HEADING EAST THIS TIME:
CRITICAL READINGS ON GENDER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Summary:

This essay intends to discuss some critical readings of fictional and theoretical texts on gender condition in Southeast Asian countries. Nowadays, many texts about women in Southeast Asia apply concepts of power in unusual areas. Traditional forms of gender hegemony have been replaced by other powerful, if somewhat more covert, forms. We will discuss some universal values concerning conventional female roles as well as the strategies used to recognize women in political fields traditionally characterized by male dominance. Female empowerment will mean different things at different times in history, as a result of culture, local geography and individual circumstances. Empowerment needs to be perceived as an individual attitude, but it also has to be facilitated at the macrolevel by society and the State. Gender is very much at the heart of all these dynamics, strongly related to specificities of historical, cultural, ethnic and class situatedness, requiring an interdisciplinary transnational approach.

Palavras-chave
Género; Ásia; Narrativa; Discurso; Práticas; Teoria

Key Words
Gender; Asia; Narrative; Discourse; Practices; Theory

Introduction

With this essay I would like to discuss some critical readings of fictional and

theoretical texts on gender condition in Southeast Asian countries, trying to establish their main issues and guidelines. I am therefore going to pay special attention to the issue of silenced female voices and to the ignored practices of women's everyday life. And what happens (or may happen) when they are allowed to have not a room of their own, but a voice of their own.

Though feminists have accused Edward Said of ignoring gender issues, the concept of 'gender hegemony' through hegemonic representations of the other, the silenced one, reminds me of Said's *Orientalism*, especially when he quotes from Karl Marx: "They cannot represent themselves; they have to be represented". Said was aware that the western concept of orientalism implied a particularly male conception of the world, most evident in novels and journey accounts, where women were often the creatures of a male fantasy of power, such as Gustave Flaubert's Kuchuk Hanem. This male concept of the oriental world tends to be static, without any possibility of movement and development, thus becoming 'eternally oriental'. And this also applies to the eternal essence of the oriental – or Southeast Asian – female, as represented in stereotypes and eternalized by the media, popular culture and official discourse, reflecting Said's theory that dominated subjects (women, just like Said's 'oriental') never speak about themselves, their true emotions, desires and stories: they have to be represented, someone has to speak on their behalf.

Within the scope of this essay, I intend to analyze some ideological and rhetorical processes through which women's identity is constructed, either by women themselves or by surrogate voices. Ethnography, anthropology, historiography, fiction, translation, popular culture, the mass media and all kinds of textual and visual sources play a very important role in the invention and re-invention of old and new female identities, and in circulating these through time and space. Therefore, one has to select and organize resources, such as: a) Works that focus directly on women; b) Works that refer to women within broader contexts and serve as resources for more specific studies. This is the case of works on kinship, demography, family planning and law, among others, which consider women incidentally, as do many biographies, bibliographies and ethnographies; c) Creative writing and literary criticism, including both female writers in general and male writing on women. The inclusion of works by female writers here is not intended to perpetuate the view that they should be considered primarily as women. Creative writing comes from personal experience, however, and poetry, short stories, novels, plays, and essays should be counted among the resources relating to Southeast

Asian women, because authors are often able to speak more freely about sensitive topics in creative writing than in other media. Therefore, and in short, there may be fact in fiction and fiction in fact, as in the works of Marilyn Krysl, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, V. S. Naipaul, Gao Xingjian, Salman Rushdie, and many other renowned authors.

In this essay, I will give special – though not exclusive – attention to the study of texts, narratives and sources related to Indonesia and Sri Lanka. When illustrating my argument with passages from creative writing, I will quote from Marilyn Krysl's short-story "The Thing Around Them", published in 1998 and located in war-torn southern Sri Lanka[1].

'I Would Like To Tell You My Story': The Narrative of Everyday Practice

What does an accounting of everyday life have to contribute to the current discourse of gender studies? Is everyday life similarly or differently manifested on the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the capitalist world-system? How are the possibilities for emancipation inscribed in everyday practices, relationships and events concretely taken up and realized by specific individuals and groups, which often take the form of new potential for autonomy, dissent or accommodation? What implications do recent transformations and old continuities in the nature of everyday life hold for the analyses of subjectivity, gender, embodiment, ethnicity, socio-cultural identity, sexuality or the concept of 'experience'?

Before he died, André Lefevere was developing a theory of cultural grids, based on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of cultural capital. In Lefevere's schema, a kind of grid system can be mapped out that shows the role and place of texts and discourses within a culture and the role they might play in another culture. Such a

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[1] Marilyn Krysl has published several books of poetry (*Saying Things*, 1978; *More Palomino, Please, More Fuchsia*, 1980; *Diana Lucifera*, 1983; *Midwife*, 1989; *Soulskin*, 1996; *Warscape with Lovers*, 1997) and short story collections (*Honey You've Been Dealt a Winning Hand*, 1980; *Mozart, Westmoreland and Me*, 1985; *How to Accommodate Men*, 1998). She was a teacher in China and worked as a volunteer for Peace Brigade International in Sri Lanka, and at the Kalighat Home for the Destitute and Dying, administered by Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity in Calcutta. She is the director of the Creative Writing program at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and co-edits the literary journal *Many Mountains Moving*. "The Thing Around Them" appeared in *How to Accommodate Men* (1998) and was selected for *The Best American Short Stories 2000*, edited by E. L. Doctorow. "The Thing Around Them" is one of the four stories of *How to Accommodate Men*'s second section "The Island", which reflects the writer's experience as a Peace Corps recruit in Sri Lanka and details the horrors of the current civil war between the Hindu Tamils and the Buddhist Sinhalese. In "The Thing Around Them", a young mother whose husband was taken away by guerrillas hopes to save her son by sending him abroad for adoption. But when soldiers surround her daughter's school, she realizes she can do little to protect her family from the suffocating atmosphere of terror.

system would clearly show that texts undergo all kinds of variations in status both inter-temporally and inter-culturally, and would help us to explain some of the vagaries of those changes.

