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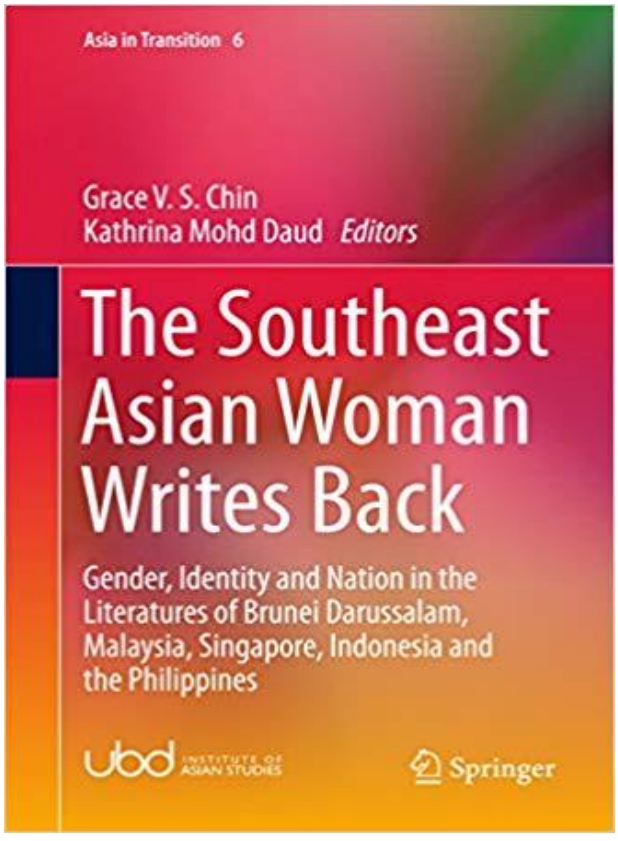

Grace Chin and Kathrina Mohd. Daud's collection of essays *The Southeast Asian Woman Writes Back: Gender, Identity and Nation in the Literatures of Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines* offers an opportunity to deliberate on the issue that has plagued postcolonial studies since its inception – the place of women in the agendas of nationalism, development and progress. In addition, with its focus on Southeast Asian woman, the book offers an opportunity to engage with the regional or local sphere with its sociocultural, political and historical specificities, and at the same time, broaden the domain of postcolonial studies to include the subjectivities that have remained on the margins for a long time.

The Southeast Asian Woman Writes Back consists of eight chapters by contributors from five countries of Southeast Asia mentioned in the title. The book acknowledges the partial coverage due to "lack of scholarship in English" in the region (11). Moreover, given the focus on normative roles of women and resistance to it in the historical, sociopolitical and nationalistic contexts, the concerns explored in the volume are largely heteronormative. Despite these limitations, the essays present a range of scholarship – from an analysis of the political constitution of national literatures to an examination of the role of English in postcolonial nations, the conceptualisations of female citizenship and its subversive articulations and counter-narratives that underscore the intention to "write back."

The title of the book, *Southeast Asian Woman Writes Back*, raises some crucial questions that demand more than a straightforward summary of contents. The intention of the book to identify a distinct category of Southeast Asian women leads the reader to deliberate on the idea of Southeast Asia and its place in postcolonial literatures. Southeast Asian identity is constituted more in terms of the geographical region than in terms of common historical, cultural or social patterns. The region is home to a variety of religions, ethnicities and sociocultural traditions. Indeed, as Farish Noor points out, this heterogeneity is a distinct feature of Southeast Asia: "It rather is a patchwork of networks, life worlds, trading systems and cross-cultural pathways to human interaction" ("ASEAN Identity"). Discussing the links constituted by regional bodies like ASEAN, Amitav Acharya points out that the identity of Southeast Asia is not a given: "it is socially and political[ly] constructed but through interactions amongst its governments and societies" (25). In this context of heterogeneity, I wish to highlight certain commonalities in the social, political and cultural constructions of the nations under consideration in this volume, to provide a framework against which the gendered subversions and resistance inherent in the idea of "writing back" occur.

