Introduction to the Special Issue

Asia-Pacific Writers: Voices from the Centre to the Peripheries

In this special issue, *Asiatic* explores Asian voices from a selection of countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, and the diaspora. The Asia-Pacific region is experiencing rapid change fuelled by globalisation.

Historically, Asian nations have always been posited as Peripheries to a dominant Western centre, whether as Coloniser/Colonised, Oriental/Occidental or First, Second, or Third Worlds. However, recent Globalisation trends have dramatically changed the economic, political, and sociocultural landscapes around the world, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, where Asia is increasingly becoming the centre of the global economy (McKinsey Global Institute). Regional trade, capital, investment, the movement of people, knowledge, and resources have increasingly integrated and multiplied tenfold in the last two decades. In this context, globality, the social condition created by Globalisation processes (Steger 7), challenges our understanding of existing boundaries, borders, and the nature of interconnectedness. Questions of Centre and Periphery, therefore, remain relevant in our study of the Asia-Pacific region because these processes continue to exacerbate and problematise issues of Power associated with existing economic, political, cultural, and social asymmetries.

The Centre-Periphery model has been widely explored in Postcolonial studies to explain how these asymmetries play out in postcolonial nations. Much of the discussion has been influenced by Wallerstein's "world-systems theory," which makes a distinction between "the core" (regions that hold economic, political, and discursive power) and the "peripheries" (regions that do not hold such power and which supply resources to the core) (Pitzl 38). This framework, however, is often limited by assumptions of an unequal, static relationship, characterised by domination of the core over the peripheries. It overlooks complex relations of race, gender, and class within nations and between nations that problematise such reductive conceptions. Today, relations of power and domination are more varied and dynamic; our matrices are shifting. We observe these changes in the Asia-Pacific countries, with the rise of China and the shift in the core of the world economy to the Asia-Pacific region. This is a time of complexity in which new connections and interactions disrupt core-periphery relationships. In light of these shifts, it is crucial to rethink the notions of "core" and "periphery," and the ways that we apply these concepts to the Asia-Pacific region.

In this collection of papers, contributors invite us to reconsider traditional understandings of "centre" and "periphery" by exploring the limits of these concepts. As guest editors, we perused and selected papers that explore the variations in the peripheries, the different ways they respond to new articulations of the Centre, and the mutually constitutive relations across these spaces.

Edwin Thumboo offers a vision of ASEAN literary culture developing from the inter- and intra-literary study of national and regional literatures written in the various languages of the member states. Thumboo argues that these literatures embody the unique histories and purposes of new nations, but are united in the experience of colonial disruption, wherein distinctive languages and identities were oppressed. This study of ASEAN literatures would therefore tap into the various negotiations between the different cultures, and also draw upon common threads that tie the different literary cultures together, for example, the relationship between Literatures in English and National/Regional Literatures, and the transcultural experiences of colonialism and modernisation. Such an endeavour, Thumboo argues, constitutes a "Power of Many" that interrupts the cultural uniformity of colonialism and unsettles colonial hierarchies of power. For Thumboo, this constitutes a systematic promotion of an ASEAN identity that ultimately undermines colonial power dynamics that have in the past placed ASEAN identities at the margins.

Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta explores how stand-up comedy has allowed Filipino-Americans, a marginalised group in America, to become culturally visible in the 21st century. Ancheta argues that contemporary Filipino-American comic artists deconstruct 'Filipino-ness' and re-frame it as a transnational encounter. Through the mode of comic performance and the use of observational humour in particular, Filipino culture can be understood through contemporary Americanness, which facilitates cultural interconnectedness. Ancheta employs Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and John Limon's development of this concept, to illustrate how Filipino stand-up comics engage with a comic narrativisation of an imagined abject self. Analysing the work of contemporary stand-up comic Jo Koy, Ancheta reveals how this comic narrativisation counters stereotypes by tempering audience's reactions to these stereotypes, thereby effectively subverting the power imbalance fundamental to colonial relationships between the centres and margins. Ancheta thus draws attention to how multicultural stand-up comics have created new cultural spaces and established new forms of discursive power for long-peripheralised ethnic communities in the United States.

Interestingly, four of the articles featured in this special issue look at Centre/Periphery concerns through a spatial lens. **Lily Rose Tope'**s "A Cultural and Spiritual Cityscape: Manila Chinatown in Charlson Ong's *Blue Angel, White Shadow*" juxtaposes Manila, seen as "the Centre" (largely populated by English or Filipino speaking people) with Binondo, a Chinatown in Manila, a place where

Chinese migrants congregate. As minorities and migrants, Binondo is a safe haven for those to protect their Chinese identity and heritage. It is also a space where they build their dreams for acceptance and civic opportunities. However, Tope illuminates the irony of a Chinese-Filipino writer 'othering' Binondo. Instead of celebrating it as an economic and cultural space that adds value to Manila's diversity, Binondo is portrayed as a place of decay, full of social ills and vices. Its glory past is no more. Tope also suggests in her paper that Charlson Ong is not demonising his own people but merely capturing a changing time of the once unique and glorious Binondo. Binondo is now full of fallen angels. Tope ends her article by asking why is Ong's vision of Binondo dystopic? But, she also concludes the article on a positive note. While Ong presents Binondo as grim, he too believes that Binondo offers more possibilities for the young. Binondo will follow its natural course as it continues to speak to the Centre.

