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Women and the Politics of Representation in Southeast Asia

Engendering discourse in Singapore and Malaysia

Edited by
Adeline Koh and
-Mei Balasingamchow

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Women and the Politics of Representation in Southeast Asia

Singapore and Malaysia are rapidly modernising, globalising Asian states which, although being distinct nations since 1965, share common elements in the ongoing struggle over the meaning of gender and sexuality in their societies. This is the first book to discuss a range of discourses around gender in these two countries.

Women and the Politics of Representation in Southeast Asia: Engendering Discourse in Singapore and Malaysia seeks to give an overview of how gender and representation come together in various configurations in the history and contemporary culture of both nations. It examines the discursive construction of gender, sexuality and representation in a variety of areas, including the politics of everyday life, education, popular culture, literature, film, theatre and photography. Chapters examine a range of tropes such as the Orientalist 'Sarong Party Girl', the iconic 'Singapore Girl' of Singapore Airlines, and the figure of pious Muslim femininity celebrated by Malaysian NGO IMAN, all of which play important roles in delineating limitations for gender roles. The collection also draws attention to resistance to these gender boundaries in theatre, film, blogs and social media, and pedagogy.

Bringing together research from a variety of humanistic and social science fields, including film, material culture, semiotics, literature and pedagogy, the book is a comprehensive feminist survey that will be of use for students and scholars of Women's Studies and Asian Studies, as well as for courses on gender, media and popular culture in Asia.

Yu-Mei Balasingamchow is a writer and independent scholar in Singapore. She is the co-author of *Singapore: A Biography*, which was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Title 2010. Her research interests are in history and social memory, gender, urbanism and cultural politics.

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Contents

1 Introduction

Adeline Koh and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow

On 4 December 2011, a crowd of women orchestrated SlutWalk Singapore, a demonstration against sexual violence and 'victim-blaming' in Singapore's Hong Lim Park. The demonstration was inspired by the international SlutWalk movement that had begun in Toronto in February that same year, which emerged as a backlash against a Canadian police officer who stated that 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimised'. Women in Toronto organised an outdoor rally on 3 April 2011 to protest this statement, which they argued represented the patriarchal culture of victim-shaming and fear of women's sexuality. Similar groups were quickly formed all over the world, and in December 2011 Singapore held its own SlutWalk. In localising its message, the Singapore SlutWalk website features a striking photo montage of the term for 'slut' in the four official languages of the country: English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil.[1] The event drew hundreds of people – including men – despite Singapore's reputation for political diffidence. Yet a local commentator suggested in an online forum that 'I don't know if this whole SlutWalk thing is necessary or relevant in Singapore, or if it's just another copycat idea by women here who think that just because some women in a Western country is [*sic*] affected by it, they should be too'.[2]

The same year, on the other side of the narrow straits that separate Singapore from Peninsular Malaysia, a group of Muslim Malaysian women formed the 'Obedient Wives Club'. The club aimed to fight divorce and domestic violence by training Muslim women to be more submissive and to please their husbands sexually, and it published a book – *Islamic Sex, Fighting Against Jews to Return Islamic Sex to the World* – to teach Muslim women how to better satisfy their husbands.[3] The club generated fierce criticism from both Muslim and non-Muslim critics, and was castigated as both a 'medieval and oppressive interpretation of Islam', and a 'regression, a moving backwards, in [what] women and other progressive men – Muslim and non-Muslim – are trying to do for gender equality'.[4]

These two vignettes represent some of the key complications surrounding gender and sexuality in Singapore and Malaysia today, most saliently the display and disciplining of women's bodies and the regulating of masculine sexuality in postcolonial culture. The reaction against SlutWalk Singapore calls

attention to central tensions in the history of local feminism. Are feminist movements such as SlutWalk mere 'imports' of international feminism, or have they been sufficiently localised? As Chandra Mohanty cautioned in her landmark essay 'Under Western Eyes', Western feminism has a problematic assumption of 'a commonality of the category of women'.[5] How does SlutWalk Singapore pay close enough attention to the local specifics of gendered sexual violence in the country?