While discussing gender in translation, Sherry Simon points out that those spaces that were once identified as universal (such as the great humanist tradition, the canon of great books, the public space associated with democratic communication, the model of culture which sustained the ideal of citizenship) have now been exposed as being essentially expressive of the values of the white, European, middle-class male.

This is why stories of life, case studies and interviews with women of every age, education and background must be considered as seriously valuable materials for an inside study of gender in Southeast Asia, capable of generating encompassing theories. The previously silenced voices of these women (non-white, non-European, non-middle-class and non-male), and the narratives they produce, have to be given a new role and status, in a modern transnational, interdisciplinary cultural grid: small voices instead of great books, the space of home instead of the public space, that is to say, the narratives of everyday common life, read and decodified in their own context. Moreover, by listening to women's voices and their life-stories, we learn about their real needs and listen to their requests. Because narratives of actual lives produced by human beings with a voice, a face and a name, create spaces of empathy. Consequently, projects of action and research will be conducted in order to obtain actual and useful results.

The first reading whose impressions I would like to share refers to Walter Williams's *Javanese Lives: Women and Men in Modern Indonesian Society*, a set of 27 short autobiographical interviews conducted by the author and his collaborators in Java between 1987 and 88, with individuals – both men and women – that represent a wide diversity of Javanese people. The people interviewed tell how they have coped with rapid changes in society and economy, and with the transformation of their traditions.

These oral histories were gathered from women and men of various religions, socio-economic status and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity is a constant theme, as evidenced by a poor pedicab driver who can barely survive; by a rich businesswoman who explains how she balances her professional and domestic roles; by an educated and respected homosexual school principal; and by an illiterate mother of fourteen children. All of them present in their stories a unique Javanese approach to everyday living. The focus of the first section of the book is the way people have adapted their daily lives to undergoing massive social and economic changes. In the middle section, we hear from

the Javanese who represent traditional values in the midst of rapid evolution. Finally, we hear from educators and parents who tell us of their concerns about youth and the future of the country.

Similarly, *Women at the Crossroads: A Sri Lankan Perspective*, edited by Sirima Kiribamune and Vidyamali Samarasinghe, relies on interviews and case studies to deal with a wide spectrum of issues related to employment and women's social and domestic roles, as well as to vital concerns and perceptions of women in an Asian society faced with the dilemmas of economic and social mutation. The authors include interdisciplinary studies on tradition and modernity; parliamentary politics; education; family law and social justice; Sri Lankan, Bengali and Indian domestic aides in the Persian Gulf states (Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain); school teachers; marriage, motherhood and employment.

Modern Sri Lanka is also the field covered by Swarna Jayaweera, who edits *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka*, a collection of essays which reviews the different paths Sri Lankan women have taken to achieve greater political and economic empowerment and control over their lives, during the fifty-something years that have elapsed since this country gained political independence, i.e., 1948.

Adopting a gender perspective, this volume discusses the impact on women of the social, political and economic developments which have occurred during these eventful decades. On the face of it, the country's record on gender issues has been remarkable: women have occupied and continue to occupy positions in the highest echelons of political power; the country ranks high on the list of developing nations in terms of its social indicators; and both men and women have enjoyed the franchise since long before 1948. However, a closer examination reveals that, despite all this, gender issues continue to be largely ignored in policy making and in important sectors of national development.

Therefore, the book opens with an overview of the various spheres where women are affected: law and human rights; the impact of the continuing ethnic conflict and violence; education and employment; health and population; changes in social and intra-family structures; the emergence of women's organizations; reasons for upward mobility, endemic poverty and violence. But all these topics take into serious consideration the voices of Sri Lankan women themselves, by studying and quoting extensively from interviews with women from different socio-economic strata and with those who have experienced first-hand the effects of political upheaval and violence.

In South and Southeast Asian countries, a large number of women have been employed as teachers, from primary to higher secondary school and, though comparatively fewer in number, at college and university level. This has given rise, however, to role conflicts in a woman-teacher's everyday life experience. Based on extensive fieldwork and personal interviews in Sri Lanka, Nepal and India, Usha Nayar's *Women Teachers in South Asia* reveals a pattern of continuity, discontinuity and change in the occupational mobility, role commitment and also role-conflicts of women teachers in these three societies, as teaching at any level gradually becomes a specialized job, requiring a particular kind of training, skill and aptitude. Tracing the growth and evolution of education and teaching as a profession for women in traditional Asian societies, this pioneering cross-cultural study shows that while at lower levels women teachers take their occupation almost as an extension of her family roles (in terms of space and time), at higher levels their family roles come into conflict with their profession, though they have in general displayed a remarkable capacity for evolving a certain compatibility between them.

When it comes to remunerated work outside the domestic space, gender roles and conflicts of identity become even more evident in professions that require a high level of academic education and offer both personal and economic power. For such women, new alternatives continuously interplay with the forces of *adat* (tradition) and religion, which are not always compatible, bearing in mind that what may be 'appropriate' according to tradition at home, may not be 'appropriate' according to modern corporate culture at work. In other words, gender identity in one realm does not necessarily travel well into another social situation.

This type of role conflict is analyzed by Wil Lundstrom, in his essay "Gendered Borders: About Some Professional Women in Malaysia", which intends to reveal what well-educated female employees are doing with their private lives and gender identity, as they follow career patterns that were once more typical of men. In Malaysia, we find a new generation of well-educated widely-travelled women, who mix and blend different ways of cultural orientation. Lundstrom's research emphasizes the deep connection between professional, family and religious fulfillment for these women. During their interviews, they reveal how important it is for them to be ambitious, recognized professionals, to be good active Muslims and to have children. Domestic work is not the heavy restraining load it often is in the West, as it is left to servants or

helpful relatives. Marriage is, first of all, the (sole) acceptable way for having children and it should also provide emotional fulfillment.