While the essays in the volume focus on several Southeast Asian countries, one can see certain common features in their national systems against which the politics of gender and nationalism is played out. The introduction outlines some of these features relevant to the field of Southeast Asian study – for instance, the enduring display of state power following the end of colonialism. These include Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Sukarno and Suharto in Indonesia, Sultan of Brunei in Brunei Darussalam and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia (4). While these "national fathers" have shaped the economic, political and sociocultural landscape of the region, the consequent patriarchal conception of the nation as a family has pushed women to the traditional space of motherhood and wifehood, making them central to the narratives of social cohesion and gender complementarity, and simultaneously marginalised them from the spheres of policy and decision-making. Chin and Daud argue that

> While the marginalization and subordination of the female body and sexuality are constructed and normalized through insidious strategies and legislation made in the name of national security and social unity, the inordinate amount of attention on women suggests an underlying masculine disquiet and ambivalence that permeate the state's preoccupation with normative gender and sexual identities, roles and relations. (5)

The book's introduction as well as the chapter on nationalism in the Philippines highlight the ambivalent role of English language with respect to the postcolonial identity politics. Scholars like Gauri Vishwanathan have already discussed the role of English language education in the colonies as "a mask of conquest" to not only train the colonised subjects to aid in the day-to-day workings of the imperial administration but also as a tool of cultural colonisation. Hence, as an assault to the traditional culture, English language in the nationalist sphere is still seen as an instrument of Western modernity that threatens the unique cultural identities of the erstwhile colonies. Alicia Izharruddin in the chapter "The New Malay Woman" highlights the "moral suspicion about the dangers of 'westernization' that underpin many aspects of modernity" (61). Similar concerns are articulated by Daud in the discussion of women, family and nation in Brunei in the third chapter and by Chin in her discussion of the Indonesian context in the chapter, "State *Ibuism* and One Happy Family."

However, when it comes to the female subject, the English education adds another complex dimension. While the introduction of the language was intended as a tool of colonial control, it also allowed women to access education, thoughts and ideas that were denied in the traditional patriarchal setups. Both Izharrudin, in her analysis of modern Malay women and Amanda Solomon Amorao in "Writing against Patriarchal Philippine Nationalism" point to the subversive role of English language and literature in creating a space from which the women writers could "write back."

Another prominent theme of the essays is that of the state and its manipulation of the idea of female citizenship. Highlighting the construction of statehood in the countries under consideration, the authors have emphasised the overlap between the discourses of patriarchy and postcolonial nationalism. Daud, in "Articulating Female Citizenship in Norsiah Gapar's *Pengabdian*," explores the three components of race, religion and governance that make up the Bruneian national ideology of *Melayu Islam Beraju* (MIB) translated as Malay Islamic Monarchy. It underscores the mode of paternalistic "father leadership" that fosters a sense of the country as an extension of a family unit. In this context of nationhood, Siti Noor, the protagonist of Gapar's *Pengabdian*, provides a prescriptive template for Malay Muslim womanhood – a woman who is professional, yet tied to the values of family, culture and philanthropy in service of the nation. Her chastity and self-abnegation present her as "an epitome of

desirable and successful femininity" that has been endorsed nationally by the inclusion of Gapar's texts in the Malay literature curriculum (49). Lily Rose Tope's analysis of short stories by women writers from Singapore and the Philippines, in "Women and the Authoritarian State: The Southeast Asian Experience," highlights the imbrication of the notions of state and gender as the state constitutes marginalised citizenship for the women while at the same time, remains preoccupied with woman's body, psyche and subjectivity, pressing them into the service of the nation.