At the same time, the establishment of the Obedient Wives Club raises issues that are inextricably connected to divisive issues of race, ethnicity and religion in postcolonial Malaysia. Maznah Taufik, a member, declared that the club was simply trying to integrate a pure understanding of Islam: '[Being an] obedient wife means that they are trying to entertain their husbands, not only taking care of their food and clothes. They have to obey their husbands. That's the way Islam also asks.'[6] Yet overseas critics such as Anjum Anwar have criticised the group as being totally misguided about their perceived faith and the needs of women, arguing that, 'As a Muslim woman I have total control over my body, and it would take a lot more than being good in bed to reduce domestic violence and prostitution and other vices.'[7] As the comments by the club's proponents and detractors illustrate, the club created a highly charged image of the subservient Muslim woman, which draws attention to wider contestations over representations of Islam and women in Malaysia.

Gender trouble in Singapore and Malaysia

This collection of essays, *Women and Representation in Southeast Asia*, conducts an overview of the ways gender and representation come together in the histories and contemporary cultures of both nations. Singapore and Malaysia share a common history of being British colonies from the nineteenth century, and from 1963 to 1965 Singapore was part of Malaysia. Although they have been distinct entities since they separated in August 1965, as these two vignettes illustrate, there are common elements that complicate the understanding and performance of gender and sexuality in both societies. The Obedient Wives Club and SlutWalk Singapore seem to take up opposing positions on the spectrum of what is deemed 'appropriate' behaviour for men and women. We read them as symptoms of the same struggle over the meaning of gender in two rapidly modernising, globalising Asian states.

In its approach to bringing together specialist essays on both countries, this book aims to explore some of the historical tensions and continuities between the two nations in terms of gender and representation. Some of the most groundbreaking work on gender in both countries has cleanly separated both nations. This includes Aihwa Ong's landmark study of Malay female workers in Malaysia,[8] and her work on the Malaysian feminist Muslim group Sisters in Islam;[9] Geraldine Heng's early work on feminism in Singapore;[10] Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang's work on gender and migration;[11] Cecilia Ng,

Maznah Mohamed and tan beng hui's work on Malaysian feminism;[12] Lenore Lyons on Singapore feminism;[13] Barbara Andaya's work on precolonial female mythology in Malaya;[14] and Wazir Jahan Karim's work on gender and *adat* in Malaysia.[15]

The separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 certainly merits this disciplinary divide, given that both countries have developed distinct sociopolitical cultures since then. Yet we argue that studying gender across both countries leads to some telling connections between both nations, much of which is drawn from their shared colonial histories. British colonial influence began with the annexation of several key port cities that the British administered as the Straits Settlements: Penang, Melaka and Singapore. This colonial presence was consolidated with the signing of the Anglo–Dutch Treaty of 1824, which divided the vibrant cultural exchange of the Malay world (spanning modern-day Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and southern Thailand) into two separate spheres of British and Dutch influence. This treaty resulted in the creation of a new Anglophone culture shared between Singapore and the Malay Peninsula.

Additionally, Singapore and Malaysia share a similar range of ethnic diversity and history of immigration. Migrants from southern China and India arrived in both countries in large numbers in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the colonial state created an infrastructure for managing and separating different races and ethnicities, which the governments of Singapore and Malaysia perpetuated after independence. In the early twentieth century, it was widely assumed that Singapore and British Malaya were to become a joint independent entity. When Singapore abruptly left Malaysia in 1965, it had to define its nationhood, society and culture, despite its centuries-long ties with Malaysia.

Yet, although both are modern nation-states that were substantiated by the withdrawal of colonial power, Singapore and Malaysia were also sites and subjects of globalisation *avant la lettre*. Both were nodes of ancient regional trade networks, interacting with the pre-colonial Srivijaya and Majapahit empires (seventh to sixteenth centuries), then rising to importance in Sino-Malay and Arab-Malay trade networks (from at least the fifteenth century). This was, in no small part, what led to them becoming targets for European incursions into the region from the sixteenth century. This long history of Singapore and Malaysia with globalisation thus means that both places present a different picture of Asian modernity, one in which particular concepts of gender and sexuality have taken root.

The contest over the meaning of 'acceptable' masculine and feminine roles for men and women in Singapore and Malaysia is derived in many ways from this shared history and continued cultural and economic connections, as well as the sociopolitical discourse that these connections animate. Our collection seeks to give body and depth to the archive of gendered representations in Singapore and Malaysia, arguing that this archive provides an array of textual and visual power nodes from which discursive manifestations such as the

controversy over SlutWalk Singapore and the Obedient Wives Club are drawn. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault explained that discourses are formed through the ways in which certain nodes of knowledge are repeated, grouped together and rewritten to form a 'discursive formation'. We locate the growth of these discursive formations on 'acceptable' masculinities and femininities in Singapore and Malaysia in a larger archive of historical representations, which find many interrelations between both countries. For example, the Obedient Wives Club has a Singapore branch, and draws its self-identification across a longer history of representation of the pious Muslim woman in both countries. In this book, Sylva Frisk's essay (Chapter 8) on the women-only Muslim non-governmental organisation IMAN shades in some of the other foundations of this construct of Muslim femininity in Malaysia. At the same time, the essays by Chris Hudson (Chapter 2) and Simon Obendorf (Chapter 3) delineate the important tropes around commodified Asian sexuality and its disavowal through the 'Sarong Party Girl' and her polished counterpart, the iconic 'Singapore Girl' of Singapore Airlines.