But women's potential for agency is not restricted to their participation in Western-like forms of organization, education or production. Sustainable management of traditional local resources can also profit from women's experience and function as an alternative source of income for them, thus raising their social and economic status. For instance, one of today's most pressing challenges is to find strategic solutions to deforestation, and to strengthen the sustainable management of forests. In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Nepal, the traditional contribution of local communities to forestry and tree management has always been significant. However, communities are now almost fully excluded from this task. In the few instances in which communities participate in forestry, they do so as cheap labourers in the production of timber, and never at the level of planning and design. In two case studies based in Sri Lanka and published in *Deforestation, Women and Forestry*, Anoja Wickramasinghe explores historical trends that have led to deforestation, women's loss of control over resources and to the conflicting priorities of forestry professionals and rural women.

As a development sector, forestry is male dominated. Decisions made at the level of policy, planning and regional implementation are accepted as infallible. Women, who form the lowest strata of society, must therefore implement decisions that ignore their own urgent needs. Rural women in developing countries use forests as a provider of items essential for household survival: food for the family, wood for domestic cooking, fodder for domestic animals, fibre and raw materials for making household utensils, pharmaceutical products to treat ailments and prevent the spread of disease – all these are acquired in the forest. For centuries, these resources were widely available and women used them freely. In the process, women accumulated an immense hoard of knowledge, namely where resources were available and how they could most efficiently be used and preserved for future generations. The food security of rural populations has therefore always been directly dependent on forests and tree farms. With such a close involvement in day-to-day survival, women in rural areas are knowledgeable in the multiple uses of forest resources. Therefore, they are potential planners and designers, with the capability of changing the present negative situation. This gender disparity in attitudes towards forestry (women's lasting interest in tree products and men's interest in timber obtained through destructive harvesting) can be

reconciled through the promotion of tree planting. However, these tasks performed by women should not be taken as biological commitments, nor should women's involvement be justified by theories that too easily link women with nature.

In the same field as Wickramasinghe's study, a strong sense of emotional connection with the environment – here understood as proof of humanity and not just of 'womanity' – is conveyed by the first extract from Marilyn Krysl's "The Thing Around Them" I selected in order to illustrate the above-mentioned factuality of fiction. In this extract, young Vasuki visits what is left of her beloved forest, after soldiers have devastated this potential hiding place for rebels:

> A day and a night passed. Then the news came. Soldiers had cut the coconut trees. They said it was to use the trunks for bunkers, but they'd cut every tree. Orchard after orchard, all the way back to that first generation fell in this cutting. Even the orchards which belonged to the Catholic priests were cut without a single piece of paper granting dispensation. Vasuki left the children with Sri and went to where the orchards had been. It felt as though angry speech had shot out across the air, cursing whatever lovely thing was in its path. The stumps were white, shocking. You didn't want to walk there. There was too much sadness in that place. (129)

Krysl's prose also introduces another important, sometimes even dominant, subject in the narrative of everyday practice, which is the narrative of the everyday practice of terror, with its manifold and very significant discoursive strategies.

Narratives of Violence: The Everyday Practice of Terror

The narrative of violence is another important type of discourse generated by extreme poverty, strong relations of inequality and close contact with terror and sheer survival on a daily basis. Old and new realities require an adequate vocabulary, with its polissemic words and metaphors, whose meanings are created and shared by the affected community, because violence has to be described and somehow justified by both victims and perpetrators. Violence against women may take multiple forms, wear several masks, play its hegemonic role in many scenarios.

The case of Asian domestic aides in the Persian Gulf states, and their subhuman living conditions, already introduced in *Women at the Crossroads*, is the core of Michele Ruth Gamburd's *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*, which focus specifically on Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers. Domestic service abroad functions as a possible but uncertain response to social and economic changes, in a context of severe inequality inside the family, the community, and the nation. This inequality is also evident in the

relations between nations, races, religions, and cultures established by migration. The case studies described in this book blend the painful stories and memories of returned migrants and their families and neighbours with interviews to government officials, recruiting agents and moneylenders, thus showing the confluence of global and local processes in the lives of these women and their community. I would like to emphasize that, in most cases presented here, violence against women is perpetrated by both male and female employers. Asian domestic aides are seen as mere commodities, an expendable slave-like workforce that even a middle-class family is able to afford.

But there are other forms of tacit violence and consented transnational exploitation of Asian women, as in the strange case of 'mail-order brides', who are advertised, selected and purchased through glossy-paper catalogues and websites. Rolando Tolentino explores this practice in America and Canada in his essay "Bodies, Letters, Catalogs: Filipinas in Transnational Space", published in *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture and the Public Sphere*.

The 'mail-order bride' exists within a narrative of hegemony, of disguised violence, a nostalgic discoursive production that enhances the values of traditional family and ideal social order. But the mail-order bride herself, confined to a commodity trade, is deprived of an independent discourse. The functional third-world woman's body is made symptomatic of the ideal first-world male nuclear family narrative. The catalogue's text brings into perspective the desire to situate women in an American space and in a time when women were idealized schoolgirls and perfect housewives. First-world men aim to regain the pleasure of authority through a conquest of those third-world women who prove themselves worthy of redemption from their own kind. Nostalgia and gender and racial stereotypes are disguised under the language of philanthropy. The mail-order bride business depends on the catalogue's verbal and visual discourse about passive, devoted, submissive women, revealed as the very antithesis of the supposedly liberated first-world woman.

War, however, is the domain of terror by excellence. Women and children helplessly experience all sorts of violence, which has to be somehow expressed through words and silences, through patterns of thought and behaviour… provided that they survive. Sasanka Perera's recollection of *Stories of Survivors* (*Socio-Political Contexts of Female Headed Households in Post-Terror Southern Sri Lanka*), for instance, describes the emergence and the institutionalization of political violence in Southern Sri Lanka in the late 1980s. Female-headed households in Sri Lanka emerged as a social

phenomenon in substantial numbers only after the two youth uprisings, one in the south among the Sinhalese, and the other in the north among the Tamils. Men went to war and died violently, leaving the women and children to face their lives amidst uncertainty, insecurity and terror. While undertaking a sociological inquiry into the lives of women and children, an inevitable political focus enters the scene of the research, as the complicity of the state in creating coercive patterns of governance becomes more and more visible.