This dualism characterises women's citizenship in the Southeast Asian countries under consideration. The notion of state *Ibuism* in Indonesian narratives echoes similar conflation of domesticity and state policy: "female marginalization is endorsed in state ideology of *Ibuism* (motherhood), which encourages women to stay at home and conform to the ideal subordinate roles of wife and mother" (89). Chin's essay on state *Ibuism* explores the overlap between the traditions of polygyny, family and motherhood as well as the ideologies of normative femininity in the concept of "*kodrat wanita"* (natural destiny of women) or *Keluarga Sakinah* (peaceful, harmonious family). Discussing Raden Adjeng Kartini, an iconic figure in Indonesian national narrative, whose writings denounced polygyny as a "curse" and a "cruel wrong," Chin highlights the conflict between the idea of a modern nation and the traditional gender roles it endorses. Kartini, a proponent of women's rights and education and celebrated as Indonesia's first modern feminist, succumbed to the traditions and entered a polygamous marriage. Her writings and that of her successors, Titis Basino and Nia Dinata are explored for their engagement with patriarchal discourse of family, *Ibuism* and the national imaginary that has been nurtured on masculinist views and representation of the nation as a "united and inclusive" family.

These themes highlight some common features that the writers of the volume foreground in their discussion of Southeast Asian nations and against which they explore the complexities of gender and tradition. In the introduction Chin and Daud align themselves with their "'third world sisters' to recover the 'subaltern gendered voices and perspectives that do not nearly fit into or which challenge the official, hetero normative and masculinist narratives" (2). Herein, Chin and Daud point out the similarities between postcolonial literary undertakings and the third world feminist goals and agendas. Hence, the intention of "writing back" to the imperialist center (the volume borrows the notion of "writing back" from Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's celebrated postcolonial text *The Empire Writes Back*) is intertwined with the contestations against postcolonial nationalism that has replaced colonial ideologies. As the writers in the volume point out, the postcolonial nations that replaced the colonial empires often resort to traditional patriarchal notions of society and culture which are as oppressive as the colonial ideologies were towards their female subjects. Hence, the volume seeks to discover the ways in which the Southeast Asian

women writers and artists engage with the images of womanhood or the notions of femininity in the narration of the nation through literature.

Therefore, "writing back" refers to the reclamation of gendered perspectives and voices, a generation of counter-texts and representations of the marginalised community of the Southeast Asian women. Izharruddin's discussion on the rise of "the new Malay woman" as a cultural product in the 1960s highlights the refusal of the writers to accept the representations of Malay women produced by the male-dominated and state-supported literary arena. At the same time, the new Malay woman's embodiment of modernity is also a critique of Eurocentric constructs of modernity. Amarao's exploration of Filipino poet Angela Manalang Gloria's *Revolt of Hymen* in Chapter 2, interrogates the gendered politics of 1940 Commonwealth Literary Awards as a site for the constitution of the patriarchal vision of the nation. Gloria's poetry, censored for immorality and eroticism, challenges these notions of modernisation, masculinity and nationalism. Meghan Downes in "Women Writing *Wayang* Post-reform Indonesia" examines the work of Indonesian writers whose texts use the traditional *wayang* epics to present counter-discourse that argues for new femininities and masculinities. The final chapter of the book, "Counter-Narratives of the Nation," explores the constructions of the New Brunei Malay Woman in the writings of female students in an English creative writing class. It is an interesting chapter to conclude the volume as it highlights the continuation of the usage of literary space for articulating different versions of female identity and agency via English language.

Though each essay is standalone, the volume does, in a way, constitute Southeast Asia, a distinct field of study in terms of gender and nationalism. It further points the way to the future exploration of nations like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and others which are integral to Southeast Asia. An important dimension missing in the volume is racial and ethnic politics that characterise most of the Southeast Asian nations. It would be of interest to explore the impact of racial and ethnic diversity and conflict on the notions of gender. Hence the book points to several ways forward in the discussion of cultural overlaps and distinctions within the larger Southeast Asian context.

The volume is a timely work of scholarship. By declaring the intent of the Southeast Asian women to "write back," it raises questions about the notion of Southeast Asia as a distinct social, cultural and historical sphere. Gender, instead of being a woman's problem, becomes as a pressing socio-political issue that complicates the processes of nation-building and nationalism in the region.

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