a representative of a new people. Sitting on either side of the glass case, Clarice and Winston bear a connection, only remotely acknowledged by Clarice this one time, in which she hopes to establish some measure of human connection with him: "...Winston would sit in the shop in the corner of the long bench used by customers, behind the glass case where bread and cheese were displayed. Clarice sat on the other side of the glass case" (14) [21]. This glass case seems symbolic of Clarice and Winston's relationship – related by blood, they can see each other through it, but unacknowledged and unconnected, they can't physically touch each other through the glass. Still, from behind her glass wall, Clarice attempts to transfer the truth of her

immigrant tale of instability to her little unacknowledged grandson and his mother, because it is Winston's story too: "...she told Cordelia Patterson about her memories, her feelings of loss, of having to become a different person in British Guiana..." (15) [22]. In her communication, Clarice concretizes her relationship with Winston, because her own story of rejection simultaneously validates and invalidates her rejection of him:

It was a language filled with grief, bewilderment and anger that this was how she had ended up – a Chinese person, whom no one understood, on a remote, poverty-stricken sugar estate in British Guiana, far from the homeland she would never see again. When she arrived on a ship, the *Admiral*, in 1879, she and her family had to stop speaking their language, had to stop being Chinese because people laughed at them. (15) [23]

Perhaps this is one of Clarice's attempts to reinterpret her identity, but she never gets further than the retelling of her past. She never gets past a full understanding of what has happened to her, in order to fully analyze its effect on her life so that she may then reconstruct her identity to her benefit.

As a migrant to a new immigrant landscape, Clarice denies the relationships forged unwittingly and naturally with old and new variables, and the new and often beautiful things and people like Winston, born of the fusion of the old established order and new beginnings are sidelined. Different variables on new spaces are viewed with skepticism or rejected by her. Ultimately, Clarice's identity is really viewed by others as her being "*ancient*, like China" (9) [24], and to her detriment, there is nothing dynamic and re-interpretative about that ontology.

If this assessment of Clarice comes off as harsh, then to her credit, in the words of Annie Chung, Clarice has unrivaled accomplishments too: the invention of the Chinese cake that increased her father-in-law's income; her hard work as a seamstress; the building of two shops from scratch; and the taking care of her in-laws and her children (142) [25]. Yet, despite her toil, years after she dies, the village children who grow up have "nothing good to say about her" (10) [26]. Similarly, at Susan's death, her daughters have no praises for her because of her relations with Indian men. Instead, they praise Clarice. Ironically, they praise her not because Clarice loved them, but because she was "real Chinese". Even the seemingly positive outcomes of Clarice's life are heavily entrenched in her Chineseness – a heritage, which on its own ought not to have negative connotations, but is given negative connotations in the novel because of Clarice's own limited interpretation of what it means.



Clarice's interpretation of her identity is severely limiting. Though she survives her immigrant experience, she never manages to accomplish the full ease and happiness that she once experiences briefly before the first shop burns down and before her husband dies. This is because she builds walls with her Chinese heritage, between herself and others who want to befriend her. Susan on the other hand, reinterprets herself and redefines her identity. Though she too experiences much anguish as an immigrant, she manages to achieve an experience in which she is more at ease and even to some extent, satisfied and at peace with her socio-cultural environment. Even though she too faces friction and rejection, in the end, she manages to exert a large degree of freedom by breaking down walls in order to allow others to experience her personhood that obviously comprises her Chinese heritage, even though she never overtly expresses it in this manner. From Joan's perspective: "Her mother and aunts told her that she had two Chinese grandmothers but she felt strongly that she only had one...Susan Leo" (104) [27]. It is ironic that Joan should identify her *only* Chinese grandmother *not* as the one whose existence was based on insistent declarations of her Chinese heritage.

An examination of these two characters reveals how an openly aggressive attachment to race and status can interfere with emotional ties as well as any fulfillment that one might gain on a personal level. It is difficult for Clarice to peacefully survive as an immigrant because she chooses not to reinterpret her identity. Her only way of existence encourages her to remain at odds with the new country, its diverse population and the organic growth of the new culture with its fusion of people and practices. Her entire life is spent on living out her ideal of what it means to be Chinese. Clarice's preoccupation with her Chineseness prevents her from seeing even those closest to her as products of love and union and her open show of power as shopkeeper reflects a woman who remains marginalized by her own actions. Susan on the other hand, is aware of her Chinese heritage, but chooses to negotiate her identity differently. For Joan, the comparison between the two grandmothers shows how having power does not mean that one is empowered. For Joan, Clarice represents a powerful domineering destructive presence over her family's life, while Susan's gentle spirit runs through their lives as a source of quiet empowerment.