Drawing upon extensive narratives of violence articulated by women, Perera's book captures both the structural and emotional upheaval that affects women and children during times of war, such as living with the tortured, the disruption of the family, concerns over sexual harassment and re-marriage, consequences of trauma and the problem of missing relatives, the so-called 'disappeared'. This widespread culture of violence, with large-scale destruction of life and property as well as thousands of arbitrary disappearances, coined new words and altered meanings for old words, such as the ones used for designing 'terror', 'torture chamber', 'kidnapped' or 'the disappeared'. These words made a dramatic entrance into the journalistic and popular discourse, and eventually into the narrative of everyday experience.

Articulating violence, both as an agent and as an object, is a painful, difficult task, as it becomes evident in Alex Argenti-Pillen's *Masking Terror: How Women Contain Violence in Southern Sri Lanka*. This book gives an account of the ways women from a community in the rural slums of Southern Sri Lanka talk about violence and its effects. The background of the soldiers commonly depicted as perpetrators, because of the genocidal war crimes against Tamil communities, is reconstructed through the stories of their mothers, sisters, wives and grandmothers. In order to understand these stories, it is important to analyze the language in which they are told. These women's often metaphorical and ambiguous discourse about a daily reality of violence underlines the difficulty of sustaining a cohesive social reality by those living perennially under what they call 'the gaze of the wild'. One feels that there has to be a sort of discoursive domestication of political violence, both by victims and families of perpetrators, in order to "mask terror". Let us not forget that 'to mask' means 'to hide', 'to disguise', 'to justify'; but it can also mean 'to embellish'. Many expressions fluctuate between the discourse of spiritual religion and a discourse of interpersonal violence, because language has to describe a new unknown reality. People have to coin new words or give old words new meanings, but some things are better left unsaid.

Marilyn Krisl's metaphor in the very title "The Thing Around Them" works perfectly in order to illustrate this issue. The true meaning of such "Thing" is never given throughout the short-story, as the characters are unable to understand the reasons and the full extent of their country's desperate situation: "People talked about the thing around them – how you couldn't see how big it might be, how you couldn't tell when it would come" (121). However, they know that there is someTHING terrifying slowly closing around them, a siege of terror looming nearer and nearer, until it explodes in the story's open final, when the school (with the children, their teacher and mothers inside) is actually surrounded by heavily-armed soldiers. The reader is left to guess the unspeakable things that will follow.

The same lack of an appropriate vocabulary for the terror and torture created by man – in contrast with the beauty and peace of Nature – is implied in the passage:

> One young man who'd been kept almost a year had come back. His story was not a good one. Things had been done to him, things with electricity. Things with water. And yet the moon rose and set, moving the ocean's ablutions. The green curtain rippled when a breeze blew over the lagoon. Birds sang out their vibratory calls before dawn, urging the sun onto its arc. The air tasted sweet. Light laid on its hands. (119)

Sasanka Perera's *Stories of Survivors* carefully describes the new widely experienced reality of the disappearances and the women's strategies for coping with terror and torture, as in the passage: "The majority of the women dealt with their feelings of hopelessness by concentrating all their efforts on bringing up their children in a safe and stable environment. It was for the children that they would continue to live. It was for them that they would find employment, and for them that they would request help from others" (113). Through creative writing, Marilyn Krysl's "The Thing Around Them" accomplishes a very similar purpose:

> "What is it?" Vasuki said. "Did someone hit you?" "No," her mother said. Vasuki thought of the catholic priest who, though her family was not Catholic, had volunteered to intercede for them with the sergeant. He had used an expression Vasuki had not heard before: the disappeared. […] Inside herself Vasuki constructed a pyre like the one which the family would have cremated Raj's body. She would not be like those other women, helplessly waiting. She would not wait. She would not hope. She was the mother. She stood up inside that space Raj had attended. She would become even more fiercely the mother. (117 and 125)

As it seems, women and their country's History meet frequently during times of war, when they are its helpless victims. But women also took part in the construction of

those same countries, in colonial and post-colonial times. If History is another sort of narrative, what is then the role of its female characters?

The Nation's Narrative

According to the official discourse of independence and nation-building in Southeast Asia, women act as secondary characters in the nation's narrative, because the very definition of national History is destined to exclude or marginalize women. Colonial and post-colonial History concentrates itself on issues like inter-state diplomacy, political leadership and warfare, where men play the dominant role, according to written sources that privilege male activities. In her introduction to *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, Barbara Watson Andaya stresses that, when the national story has already been laid out according to certain accepted formulae, women can only be included as a kind of supplement. This has been especially evident in Southeast Asia, where nationalist movements and the struggle against colonialism have been infused with masculine pride. Histories already articulated in terms of themes such as the suppressed people, the emergence of leaders, the awakening of popular consciousness or the successful revolution have proved highly resistant to the incorporation of women's perspectives.

But when narrating the Nation's predicaments, patriarchal discoursive productions often resort to stereotypes and metaphors associated with women, like honour, respectability, victimization, maternity, protection and care, thus 'gendering' mother-Nation, a fragile imaginary female entity. This is the main conclusion of Neloufer DeMel's essay "Setting the stage, gendering the nation", included in *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century SriLanka*. The book explores the development of nationalism in Sri Lanka during the past century, particularly within the dominant Sinhala Buddhist and militant Tamil movements. Tracing the ways women from diverse backgrounds have engaged with nationalism, DeMel argues that gender is crucial to an understanding of nationalism and vice versa, in several essays whose suggestive titles are, among others: "Framing the Nation's Respectability", "Agent or Victim? The Sri Lankan Woman Militant in the Interregnum" and "Mother Politics and Women's Politics? Notes on the Contemporary Sri Lankan Women's Movement".

