Postcoloniality in Southeast Asia?

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When did Southeast Asia appear as a concept in geo-political imaginaries? Writing in the first half of the 1950s, the historian DGE Hall noted that the term became generally used only during WW ll, to signify a land mass covering "the mainland states of Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, North and South Vietnam and Malaya together with the two great island groups . . . the Republic of Indonesia and the Republic of the Philippines' (3). According to Hall, the term signified not so much a coherent region with unified forms of language, ethnicity, religion, etc, as one of simultaneous mixing and maintenance of local differences: "There has obviously been a great deal of intermixture between the earlier inhabitants and later comers. The whole area, indeed, has been described as a chaos of races and languages" (5). In brief, Southeast Asia in its heterogeneity of ethnic peoples, languages, religions, and local identities may be said to have emerged as a tentatively coherent concept only in the early twentieth century, during the last stages of colonialism, and even as approaching independence and post-independence eras augured the emergence of more nation states than Hall's description intuited, and the possible future division of territories into even more micro-states. Hall's Southeast Asia now has been enlarged to include Brunei, Singapore, East Timor, and perhaps other incipient states struggling for autonomy, like Acheh and the Moro-dominated Mindanao in the Philippines.

How then to conceptualize a unitary postcolonial Southeast Asia and to formulate a unifying set of ideas, rigorously argued, operating as a systemizing theory, to explain such a single postcolonial region, particularly when in U.S. academia, where theories and disciplines often seem to appear and disappear as rapidly as mushrooms on damp forest floors, the word has been out for almost a decade that the discipline of postcolonial studies as a university course of studies is passé, along with feminist and Marxist studies, and even theory itself?

Critiquing the term "Southeast Asian postcoloniality," I wish to suggest a more modest thesis that may illuminate regional historical and contemporary narratives and forces covered under this rubric.

Any articulation of a Southeast Asian postcolonial theory will have to incorporate

the region's geo-political multiple pasts, its current highly local cultures and economic and national interests, and its possibly more solidly integrated future. To encompass these diachronic features in one set of abstractions with explanatory power to encompass past and contemporary forces viewed as postcolonial, to my mind, is a challenging project because of the tenuous, provisional dynamism of the diverse Southeast Asian populations, intersecting with the highly volatile character of contemporary global geopolitics, including world-wide environmental, gender, economic, and identity conflicts. Thus, any attempt to generate such a unified explanatory system may be an act of hubris.

The term "postcolonial" operates as a post-Independence concept, not simply as a chronological term denoting the era after colonialism, to signify importantly the structural continuation of colonial apparatuses after the achievement of Independence. The apparent departure of colonial powers in many postcolonial states did not result in the end of colonialism. Rather, despite the shift to nationalist leadership and the installation of democratic constitutions, colonized peoples in varying degree often remain subordinated in post-Independence societies through a combination of economic infrastructural controls, collusion between nationalist and establishment powers, and lingering cultural dominance of the exiting colonial power. This critical observation of on-going colonized mentalities, powerfully theorized by the Caribbean-Algerian psychologist Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks,* has been locally reproduced by indigenous intellectuals in Malaysia such as Mohammed Haji Salleh, who has criticized Malaysians writing and speaking in English as colonized subjects. Muhammad, trained in English literature at the University of Singapore, has been a major literary voice in formulating the attack on English as a colonizing instrument in the "history of intellectual subjugation" (6).5 Almost fifty years after Malaysia became an independent state, in an article published in 2001, he argued,

> For many native writers the languages and cultures of these colonial powers, be they English, French, Dutch, Spanish or Portuguese, were to lie heavily over their consciousness and conscience, creating a situation where they were condemned to living lives partly dependent for their vocabularies and logic on the colonial cultures. Many were divided souls, and this division has become a problem forever to disturb them, to be continually examined, suffered, argued for and against, and often poured into the dark decades of uncertainty. The literary works that they have come to write are saturated with it. And in many instances darkly feeding on it. It has in the meantime become a problem for the independent country itself. (2001, 6)