### III. THE SPOUSES AND THEIR STRUGGLES AS SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

The next pair of characters falls into the category of second generation immigrants. They must negotiate their

identities situated between two or more countries – the country of their birth, in this case Guyana, and the countries of their parents' origins, in Frederick's case China, and in Mary's China and India. While Frederick's interpretation of his heritage is mostly idealistic, brought on by his living in a sort of 'bubble', Mary's interpretation of her identity is channeled through the lens of her practical experiences.

Frederick is an idealist and a romantic. To begin with, we see his love for Hollywood movies and his obsession over the female film stars (11) [28]. Eventually he transfers this obsession to his betrothed, immediately falling in love with her from just her photograph (17) [29], and ultimately becoming smitten: "Love made Frederick like a child. His eyes lit up when he looked at Mary. He could not bear not to be near her" (55) [30]. Interestingly, his idealism seems to extend to the analysis of his racial heritage:

Frederick [told Clarice] to stop talking about bad things to his wife, and only speak to her about good things; he did not want to hear any more about her suffering, he was not interested....He did not like it when his mother described her life as a bad one. He was proud of her because she came from China, she was a genuine Chinese.... He liked to tell people about it; it made him feel like a real Chinese, but his mother spoiled it by portraying her life differently, as one of suffering....his mother had lived in China, the greatest, most ancient culture on earth, but she spoiled it and let him down when she told Mary she had to live like a pig on a stinking ship for three months. He told Mary not to believe what she said; it was not true.... (70-71) [31]

Without first-hand experience of China, but with a clear awareness of his ancestral roots there, Frederick recognizes how he must negotiate his identity. And yet, he remains in denial, refusing to accept the truths of the immigrant story as his mother attempts to pass them on to him. In this way, he neglects to reinterpret his identity through new lens. In a sense, he exists in a sort of bubble, in which he is transported from one 'Chinese dimension' into another – from Clarice's partly fictitious version of his Chinese roots to his house and shop, beyond which he doesn't have to fend for himself, and in which Clarice constructs for him a definition of his Chineseness and by extension of his very way of being. Against this background, he is able to preserve his perception of self and remain whole despite operating on a limited vision of his condition.

Yet, Frederick is such a genuinely warm and kind person with humane qualities. He sets about: offering the Leos drinks and cakes (20) [32] and Winston and Cordelia treats (16) [33] from the shop, taking it upon himself to act as mediator of others' relationships – sternly reminding Clarice of the necessity of treating her daughters-in-law better (58) [34], telling her to “improve her relationship with Norma” (65) [35], and reminding her of her promise to have the house for Harold and Lily built in the yard (59) [36]. Frederick really has the perfect opportunity to start afresh, with an identity free from the trappings of ambiguous ancestral ties. Instead, he chooses to retain some of the images passed on to him through his mother and through what he chooses to retain, selectively. Frederick can be summed up into several main images. He can be seen as an idealist and a benevolent relationship builder but most importantly as a man who lays claim to his racial heritage only in an idealistic way and as such does not reinterpret his identity to his advantage.

Similarly, Mary doesn't reinterpret her identity enough, but for different reasons. The trauma of her childhood forces her into a conflicted relationship with her mother, her absentee father, herself, and by extension the merging of cultures which she visibly represents.

Mary's traumatic childhood forces her to reject her mother, and Susan's adapted Indian lifestyle. In addition, her absentee father seems to force her to close herself off from her awareness of her East Indian ancestry. Mary is plagued by her past, a past which is representative of the forging of a marriage between two immigrant groups – representative of an attempt at reinterpreting identity and accepting a new ontology on the new landscape. Because Mary is born of this 'marriage', she inherits the positive fusion but also the 'creases' that have not been ironed out yet. In this way, when James Abdul abandons his first family for an Indian wife, a wife who might have finally gained him approval, and Mary has to go and work as an apprentice and endure abuse from Evadne and her boyfriend (61) [37], she becomes plagued and never frees herself from the trauma and emptiness of the meeting of cultures. It doesn't seem like she 'benefits' from this 'meeting' because of all the Leo girls, Mary's life “was the most difficult, least cared for of all” (21) [38].