Indeed, nationalism and patriarchy are never static institutions. They shift and adapt to circumstances and, sometimes, even adopt an apparent feminist stance, appropriating (exploiting?) the discourse of women's rights. But women also act on their own behalf, and negotiate patriarchy, capitalism and political opportunities, as well as contradictions within nationalism itself, to their advantage. Universal values concerning conventional female roles are also present in some strategies used to recognize women in political fields traditionally characterized by male dominance, as in the case of Megawati Sukarnoputri's 1999 campaign:

> During and after the June elections, not only Megawati, but also many other women in Indonesia began reclaiming a significant role in the political life of the country. Apart from adding their voice on national issues, they have also sought more attention for women's issues, including demands for more jobs in the bureaucracy, from village head to ministerial positions, and access to credit. No doubt these new political 'beginners' may become role models for less active women to enter public life. Although the movement is considered still too disparate to result in a significant impact, it surely is a strong change in political life.[2]

In Indonesia, under Suharto's New Order regime, people were systematically depoliticised, a strategy that, towards women, took the form of 'State Ibuism' or 'housewification', a process by which women are socially defined as dependent housewives, a convenient strategy of social control and capitalist re/production. This was a general setback, if we compare it with the rather equalitarian orientation of the

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[2] MACHALI, Rochayah, "Women and the concept of power in Indonesia", BLACKBURN, Susan (ed.), *Love, Sex and Power: Women in Southeast Asia*, Victoria (Australia), Monash Asia Institute, 2001, p. 2. This collection of eight papers provides a glimpse of various styles in writing on Southeast Asian women, by specialists from several disciplines. The essays, drawn from a 1999 conference held in Melbourne, range from reports of early research findings to post-modernist reflections. Five essays are primarily research-based, and they provide fresh insights derived from different methodologies. Alexander Soucy ("Romantic love and gender hegemony in Vietnam") draws on talks with his Vietnamese women friends to show how they reject old hierarchies, only to accept the limits imposed by new, karaoke taught lessons. Nurul Ilmi Idrus ("Marriage, sex and violence") opens a window on a little known world with her case studies of marital rape, based on painfully intimate interviews. Lyn Parker ("Domestie science and the modern Balinese woman") analyses periodicals from the 1920s and 1930s to show how 'new women' in colonial Bali claimed 'modernity' for themselves. In her essay "Dalangs and family planning propaganda in Indonesia", Helen Pausacher reveals the government's manipulation of traditional shadow-play narratives to sell contraception. Peter Hancock uses his knowledge from earlier research on the lives of West Javanese women factory workers to criticise the narrow occupation-based focus of the U.N. criteria for assessing gender empowerment. He argues for the inclusion of more embedded criteria, such as participation in decision-making, and factors reflected in such indicators as education and age at first marriage. The remaining three papers are of a somewhat more general nature. Two convey current preoccupations with Islam and the political leadership of women. Rochaya Machali reflects upon Megawati's run for presidency, while Kathryn Robinson contextualises the same issue in a survey of selected case studies. In "Gender, Islam and culture in Indonesia", she suggests that there is a tension between the flexible and pragmatic accommodations by which Islam has been adapted in diverse societies (she focuses on the Javanese, Achinese and Buginese), and the tendency of modern Islamic movements to return to textual interpretations. The final essay, by Lenore Lyons ("Researching the lives of Singapore women") is an introspective account of the intellectual and emotional voyage she herself made while working with the Association of Women for Action and Research.

revolutionary struggle against Dutch colonizers and the mid-1950s political campaigns.

But Megawati Sukarnoputri's campaign also followed strict self-imposed representations of female power, always protected and justified by the sacred inheritance of her father's name and mission[3]. The continuity of that formerly offended male power was the reason for Megawati's own struggle for power, because she was acting in the holy name of the father. She was not herself, she was 'the daughter of'. Once her father was revenged, she would simply return to the role of Ibu, wife and mother, ruling her country as peacefully as any other housewife rules her home, supporting, in the first place, the ambitions of her husband.

This self-interested legitimation of hierarchical power structures relies on a binary stereotyped opposition between genders, which justifies and perpetuates the division of society into a privileged group of leading men, and a vast majority of powerless 'others'. Dichotomies rationalize this type of situation, making it appear natural and reasonable.

Stereotypes, Dichotomies, Metaphors and Power

Most texts we have seen refer to several types of stereotypes, dichotomies and ideologically oriented metaphors about gender related issues in general, and the role of women in particular. Moreover, traditional forms of stereotyping gender hegemony have been replaced by other powerful, if somewhat more covert, forms, such as the ones pointed out by Robert Connell in *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*: "(a) the hierarchies and work-forces of institutionalized violence-military and paramilitary forces, police, prison systems; (b) the hierarchy and labour force of heavy industry (for example, steel and oil companies) and the hierarchy of high technology industry (computers, aerospace); (c) the planning and control machinery of the central state; and (d) working-class milieux that emphasize physical toughness and men's association with machinery" (109) .

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault wrote that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (93). Indeed, in the context of this essay, even modern popular culture (in music, cinema, television, novels and magazines) emerges as a new form of reinforcing old structures of power

[3] See also: BARREIRA, Irlys Alencar Firmo, "Ritualisations du Féminin Lors d'une Campagne Électorale au Brésil", *Anthropologies et Sociétés*, vol. 25, nº 3, 2001, pp. 31-49.

that subordinate women[4]. A popular novel, for instance, in order to be 'popular', has to be an intricate composition, which expresses and mirrors the existing life issues, while having the additional merit of subtly educating society towards alternatives to replace stereotypes. These concerns are delicately expressed without acknowledging a definite but unknown utopia for women, and without disturbing the balance of an actual patriarchal society.