The problem of representation

We mean several things by the term 'representation'. 'Representation' has been used in feminist scholarship from the United States and Europe from the 1960s to restore women to history. This has been seen in numerous forms: in eighteenth and nineteenth century American literature as the 'recovery' project, which sought to restore forgotten women writers to the literary canon;[16] the rewriting of the French revolution to take note of important women actors and their agency;[17] Joan Scott's masterful intervention about the need to examine how gender worked as a concept that helped to determine historical events; and closer to Asia, the movement by China scholars to problematise women and gender in East Asian history.[18] Our collection aims to work along these lines by treating gender and sexuality – in terms both of masculine and feminine roles, and of the nature of sexual preference – as important topics within the landscape of contemporary Singaporean and Malaysian culture. Fundamentally, in keeping with Joan Scott's argument for the need to problematise gender, we wish to explore the 'implicit understandings of gender' that have created both men and women as philosophical, political and historical subjects, but also make explicit and question these 'implicit understandings'.[19]

Yet we also seek to go further, to explore some of the theoretical consequences of representation. In doing this, we take seriously the issues of representation outlined by Gayatri Spivak in her landmark essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'[20] In this essay, Spivak draws a distinction between two forms of representation. The first is aesthetic representation, as conveyed by the German term *darstellen*, which represents or portrays the subject; the second is political representation, conveyed by the term *vertreten*, or the act of 'speaking for' the needs and desires of someone or something. Spivak

characterises these two forms of representation as, respectively, 'portrait' versus 'proxy'.[21] She critiques the work of Foucault and Gilles Deleuze for conflating the two rhetorically, so that representation-as-portrait claims to transparently express representation-as-proxy. This conflation – or complicity, as Spivak terms it – conceals the fact that the act of representation has first conjured the subject as a stable, coherent entity, and then claimed to speak for that imagined subject accordingly. The subject therefore receives its political identity within the dominant discourse of the elite. It is not self-determined, and its self-consciousness is defined by a specific, dominant system of political representation. Therefore the subaltern cannot 'speak'; as Spivak noted in a subsequent interview, 'even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard' because the dominant discourse is unable to interpret or understand her utterances accurately.[22] To represent the subaltern is to silence her.

Academic scholarship, as Spivak and many others have noted, is complicit in this silencing or muting of the subaltern. No matter how well intentioned, the Western or Western-inflected intellectual, in claiming to be an authoritative representative of subaltern consciousness, is also guilty of displacing and subordinating the postcolonial subject, and of producing knowledge that re-inscribes the world in the context of dominant modes of culture. As Spivak writes, 'the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the non-representing intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved'.[23]

This book attempts to interrogate these questions of 'speaking for' within the politics of representation. Who has spoken for the women, men and LGBT people of Singapore and Malaysia, and why do women and gender perspectives and methodologies continue to be so unpopular within Singapore and Malaysia studies? What are the dominant ways in which women and gender have been depicted in Singapore and Malaysia studies? What is present, and what is absent in the construction of gender in both countries? A point we have noted in the existing literature is that, in Singapore and Malaysia, the dominant narratives of postcolonial 'nation-building' and modernisation exercise a similar silencing of women's agency and self-consciousness. Much of the literature on the place of women and gender, especially before the 1990s, has focused on women's 'contributions' to economics, education, the state and other apparatus of modernity.

Taking Spivak and Scott as our starting points, the goal of this book is to attempt an incomplete representation of what has currently evaded representation. If academic scholarship is part of the problem, so to speak, it is also part of the solution. As Spivak writes, 'the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation'.[24] We are centrally concerned with both attempting to articulate 'unrepresented' voices of gender studies in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as making our own privilege visible. Although we acknowledge that the subaltern cannot speak, we seek to illuminate the gendered context in which she, or he, has been subjectified – not to speak *for* the