Because of her tumultuous background, Mary develops an intense need to be accepted by her in-laws, especially by Clarice: “Now with Frederick's family, her family was doubled. She always mourned not having a father, but now she was going to have two mothers, two more sisters and the brother she'd never had...” (34) [39]. Her desire for family relationships is met in her relationship with Clarice, though it is an ambiguous and psychologically abusive relationship, through which Mary comes to form

an unhealthy attachment to Clarice's ideologies. In her new family, she often feels rejected, and things like being excluded from their special Chinese family meals on the last Sunday of the month, because “It was a Chinese ritual for Chinese people” (63) [40] and Norma's ignoring her (81) [41], force her to take all the validation she can get out of Clarice's eventual approval of Lorna (64) [42].

But while Mary's hurt permeates her very being, she manages to weave a pattern of being for herself, making progress and carving out an identity for herself, despite belonging in a 'no-man's land'. She learns and makes incredible progress as a shopkeeper, and in time becomes an even better shop keeper than Clarice, catering to the needs of the people: “With each passing week Mary's confidence grew until she became so efficient at working in the shop, she seemed to float effortlessly from one end to the other” (57) [43]. In addition, Mary's skill at cooking African food and socializing with the black customers (60) [44] shows her knowledge of her 'new' country. The shop does well because of Mary's input (65) [45]. Eventually, after Clarice's death, Mary grows into an entrepreneur, making changes to the shop by introducing new merchandise to attract a new category of customers (81) [46]. Eventually, she reaches a point of security: “...she was proud of this great improvement in her life. By her own efforts she had freed herself from deprivation and despair; she was in control of her own life, she was secure” (85) [47].

But Mary is delusional and inherits all the ambiguous sensations of her unique situation eventually perpetrating the same harm committed to her. Firstly, she remains suspended between both the positives and negatives of her 'no man's land': “But it did not seem real that this beautiful house belonged to her” (86) [48]. All of the houses of pain and rejection are still seared into Mary's psyche, that to live now in a beautiful house of her own, makes her unnerved. Unlike Frederick, Mary has had no fixed 'house' – no defined identity of her own. Instead, she survives on delusions: “Lorna has become the light that could banish the darkness inside her” (87) [49] but for all the wrong reasons – like financial recognition and prestige. Then there are her ambiguous beliefs. Contrary to Clarice's belief that nothing Chinese could grow good in British Guiana, Mary feels that Chinese could prosper (68) [50]. But Mary's appreciation for how Chinese could do well in Guyana, extends to supposedly 'upper class' Chinese like Clarice and others, but because of the direct harshness meted out to her in childhood, certainly not to her mother: “My mother din do good like you” (68) [51]. And yet, even though Clarice tells Mary of the sordid details of her own past, Mary chooses to believe Frederick's rose-tinted version of what it means to be a Chinese immigrant to Guyana (72) [52]. It is obvious that

Mary doesn't ever free herself from the negative binds caused by immigration, as the hauntings of her childhood cause her to transfer her cold harsh treatment to her own 'less preferred' daughter (89) [53].

Because Mary sees her identity being lived out in Lorna, she reinvents herself as an adult through Lorna, Clarice's approved one, and manages to exercise some amount of awareness and control over her own life. But she remains imprisoned, without a 'house' – an identity of her own. She dies, 'delusional', similar to Clarice.

Both Frederick and Mary die believing in Clarice's 'truths', despite battling all their lives against the effects of these truths.

#### IV. THE SISTERS AND THE EFFECTS OF IMPOSED IDENTITY

Lorna and Joan as third generation immigrants have a heritage comprised of their own experiences in addition to the tapestry woven into their parents' and grandparents' lives. Though brought up in the same home to the same parents, Lorna and Joan experience very different childhoods, mainly because of how they look. Lorna's imposed identity goes unchallenged and thus she suffers a disintegration and detachment of self. On the other hand, Joan questions her imposed identity and manages to arrive at a level of satisfaction.