In modern popular culture, global concepts are localized according to frequently imposed roles and expectancies for local women. Although originally deriving from Western ideas, representations of romance, for instance, have taken a life of their own in media images, and are rampant in popular culture throughout Asia[5]. The ideal of the happy family as the basic cell of society is prevalent and it is primarily women who are held responsible for creating it. In women's magazines, the connection between happiness, family and love is explicit. And, once again, we find here the inside/outside (home *versus* the world) dichotomy, where the male-dominated outside is accorded more prestige than the female-supervised inside. Popular ideals of romantic love effectively reinforce gender hegemony, because of the non-confrontational way in which they are presented. In a nutshell, women no longer serve men because that is what they were supposed to do under the patriarchal system; they now do so because it is an expression of their true romantic love, which will ultimately reward them with a model happy family.

In Indonesia, everyday language itself shows that, when a couple is the same age, the woman takes up the personal reference for young sibling ('adik'), and the man for older brother ('kakak'). Thus, a relationship that positions men above women in a hierarchy of reference is seen as romantic. Moreover, in a much more dramatic level, the notion of domestic violence and marital rape may be difficult to localize, as in Indonesia religious experts argue that husband and wife are 'two in one', and therefore rape cannot happen in marriage, because raping one's wife is similar to raping oneself. Likewise, this issue is regarded as a Western concept, spread by Western feminists and believed to be inappropriate for Indonesia, where feminism has commonly been viewed

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[4] As a complementary reading, see also the chapter on "Popular Discrimination" in John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998 [1989], pp. 129-58.

[5] See: SOUCY, Alexander, "Romantic love and gender hegemony in Vietnam", BLACKBURN, Susan (ed.), *Love, Sex and Power*, pp. 31-41.

as opposition to men rather than an effort to empower women[6]. Ironically, economic domination from the women's side does not guarantee the absence of violence: wives who are the breadwinners in the family also experience sexual violence from their dependent husbands. Moreover, women's awareness does not ensure women will leave their violent marriage: duty, economic dependency, shame, guilt, the low social status of divorce, fear of losing custody of children and general acceptance of one's lot are the main factors of silence whenever violence happens in the private sphere.

Still in the personal field, the question of pregnancy and motherhood as an institution and/or as an experience recalls Julia Kristeva's dichotomies nature *versus* culture and singularity *versus* ethics. In order to reflect on this subject, I will be quoting from the essay "Killing Motherhood as Institution and Reclaiming Motherhood as Experience: Japanese Women Writers, 1970s-90s", by Fukuko Kobayashi, published in *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture and the Public Sphere*. Among others, Kobayashi analyses the novel *Chôji* (*Child of Fortune*), by Tsushima Yûko (born in 1947), first published in 1978, which is a radical critique of the powerful and persistent institution of motherhood that simultaneously reclaims the experience of motherhood with its emphasis on the mother-daughter bond.

Fukuko Kobayashi follows Julia Kristeva's essay "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident", when she expresses the belief that, while pregnancy can be considered as a "threshold between nature and culture", maternity can be seen as a "bridge between singularity and ethics". Kristeva further argues that a woman can "find herself at the pivot of sociality – at once as a guarantee and a threat to its stability":

> Pregnancy is first of all an institutionalized form of psychosis: me or it, my own body or another body. It is an identity that splits, turns in on itself and changes without becoming other: the threshold between nature and culture, biology and language. Subsequently, with the arrival of the child and the start of love (perhaps the only true love of a woman for another person, embracing the complete range, from Lady Macbeth to self-sacrifice), the woman gains the chance to form that relationship with the symbolic and ethic Other so difficult to achieve for a woman. If pregnancy is a threshold between nature and culture, maternity is a bridge between singularity and ethics. Through the events of her life, a woman thus finds herself at the pivot of sociality – she is at once the guarantee and a threat to its stability.[7]

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[6] See: IDRUS, Nurul Ilmi, "Marriage, sex and violence", BLACKBURN, Susan (ed.), *Love, Sex and Power*, pp. 43-56.

[7] KRISTEVA, Julia, "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident", trans. Sean Hand, MOI, Toril (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2002 [1986], p. 297. Originally published as an editorial in *Tel Quel* in 1977 (number 74, Winter 1977), under the title "Un Nouveau Type d'Intellectuel: le Dissident", this article is almost contemporary with "Why the United States?". In this short essay, Kristeva argues for a new form of political engagement among intellectuals, an engagement that would escape the old master-slave dialectics outlined by Hegel. Drawing on the experience of marginality and

In *Chôji*, the unconventional protagonist Kôko may appear to constitute a small threat to Japanese patriarchal society, but it is evident that she is also envisioned by Tsushima as a guarantee of a particular kind of society, a society where the dichotomies of nature *versus* culture, or singularity *versus* ethics, are not in such extreme opposition as they sometimes appear to be nowadays.

The independent, divorcée Kôko believes to be pregnant as the result of a casual affair. Though this pregnancy is merely a product of her own imagination, she actually feels bodily and mentally transformed during this period. Koko's decision to keep her imaginary baby symbolizes her effort to maintain her own autonomous universe away from the dominant value system of the larger outside world, continuously preoccupied with upward mobility and materialistic achievement. She also believes that a child can grow into maturity by sharing many of the things that his/her mother goes through in everyday life. Thus, with *Chôji*, as with many of her other texts that deal with motherhood, Tsushima Yûko shows us that the maternal body can be a fertile ground for feminist discourse that is at once subversive and creative.