Muhammed's trope of divided souls comes directly from Fanon's image of pathological division between black skin, white mask, but his nationalist postcolonial critique assumes, as did Fanon's, that the division is psychologically

transparent and containable in the universally understood paradigm of good nationalist and bad colonialist. The contemporary economic and social disturbances in post-Independence Algeria and the Caribbean states, however, demonstrate the inadequacy of such assumptions. We, even those of us who are not historians, who may be poets and fictionists, are no longer able to believe in a pure, innocent, undivided pre-colonial Eden; nor do we now enjoy, even under the most paternalistic of nationalist regimes, an undivided liberated consciousness. The mythifications of such pre-contact identities generated by nationalist authors like Muhammad possess little resonance and credibility among today's skeptical globalized citizenry. Rather, a poem like Muhammad's "si tenggang's homecoming," with its nuanced negotiations between a desired idealized origin and a secular modern cosmopolitan agentic present, carries a more authentic and persuasive representation of the post-Independence national hero.

After World War Two and the dismantling of the British Empire, with the Empire morphing into its benign postmortem manifestation, the Commonwealth of Nations, Malaysian and Singaporean Anglophone literatures were initially framed as part of Commonwealth literature. This body of writing, I have written elsewhere, was emergent in the 1950s, although literary historians like Philip Holden have argued that its precursors were evident as early as the end of the nineteenth century, with the stories and poems published between 1899 and 1911 by Straits-born Chinese in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*. Commonwealth Studies was institutionalized in university curricula in Britain, the West Indies, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere in the 1960s. Leeds University established the first Chair in Commonwealth Literature, and its postgraduate studies program enrolled students such as James N'gugi, now known as N'gugi wa Thiongo, who graduated to establish their reputations in their home countries as nationalist authors. In 1966, Lloyd Fernando and some other University of Malaya lecturers taught a course on Commonwealth Literature for the first time in the Malaysia/Singapore region, and I was privileged to enroll as an English undergraduate in that course. I consider those bodies of theories and texts, institutionalized as Commonwealth literature in the 1960s and 70s, as the earliest forms of postcolonial studies.

Commonwealth literary studies, paralleling its political master, sank into a moribund state until it was reincarnated as postcolonial studies in 1989 with the publication of *The Empire Writes Back*. When I first reviewed this seminal text, Ashcroft, Griffin and Tiffin's theory of postcolonial studies struck me as a peculiar system for organizing the historical and contemporary socio-political globe. It held that representations of white settler communities in Australia and New Zealand were coeval with those of colonized racialized and tribal natives in India and Africa; it ignored the colonial histories of Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines despite their commonalities in Anglophone educational systems; and it elided enormous former and some current Francophone, Hispanic,

German, Netherlands, Belgium, Italian, and US colonized territories. In 1992, at a conference in Adelaide, in a keynote that later was published as an essay, "Reflections on Theorizing Postcolonial Studies," I noted that postcolonial studies can only signify in the conceptual frames of empire, colony and nation. "Postcolonial 'theory' is constructed along organizations of geographical space (thus the presumption that only certain people and territories possess postcolonial status) and historical time;" thus, postcolonial scholars deploy "notions of borders, boundary maintenance, historiographies as primitive, progressive or regressive, and essentialist or accidental identities in contesting fashion" (35-36). While I agreed with Ashcroft et al's project, to analyze the discursive shapes and representations related to post-independence decolonization movements, I noted the inadequacy of their models, pointing for example that in instating only a raced black-white production of postcolonial studies in *The Empire Writes Back,* these white Australian academics effectively erased the chief race nightmare of a historically Whites Only Australia, the Asian presence (38).

In particular, I critiqued the way that their chapter, "Theory at the cross-roads: indigenous theory and post-colonial reading," divided the subject into "Indian literary theories," "African literary theories," "The Settler Colonies," and "Caribbean theories," as if these bodies of theories were self-evidently autonomous, as if the domain of literary studies were so geographically enclosed, as if theories and writing and reading practices did not from the outset circulate across territories and borders, as if apparatuses of imperial education had not operated to produce sameness in diverse far-flung spaces, and as if the geo-political categories marked as "India," "Africa," "Settlers," and "Caribbean" did not encompass within themselves vast differences in imperial history and characteristics that create division and separation—differences in language, religion, and ethnic and tribal identity, for example, in India and Africa. Perhaps I was too critical in concluding in my review of the book, "the impression of breadth [in *The Empire Writes Back*] masks the reductiveness, homogenization, and ahistorical distortion that such unself-reflexive taxonomy produces" (37).