From birth, Lorna is made to carry the burden of her grandmother and mother's expectations: "Clarice let it be known that if the baby *looked* Chinese, she would regard it *as* Chinese and therefore worthy of being welcomed into her illustrious clan and blessed with its gifts and talents" (64). Clarice and later Mary measure Lorna and quantify her success by her looks: "She going be a real Chung, with good brains, and very important, she going make plenty money!" (64) [54]. Since she is five years old, they envision her studying in England (84) [55] and all of these expectations seep into her everyday life with her home experiences geared towards her 'privileges' of getting the best food and having to do no chores (87) [56]. In spite of this prestigious position in the family, Lorna's unhappiness at moving away from home and studying never dissipates. In Georgetown her emptiness appears to manifest itself in illnesses (95) [57]. Her unhappiness is born of her painful awareness of race, status and the oppression of cultural influences: "She felt isolated at school because all the Chinese girls there came from wealthy families....The teenage culture of England and America dominated Georgetown...." (105) [58]. In London, the same pattern of illness follows; she battles these in addition to cold spaces and her longing for home and the food from home (113) [59]. In contrast to her conventional photos which she sends home, Lorna eventually takes on a hippie lifestyle (125) [60] in order

to eke out an identity for herself. An unstructured lifestyle with her live-in boyfriend Tony in their dirty "commune" (127) [61] is the only thing she chooses for herself. But even that choice is influenced by the painful structure and the high expectations regarding her education that she experiences all her life. By choosing a lifestyle with a 'structureless' space, Lorna attempts to free herself. But it does her very little good as Joan is shocked at the control that Tony exercises over Lorna, hardly allowing her "to speak for herself" (125) [62]. In the end, Lorna returns home feeling empty and unclaimed by her mother and tries once more to find her place in the world, by living a hippie lifestyle with Tony in the shop (141) [63]. Later on when they get tired with this lifestyle and head back to England (144) [64], we never get a hint of her ever being happy. She seems to have gone off into a void within herself. While Joan becomes well-adjusted in her environment and charts her own path, Lorna becomes feverishly disintegrated, destabilized and disoriented. Lorna supposedly inherits all the 'good things' as a result of her racial heritage, but still ends up not successfully reinterpreting her identity.

Joan, on the other hand seems to take the opposite path from Lorna and ends up on the same physical landscape in the end, but is more psychologically whole, as she manages to successfully free herself from the trappings of her racial heritage and reinterpret her individual identity. Where Lorna reinterprets her identity as little as possible, Joan reinterprets hers as much as possible, always by conscious decision and often by defiance.

Like, Lorna, Joan could've become conditioned from birth and childhood. Joan's birth was plain and without celebration, "...she came too late to receive the good luck blessings from Clarice" and she did not look as Chinese as her older sister (83) [65]. "From the moment that Joan was born, even though Clarice Chung was not there to pronounce judgement on whether Joan would be Chinese enough to accomplish great things, in Mary's mind this question hung over Joan's future" (89 -90) [66]. Joan is born into a society based on looks: "...Mary looked most like the father who had abandoned them. It was his fault their mother had given Mary to Evadne Williams..." (94-95) [67]. Between her mother's looks and her sister's looks, Mary is made to carry the burden of the consequences of both of their 'looks' as well as her own. Joan could've been solely shaped by the education that her parents choose to give or not to give her, as did Lorna. But she charts her own path – studies for the GCE O' Levels, gains a job, and then moves to Georgetown and studies at the University of Guyana, even though her childhood circumstances were pulling her down an opposite path of servitude and invisibility. She reinterprets herself rising up against being deemed a

disappointment in Math, and being the emptier of the urine buckets and the washer of the laundry “until her fingers [are] red and swollen” (88) [68]. In the same way that she finds a means to hang the clothes out to dry, even before she could reach the clothes line, she finds a way to endure verbal insults and not being allowed to be child and play like her brothers (89) [69]. Joan takes up the parallel position of her mother’s in the family – the one least cared for, but reinterprets herself and does not replicate her mother’s identity.