Motherhood may indeed be used to create a safe 'space of protest', protected by institutionalized discourses, as Malathi de Alwis argues in "Motherhood as a Space of Protest: Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka". In Sri Lanka, during the height of state repression (1988 to 1990), the Mothers' Front rose to protest against the 'disappearance' of nearly sixty thousand young men and many half-ignored young women. The Mothers' Front used the institutional discourse of motherhood, projecting essentialist views of women that reinforced the notion of biology as destiny and legitimized a sex-role system. However, the unquestionable authenticity of their grief and that espousal of traditional family values, within a patriarchal society, provided the Mothers' Front with an important space for protest unavailable to other

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exile, whether physical or cultural, the intellectual can still spearhead a certain kind of subversion of Western bourgeois society. For Kristeva, there are three groups of intellectual dissidents (the word is chosen with direct reference to the dissident movements in the Soviet bloc): the intellectual who attacks political power directly (thus inevitably remaining within the very discourse of power that he is out to undo); the psychoanalyst whose major counterpart is religion; and the experimental writer who is out to undermine the law of symbolic language: "But through the efforts of thought in language, or precisely through the excesses of the languages whose very multitude is the only sign of life, one can attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnamable, the unrepresentable, the void. This is the real cutting edge of dissidence" (300). In addition to these three groups, there is the subversive potential of women. Kristeva here gives a brief and lucid outline of her analysis of the position of women within the symbolic order: "A woman is trapped within the frontiers of her body and even of her species, and consequently always feels *exiled* both by the general clichés that make up a common consensus and by the very powers of generalization intrinsic to language" (296).

organizations critical of state practices, recalling the example of the 'Madres of Argentina'.

Moving between fact and fiction, women novelists play an important role in transmitting stereotypes, dichotomies and associated social values through multiple perspectives, no matter how popular or highbrow their writing may be. Women novelists not only encode or affirm the values of their society but they may also challenge, modify or give new meanings to those values through the formal strategies of literature. However, one must not forget that the concept of 'women's writing' itself can also be a patronizing stereotype that creates an underlying dichotomy with 'men's writing' (or main writing or mankind's writing) or with '(not) writing like a man'. By and large, however, most women writers seem to have continued to be more sensitive than men to critical opinion and to the prejudices of a still largely conservative reading public.

Thelma Kintanar, Ungku Tahir, Koh Ann and Toeti Heraty study these possibilities in *Emergent Voices: Southeast Asian Women Novelists*, concentrating in Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia. The situation of women novelists in these countries is not static but is developing in ways that are sufficiently encouraging to enable us to say that they are beginning to make an impact on their society. Education is one of the major preoccupations of their works, although the cultural contexts in which the theme occurs are quite different. Education is seen not only as a means of fulfillment for a woman but as a means of freeing her from the bondage and extreme subordination that is her fate in a strict traditional order. In the Filipino novel by women, because of the educational history of the country, which gave women relatively early and equal access to higher education, the need for education for women is not a predominant theme, as it is in its Malay and Indonesian counterparts. Indonesian popular novels by women writers present selfless heroines, dedicated to work, family and society, faithful to traditions and customs, meekly accepting everything that comes to their lives. The underlying theme in such novels is social injustice towards women, at different phases of their lives, in the context of a patriarchal society: how women deal with sexuality, whether in or outside marriage; the problems faced by a single woman in society, especially if she is a widow or a divorcée; the choice of a career as an alternative for the modern woman and its implications and complications in Indonesian society. Conversely, in the Filipino novel, injustice towards women is seen as a part of, or subsumed under, social injustice as a whole. The different

cultural contexts in which Southeast Asian women novelists produce their works thus become evident. Therefore, as the search for local concepts actually generates new concepts, there has to be an epistemological and phenomenological adaptation while studying gender related issues in Southeast Asia.

In Search Of Local Concepts: Localising Feminism

When talking about Gender Studies, Southeast Asia must be understood in terms of colonialism, post-colonialism, capitalism, globalization, and their diverse and intersecting discoursive productions.

Dutch colonial feminists, for instance, were fully involved in the colonial project. Their criticism only addressed European women's exclusion from participatory colonial citizenship, not women of other population groups, a racial discrimination justified with a conservative interpretation of *adat*, tradition. Elsbeth Locher-Scholten's *Women and the Colonial State* deals with this ambiguous relationship between Indonesian and European women and the colonial state, in the former Dutch East Indies, between 1900 and 1942. This work is based on new data from a variety of sources, such as censuses, colonial archives, rural labour reports, household manuals, children's fiction and Indonesian press surveys. *Women Creating Indonesia: The First Fifty Years*, edited by Jean Gelman Taylor, also collects several insightful essays illustrating how, in a colonial context, democracy and feminism were severely limited. Moreover, the men who have written the History of westerners in Southeast Asia produced accounts that nevertheless ignored the perspectives of the wives, daughters, civil servants, travellers and female missionaries. Actually, History has thoroughly silenced the voices of women, both colonizers and colonized, both Eastern and Western.

Both Locher-Scholten and Taylor conclude that, of the intersecting categories of gender, race and class, class has remained the most restrictive and permanent. Indonesian female servants were certainly the ultimate other – different in race, class, religion and gender from those who held the power. On the other hand, Indonesian female servants were very close to the European families, as they took part in the most intimate instances of the household. Their presence offered many possibilities for ambivalence, fears and desires, as expressed in the textual representations of this social group, as well as in many of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's tales from *Cerita Dari Jakarta*. The truth is that the demands of modernity, the illusion of westernization, together with

the hopes for promotion in the colonial system, sometimes took the appearance of concern for the rights of women, as in the case of the rejection of poligamy. But the barriers of class prevailed. There was, for instance, little concern for the consequent situation of secondary wives and concubines when poligamy was abolished, or for the cheap expendable female workforce of household servants, forgotten even by their Indonesian employers.

These – and other – readings demonstrate how Western feminism has not always been aware, either voluntarily or involuntarily, of the cultural specificity of gender condition in Southeast Asia.