Still, I am repeating this critique today of the project on the table, because I am anxious that we do not commit a similar error in formulating a Southeast Asian postcoloniality as a reductive, homogenous and ahistorical formation. I'd like to see our collective attempt to articulate a Southeast Asian postcolonialism not only as a means to insert the presence of postcolonial Southeast Asian intellectual history but also as a reconfiguration of a larger context of Asia itself as postcolonial territory and subject, thus bringing into view China's abject history as colonized territory, Japan's horrendous history of imperial militaristic invasion and conquests, and the many European colonial predators whose imperial shades still lure desired tourists and Foreign Direct Investment to Southeast Asian countries.

As well, I argue, any postcolonial studies with Southeast Asia as subject and

center would have to include the question of woman. According to Tom Plate, a cultural commentator, "More than globalization, Islamic militancy, environmental degradation and so on, the question of the Asian women's role may be the most difficult millennial issue of all for this region hoping to make the next 100 years the 'Asian Century'" (10). Noting that "about one-third of all women killed in Japan are slain by their partners, as in the U.S.," Plate goes on to note, "Even in Singapore, with undoubtedly the highest percentage of educated women careerists anywhere outside the West, there are second thoughts. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew told me: 'One of the fundamental global issues is the education of women. I see two extremes between the Japanese and the American ways. The Japanese keep their women in their traditional role. . . . They have deprived themselves of half their brain power and probably about one quarter of their muscle power. But they have done well. Their women have produced the next generation of salaried men'" (Plate 10). Plate goes on to say, "Mr. Lee sounds regretful now: 'I may sound like a male chauvinist but then the next generation is left to [the day care of] television'" (Plate 10). Plate concludes, "Many in Asia are just not convinced that the West—with its high rate of divorce and juvenile delinquency—has got the basic issue right" (Plate 10). That is, while gender inequalities and women's human rights are pressing global issues, specifically in Southeast Asia, the nexus of East Asian Confucianism, Hindu patriarchy, and attitudes toward women framed as specifically Islamic create a general significance for the region of historical asymmetrical roles and status for male and female and on-going negative economic, social and cultural consequences. Traces of oppressive past belief systems and current religious and kinship structures are hardly legislated against and may prove impossible to rule out. These attitudes are related to anti-women practices that have re-emerged in the widespread practices of slave trafficking of women and the sex trade and the growing incidences of domestic violence, the continued social acceptance of polygamy, concubinage, bridal dowries, female infanticide and honor killings, as well as in more modern forms of female subordination, such as eating disorders, body image disorders and bodily mutilation in cosmetic surgery and breast augmentation. Major tensions rising out of class divisions, the consequences of corporate culture and global capitalism on the native populations, the clash between authoritarianism and democracy, and frictions between tendencies toward racial supremacy and multicultural pluralism also persist, as well as many other pressing issues not on this list.

Still, arguably, despite my reservations over this project, it may be possible to consider a Southeast Asian postcolonial studies in an ASEAN context, for it was only with the organizing of states covered in Hall's post-World War II cartographic imagination into a proto-federalist ASEAN that economic, diplomatic, social and cultural exchanges within this region began to be governmentally encouraged, legislated, and implemented. ASEAN saw the burgeoning of interrelated

economies that are now producing a regional identity recognized and respected both externally by other regional entities and states such as EU, the US, and Australia, and internally, so that national populations in Southeast Asia are becoming more familiar with the separate, highly localized cultures that compose "the chaos of races and languages" that Hall described. ASEAN was inaugurated in 1967, over forty years ago, to help create a regional identity based on common security and economic goals (Sandhu xiii-xvi). Together, the population of this land mass geographers and politicians call Southeast Asia is over half a billion, and its total economy according to a 1997 report equaled nine-tenths of China's (Commonwealth of Australia report). The ten member states include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, all of whom as a regional entity engage in discussions with China, Japan, Korea, Australia, the U.S. and other Western powers.