Joan manages to free herself and become a thinker. Though as a powerless child she conforms to the silent lifestyle of servitude placed upon her, she manages to remain defiant at the people and conventions that put her in a box. While working at the bank, she refuses to conform to the hierarchical codes. She banishes any recognition or praise she could get from the Chung ancestry and rejects the code of snobbery constructed by “race, wealth and culture”; preferring to be uninvited into social circles: “Joan learned to recognise this code but she did not want to live by it” (122) [70]. Earlier on in her life, she also manages to mentally defy her mother and sisters’ perspective that Susan gave the family nothing. She contemplates on how much love Susan had demonstrated. In her adult years, she also refutes Annie Chung’s lambasting of Susan (142) [71] and in England, she argues back with Lorna’s friends about their idealizing of Guyana’s condition (134 – 136) [72]. Ultimately, she is able to mentally wrangle her way out of ideologies that are unquestioned and unjust.

Even though Joan also migrates, she reinterprets herself. She discovers the truth about Clarice’s heritage and hers, about the fake artefacts and that her family were hakkas (150-151) [73]. She confesses to Jonathan that to her “...the Chinese legacy is a difficult one” (134) [74], something which Lorna also knows, but doesn’t seem to know how to articulate to herself. In the end, through her own doing, Joan is relieved of the burden of her racial and imposed ethnic identity – that “delusional lie” (151) [75] and lives by her own construction and definition of ethnic identity. She manages to free herself “... flying away forever from all ideological and ancestral ties” (151) [76] in a way that none of the other five characters do.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Of the six characters, Joan and Susan free themselves of the negative implications of the aggressive claim over racial heritage and they manage to redefine their ethnic heritage overall. Susan learns to see herself as an ally and a member of another racial group’s culture; this augurs well for her individual identity and she suffers no contradictions of self by adapting her lifestyle to her socio-cultural environmental elements. Later on Joan

comfortably accepts Susan’s world view and builds on it. She grows into a woman who situates herself as Guyanese with Chinese and East Indian heritage with the freedom of choice to accept or reject whichever elements she prefers in order to construct her identity, including her choice to migrate to England and also to interrogate her history from China. Joan seems to map her understanding of self after Susan’s dynamic model, and this is possibly why Joan succeeds in finding fulfillment in the end. However, Frederick, Mary and Lorna’s lives and perceptions are mapped based on Clarice’s world view, and this is probably why they find it more difficult to create open dynamic and questioning identities. They are restricted by old frameworks.

Clarice never undergoes any major paradigm shifts in viewing herself in any other way except through the lens of her Chineseness, her occupation and assumed aristocratic class of her ancestors. Though there would be nothing inherently wrong in Clarice trying to protect a fully formed ‘Chinese identity’ that was being negated or threatened by erosion, this is not in fact really what she seeks to do in the text. Rather, she mostly defends constructs of her imagination based on what she *thinks* her ‘Chinese identity’ should be, given what she has learned from her society, take for example, the implications of being the bride in the perfectly staged Chinese wedding in Guyana. So apart from exhibiting a few soft spots in her appreciation for her husband’s memory and unexpressed admiration for Mary’s skill at shop keeping, Clarice dies remaining preoccupied with her negative immigrant experiences and fierce allegiance to a China that she had not seen for most of her life. In this regard, she remains unfulfilled and the only impact she leaves is on her children, daughters-in-law and perhaps Annie Chung, but only because they revere her Chineseness and purported ancestral ties; otherwise, Clarice lacks emotional ties and concrete achievements. Even the shop and the Chinese cake are exemplary achievements but only associated with the old paradigm. Similarly, Frederick keeps his interpretation of self safely in the old protective paradigm. Seeing his ancestral history through his mother’s eyes, only allows for the lens through which he views himself to remain unchallenged. Though he does present himself independently as a benevolent young man, his personal development is limited to his routine. This limited mode of existence does not allow him to contribute much else to the next generation. He allows Mary to continue inflicting hurt on Joan, and allows Lorna to be psychologically abused by the old cultural lens. By not reinterpreting himself enough, he offers little to his children and they either inherit nothing but emptiness, as in Lorna’s case, or inherit having to reshape their identities from scratch like



Joan, who in fact has to build on Susan's legacy of identity formation, rather than that of her own parents. Outwardly, Frederick doesn't seem to have built much on his own initiative.