Adapting Clifford Geertz's thought, as expressed in *Local Knowledge*, feminist analysis and intervention should instead be defined by neither distancing 'others' (other women) as counterpoles, nor drawing them close as facsimiles, but rather by locating itself among them:

> In short, accounts of other peoples' subjectivities can be built up without recourse to pretensions to more-than-normal capacities for ego effacement and fellow feeling. Normal capacities in these respects are, of course, essential, as is their cultivation, if we expect people to tolerate our intrusions into their lives at all and accept us as persons worth talking to. I am certainly not arguing for insensivity here, and hope I have not demonstrated it. But whatever accurate sense one gets of what one's informants are really does not come from the experience of that acceptance as such. It comes from the ability to understand their modes of expression, their symbol systems, which such acceptance allows to develop. Understanding the form and pressure of other's inner lives is more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke or reading a poem, than it is like achieving communion. (70)

Clearly, female empowerment means different things at different times in History, as a result of culture, local geography and social, political and individual circumstances. However, no matter how much feminist agendas might be made-up to resonate with women's everyday experiences under all those circumstances, ideas alone are not enough to put effective pressure on the State and society. In other words: empowerment needs to be perceived both as something "that comes from the women themselves and something they can own with pride"[8], in individualized forms of

[8] ROWLANDS, Jo, "A word of the times, but what does it mean? Empowerment in the discourse and practice of development", AFSHAR, Haleh, *Women and Empowerment: Illustrations from the Third World*, London, MacMillan, 1998, p. 3. If to empower women is to bring them into the decision-making processes at all levels of society, they first need gender policy, combined with access to market, credit, property and income. In "The Currency of Indonesian Regional Textiles: Aesthetic Politics in Local, Transnational and International Emblems", Lorraine Aragon stresses the importance of female labour in local development, through traditional activities like handicraft, weaving and batik. In issues of subsistence and gender, NGOs also have an influence, as in the case of VWWE – Veteran Women and Widow Entrepreneurs – a self-help project which intends to build economic independence with pride and

everyday resistance; and as a strategy for action, implemented by governments and institutions alike, and accepted (and put into practice) by society in general. Because, in reality, in male-dominated societies, though women may be permitted to engage in contained activism, those women mobilizing themselves around highly organized global feminist agendas are unlikely to receive such indulgence.

In brief, most women in Southeast Asia face numerous barriers to activism and find it hard to make their voices heard. Regional and class differences in domestic organization and in women's access to education and income give some women more opportunities for mobilization than others. Such examples often expose the fragmentation – by locality, class, and so forth – that is highly likely to harass feminist organizations. But they also confirm the high levels of consciousness among women with no previous exposure to feminism as conventionally understood, and the tenacity and determination of women fighting for their rights even in the face of obstruction. *Resisting the Sacred and the Secular: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, edited by Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu, studies this particular type of resistance, focusing on women's agency and activism within the Southeast Asian context, and their paradoxical relationship with religious politics in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In fact, and contrary to the hopes of feminists, many women have responded to religious nationalist appeals; contrary to the hopes of religious nationalists, they have also asserted their gender, class, caste and regional identities; contrary to the hopes of nation states, they have often challenged state policies and practices.

Patricia Jeffery's own contribution, in "Agency, Activism, and Agendas", is particularly significant, especially when she clearly states that women's movements are invariably situated within specific national contexts of state and economy: "The countries of South Asia have had different experiences of state and civil society, electoral politics and military rule, theocracy and secularism. Their economies and their integration into the world economy have taken different trajectories" (238). Consequently, all these specificities must be integrated into feminist agendas.

Yet, if women experience oppression in locally specific ways, these experiences are by no means simply local in their origins and they cannot be effectively combated at a restricted, fragmented level alone, which will only yield limited effects. Wherever

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dignity for the women and children of East Timor.

they are, then, feminists cannot ignore the global dimensions of gender issues any more than their locally specific manifestations. Localism and globalism – with their associated discoursive productions – are not another dichotomy: localism cannot be projected as a counterpoint to the global but is itself a significant dimension of globalization. Local knowledge is in dynamic tension with global knowledge. And the issue of gender is very much at the heart of all these dynamics, strongly related to specificities of historical, cultural, ethnic and class situatedness, requiring an interdisciplinary, transnational approach.

The comparative dimension necessary for what we might call 'intercultural analysis' has moved away from an anthropological notion of culture and towards a notion of cultures in the plural, as Clifford Geertz explains in his *Local Knowledge*:

> The hallmark of modern consciousness is its enormous multiplicity. For our time and forward, the image of a general orientation or perspective, growing out of humanistic or scientific studies, and shaping the direction of culture, is a chimera. (…) The conception of a 'new humanism' [cf. a global feminist agenda], of forging some general 'the best that is being thought and said' ideology and working it into the curriculum [cf. agenda], will then seem not merely implausible but utopian altogether. Possibly, indeed, a bit worrisome. (161)

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored the construction of narratives and discourses about the lives of Southeast Asian women. I argued against static conceptions of us *versus* them, nature *versus* culture, right *versus* wrong, binary oppositions that have been the source of all sorts of oppression. Multiplicity is the sole way of reconciling differences and overlook our embeddedness in cultural structures of domination and oppression.

The narrative of women's everyday practice covers a vast field, that goes from tradition to education, from employment to health, from politics to forestry. But this narrative is sometimes sadly restricted to stories of violence, with their often metaphorical discoursive strategies. As for the nation's narrative, women are predominantly secondary characters, subdued to seemingly a-temporal stereotypes, dichotomies and more or less covert forms of gender hegemony, which are also visible in modern popular culture and mass means of communication. All these narratives lead the researcher towards adequate categories and methods of study. While working on an epistemological adaptation, gender studies on Southeast Asia have to be aware of the

former relationship between feminism and the colonial system, as well as of the simultaneously global and local dimensions of gender related issues, which dictate the specificities of the Southeastern feminist agenda and concept of female empowerment.

Feminism exists within social territories, and acts according to their specific gender related dichotomies. That is why ideas derived from women's studies elsewhere in the world are being subjected to scrutiny for their utility in helping to understand regional phenomena and how to research them.

Returning to Edward Said, and according to him, concepts such as the Orient, Islam or the Arabs are too vast to be grouped together and presented as one coherent whole, encompassing all there is to know about the subject. Said bases his view on the width and breadth of the subject. The same goes for gender related issues in that same 'Orient' and elsewhere: 'women' are a dangerous category when, again, are 'grouped together and presented as one coherent whole', as shown by the multiplicity of voices and narratives by Southeast Asian women we have referred, contextualised within their many cultural practices and beliefs.

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