Homi Bhabha speaks from a more precise understanding of contemporary postcolonial forms that may be seen also to apply to the complex Southeast Asian terrains. Foregoing the indulgent jargon of 1990s theorists on "the third space," "liminality," and "culturalist" resistances, theories that Bhabha himself had helped to popularize, Bhabha recently observed that "the economic antidotes for inequality and poverty, as prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and the World bank, for instance, have 'the feel of the colonized ruler,' in the words of Joseph Stiglitz, the bank's former senior vice president and chief economist. 'They help to create,' he writes, 'a dual economy in which there are pockets of wealth. . . . But a dual economy is not a developed economy'" (B14). Bhabha continues, "These dual economies sustain silicon valleys and oases of outsourcing—but such signs of global development are darkened by the colonial shadow. In dual economies, strata of prosperity mask the ubiquitous, underlying, persistent poverty and malnutrition, the caste and racial injustice, the exploitation of women's and children's labor, and the victimization of refugees" (B 14). Rather than abstract categorizations that serve to launch moral prescriptions that few academics in fact observe (that is to say, to both talk the talk and walk the walk), this specific description takes into account the material realities, what may be viewed as the base that produces the superstructure of ideas, ideals, and belief systems that are so evident in Southeast Asia today. To steer clear of reductiveness, we must keep in mind that more than one kind of economy dominates in Southeast Asia. In states such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, and others, old subsistence agriculture and modern plantation manifestations are still significant, while in others like Singapore and segments of Malaysia and Thailand, multinational corporatism rules. Even within states with relatively long national histories, like Thailand, old and new ethnic identities expropriate ancient and postmodern civilizational elements to destabilize the nation state, as in the example of convergence of new Jihadist Islam and old tribal/village bonds in the recent violent terrorist incidents

in South Thailand. And even within strongly ethnic-identified communities, like the Malays in Malaysia, the intersection of anxieties about loss of old certainties and the rise of new desires for exotic luxuries and pleasures coming from alien societies results in divisive tensions.

Moreover, where race in western-style postcolonial theories take a black-white color-line binary for both an ethics of resistance and identity discourse, in Southeast Asia the color-line as a signifier for ethical politics and identity formation is not merely shifting but often evacuated. Asian communities, that is, communities conventionally identified as "yellow," such as interest groups from Japan that dominate the Philippines economy, or from the People's Republic of China that threaten Taiwan's development toward statehood, are not simply members of postcolonial states (Japan was occupied by the US from 1945 to 1956) that are wary of safeguarding their 21st century sovereignty. They are also potently and potentially colonizing powers with imperial histories that have not been disavowed, as seen in the then-Japanese-Prime-Minister Junichiro Koizumi's annual August 15th visits to the Yasakuni temple where the generals of the Imperial Army who had been executed for their war crimes are enshrined and honored.

To complicate the attempt to construct a unified Southeast Asian postcolonial theory, while Southeast Asian scholars generally have avoided reproducing a U.S. academic discourse that is heavily invested in comparative race theories that take into account aspects of postcolonial critiques concerning European settlements on the North American continent, the genocide of indigenous peoples, and the continued economic and social exploitation of resources and marginalized groups, the pressures toward reading and theorizing out of local, domestic, internal historical and cultural contexts in Singapore and Malaysia (and I suspect in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines as well) have been overwhelming. The conventional historical model of colonial master and colonized subjects have inaugurated a postcolonial scene of troubled relations within and between newly independent states negotiating economies and cultures broken or brokered by these still-lingering presences of colonial rulers. This is the scene that writers such as Muhammad Haji Salleh evoke when pressing for agendas presented as anti-colonial. Ideals about a recoverable pure origin have been repeatedly put forward by national language proponents, whether Malay or Hong Kong Chinese, arguing for dismantling the colonial language policies in government and educational bureaucracies. These broad commonalities have been and continue to be asserted since the 1950s, even as Pilipino-language nationalists have yet to see common cause in their struggles with the Cantonese-mother-tongue post-handover Hong Kong nationalists or with their Malaysian neighbors who implemented a Bahasa-medium public educational system, only to see the consequences of a scorched-earth policy on the English language in wretched unemployment figures, decreasing competitiveness in the global economy, and

further social divisiveness in the population. That is, in postcolonial Southeast Asia, policies driven by a conventional notion of nationalism—the desire for a common national identity constructed on shared language, cultural practice, even ethnicity and religion—become articulated not only as exclusive but exclusionary. Sameness is desired and legislated for, but it becomes realizable only when set against difference; and in every situation where sameness becomes the formative principle for national identity, then the counter principle of difference must be rejected, even eradicated. Ethnic cleansing begins to be imaginable; and identity becomes a coercive communal dynamic rather than signifying the notional value of a sovereign individual subject whose liberty is secured through a democratic state constitution.