Mary on the other hand builds a life in the shop for her family. But she does so as aggressively as Clarice, psychologically abusing both her daughters in the process. Mary sees herself through the lens of an abandoned child to begin with, and then she shifts into seeing herself as being ambiguously rejected by Clarice but being claimed by Clarice through Lorna. Through Lorna, Mary lives out what she thinks is her own validity. She dies unfulfilled asking for Lorna and leaving her children feeling emotionally confounded because she does not have the courage to free herself from Clarice's legacy or Frederick's acceptance of the rose-tinted version of it.

Because of this, Mary forces Lorna to see herself through Clarice's lens, never realizing that Lorna's discomfort with being seen this way causes her to resist this image all of her life. Despite how hard she tries, Lorna never manages to free herself from the effects of the imposed identity of the old paradigm. Even travelling all over with Tony in a foul smelling car forces her to be more unable to understand or stabilize her own identity, because she always allows herself to be conditioned by others trying to define it for her. In the end she still comes back without her degree, wondering if her mother asked for her, and trying to live and work in the shop to eke out a place of belonging for herself. She appears like an empty void both unto herself and to others, never reinterpreting her identity or becoming her own person.

Joan, on the other hand, though she also grows up with an identity imposed on her, both accepts and rejects it at the same time. She does her chores and always remains the dutiful daughter but she refuses to let anyone construct how she wants to see herself. By studying for her own exams, getting her own job, completing a tertiary education, helping to pay the bills, watching over her parents, travelling and making connections, Joan is constantly revising the way in which she sees herself, retaining all the empowering interpretive forces like Susan's and rejecting all the destructive elements like Clarice's unbending attitudes towards the role of ancestry in one's life. In the end Joan contributes finding the 'truth' to her family legacy, and this truth is the ultimate contribution on which the next generation can build. It is not to be mistaken though that Joan does not understand that her Chinese heritage is a part of her and is invaluable to her identity, as seen in her accepting Susan as her Chinese grandmother. Joan's reinterpretation of herself as a free thinking individual is not a negation of her Chinese heritage. Rather, she successfully synthesizes her racial

heritage as one of the variables in her whole identity and her daily life.

Susan's own understanding of her racial heritage is partly to be credited for Joan's approach to life. Because Susan undergoes an acceptance and a learning of the cultural elements of another racial group in addition to becoming comfortable in her environment, Joan learns that there is more than one way of seeing oneself in the world. Even though Susan dies saddened by not achieving a deeper connection with her daughters, especially Mary, she appears otherwise satisfied with her choices, and understands that any lack of fulfillment is brought on by the immigrant condition itself, for instance, James Abdul's love for her is obstructed by his forced choice of an East Indian wife, and Mary's hatred for her comes because of her impoverished childhood. Susan too is as affected as Clarice by the negative outcomes of immigration. But in the end, Susan gains one ally in Joan who fights against the negative implications of continuing to view self through one pair of lens, that of the old order. Clarice and Frederick barely reinterpret their identities and Mary and Lorna struggle with doing so, but Susan and Joan fully understand the necessity of reinterpreting their identities. Eventually, Joan remains the ultimate measure of the fulfillment that is achieved after the individual has processed his immigrant experience and has successfully reinterpreted his identity amidst the old legacy and the current experiences of everyday life.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Birbalsingh, Frank. "A Review of Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last Ship* by Frank Birbalsingh." *CHS-JCCSS GRADS – Keeping the Memories Alive*, Website Administrator, Rishi Singh, CHS-JCCSS Alumni Association (Global), 2012-2017, <http://chs-jccss.org/blog/a-review-of-jan-lowe-shinebournes-the-last-ship-by-frank-birbalsingh/>.
- [2] Lee-Loy, Anne-Marie. "What Does It Mean to Live with the Physiognomy and Cultural Heritage of Chineseness in the Caribbean?" *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, Volume 12, Issue 1: An Other Moment: Un-Collapsing the Chinese Presence in the Caribbean, Article 3, Scholarly Repository, May 2015, <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1377&context=anthurium>.
- [3 – 76] Lowe Shinebourne, Jan. *The Last Ship*. Peepal Tree, 2015, pp. 1 – 156.