Sri Kusumo Habsari's paper scrutinises the ways in which individual vulnerability is articulated through spatial dimensions of social media in Okky Madasari's novel, *Kerumunan Terakhir*. Habsari considers how contemporary Indonesian fiction addresses different local developments across the national socio-cultural milieu such as the transformation brought upon the burgeoning of online communities. In doing so, this paper analyses how cyberspace functions not only as a space of engagement and liberation but also one that can enable what Habsari calls mechanisms of deindividuation. By examining Madasari's use of the *dunia pertama* ("first world") and *dunia kedua* ("second world") concepts, Habsari reiterates the argument that space is always changing and in the state of flux. Ultimately, Habsari's study of the novel helps illustrate the use of social media as a global phenomenon and helps subvert the notion of the vast cyberspace as an exclusive and homogenous space, further blurring the line between the Centre and Peripheries.

Sanghamitra Dalal's "From the Centre/Periphery Dichotomy to Implicated Readers: Reading Tash Aw's *We, The Survivors*" examines Tash Aw's attempt to dismantle the stereotypical boundaries between the Centre and the Periphery of societies in Malaysia. Dalal pays extra attention to the complexities of agency and authority as well as the appropriation and representation in storytelling. It is interesting that not only race plays an important role in articulating voices of the marginalised but also class and gender are given the central role. Dalal highlights the fact that Ah Hock lacks Su-Min's middle class upbringing and educational background to narrate his story. Su-Min on the other hand, has the right language and syntax to empower Ah Hock in sharing his narratives. This image of a powerful female character as the central voice is often rare in Asian literature in English. As stories move back and forth between those who are privileged and those who are not, Dalal concludes that Aw's 'We' incorporates every Malaysian (and/or migrant) in his story and they all connect to one another in their own struggles for survival.

Finally, the demarcation between the Centre and Peripheries is further problematised in **Kristiawan Indriyanto**'s exploration of the Korean-American diasporic imagination of Hawai'i in Gary Pak's *A Ricepaper Airplane*. The paper entitled "Spatial Imagination and Narrative Voice of Korean-American Experience in Gary Pak's A Ricepaper Airplane," is an in-depth look at Korean-American diasporic experiences and how they are articulated through the use of a number of spatial and narrative techniques. By analysing how these techniques are used in the novel, Indriyanto shows how readers can be more participative in the reading of the text. Here, the storyworld of the novel motivates readers to actively engage with different sociohistorical contexts and landscapes, particularly those associated with Korea before and during the Second World War as well Hawai'i. Indriyanto also posits that Pak's use of Hawaii Creole English (HCE) manifests through different aspects of the narration and further adds to the polyvocality in the narration. Indriyanto's emphasis on studying the polyvocal nature of the novel, therefore, foregrounds this continued need to probe into the multitude of diasporic experiences not only in Korean-American literature, but also other literatures that highlight the experiences of other peripheral communities.

The articles above underscore only a number of stories concerning the Centre and Peripheries in Asia-Pacific writings. As these analyses exist within and beyond different national and geographical boundaries, it is important to further interrogate this relationship in other literary works and cultural forms, regardless of whether it is textual, digital, visual, or newer forms of expression. This special issue focuses on how Centre-Peripheries issues are articulated in writings from Asia-Pacific countries on a transnational, regional, national levels but they also include perspectives of other forms of periphery. The contributions do not reinforce the seemingly binary position between the two but demonstrates that the boundaries between them are fluid and porous.

To conclude, these articles exemplify several ways in which our understanding of the nature between the Centre and different Peripheries is shifting. Our hope is that the articles in this collection will provide a basis for other explorations of this relationship in future research. We would like to thank all the authors for their time and effort in improving their papers for the publication of this issue. We would also like to express our deepest appreciation to the reviewers for their feedback and suggestions on how the papers can be improved. We would also like to express our utmost gratitude to the Editor-in-Chief, Md. Mahmudul Hasan and Editor, Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie for their continued support to this special issue from the point of its conception to its publication. By and by, we hope that readers of this special issue will enjoy the articles just as much as we do, and we hope that the articles will benefit readers and give them more food for thought.

References

Pitzl, Gerald R. *Encyclopedia of Human Geography.* Greenwood Press, 2004.

Steger, Manfred B. *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford University Press, 2003.

"The Future of Asia: Asian Flows and Networks are Defining the Next Phase of Globalization." McKinsey Global Institute, 18 Sept. 2019, www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/asia-pacific/the-future-of-asia-asian-flows-and-networks-are-defining-the-next-phase-of-globalization. Accessed 1 June 2022.

Netty Mattar
Wan Nur Madiha Ramlan
Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf
International Islamic University Malaysia