The primary importance of identity in Southeast Asia may be viewed as a contingent response to modernity. Like the forces of modernity, identity formation is itself enfolding, multiple, and conflictual, and in the region, this formation incorporates religion, language, class, ethnicity, and national identity. Even where language and religion may be the same, tribal or island identity, any sense of an original different belonging, may emerge to assert a separatist political will, with identity refuting sameness through tribal bonds.

One complicated postcolonial struggle, whether in Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar and so forth and albeit in very different registers and modes, is over the nature and control of the identificatory machines of representation and expression. Who gets to control a sanctioned identity formation? Who oversees the press, media and other public forms of expression, and how? What is permissible speech, oral, printed, public, and in some states even private speech? If control of media and representation is not to be held by authoritarian regimes shaping national identity toward safeguarding their power, would it be more ethical and democratic to have these medias owned by corporate multinational entities operating outside of national control? In post-Independence territories, where is the 'free' subject located, and if nowhere, what does post-Independence mean in relation to postcolonial? Is it possible to theorize post-Independence subjects that have not fully moved out of a colonial shadow; for, to quote Bhabha out of context, there is still in developing countries (a rubric that covers all of Southeast Asia with the exception of Singapore), "the feel of the colonized ruler" in their dual economies, where "signs of global development are darkened by the colonial shadow" (B14). In postcolonial Southeast Asia, these dual economies "mask the ubiquitous, underlying, persistent poverty and malnutrition, the caste and racial injustice, the exploitation of women's and children's labor, and the victimization of refugees" (B14). It is in sight of these social miseries, these horrible sufferings of women, children, and men in a new slave economy, in dire duress of existence, in the absence of security, shelter, food, and hope that we need to theorize the colonialism in whatever is "post" about Southeast Asia's 21st century societies.

That these are ills marking colonized and subjugated peoples is doubtless. That their masters (and mistresses) may be drawn from a national ruling class and elite; or from extra-national subjects and governments in an advantageous position that allows for exploitation of their bodies and resources; or that the Western and global structures of world-dominant capitalism organized through non-national corporate and multinational entities that have a hand in their subjugation are largely invisible to these colonized peoples: these are all of a piece in how postcolonial neo-colonizing agents are set in a collaborative dominance over the rest. In Southeast Asia, as in New York and Chicago for example, notions of a first world/third world divide of poverty, unequal distribution of good and opportunities, etc, set in recognizably separate geographical spaces (also seen in the image of the North/South divide) may be daily evidenced as nonsensical: the first and third worlds now occupy the same territorial space, even if the walls between them remain as high and unscaleable for the poor. In the region, postcoloniality is a matrix of economic, social and cultural phenomena whose gains and ills are equally generated by global capital together with the eager collaboration of certain classes of nationalists and regionalists.

Can we therefore hope one day for the gains to outpace the miseries, to have these global flows—as Arjun Appadurai had conceptualized them--of finance, ideas, images, people (immigrants, migrant workers, refugees, illegal immigrants, corporate postings, etc) greased by international travel, fiber optics, and so forth, raise the living wages of the underclass, create a substantial middle-class, and solve the environmental disasters that are upon us? Singapore may be viewed as the one ASEAN state that is half way there, although in the context of environmental protection, it may be said not only to be helpless against the neighboring predations of forests and waters but also an accessory to these ills in its consumerist ethos and economy.

In a radical fashion, one may theorize that even if there is no contemporary Southeast Asian postcoloniality in situ, we must imagine one, for only with a regional structure sharing some common purposes and in which some local and particular claims may have to be set aside for a federalist goal--that is, only with an entity like ASEAN--can the long nineteenth-century colonial shadows, seen in the phenomena of Westerner-dominated sex tourism, in dual economies of rich and impoverished, technological and agricultural, and so forth, be confronted and ameliorated, if not totally dismantled.

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