

## Introduction

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I am honoured to be a part of this issue of *Asiatic* and writing the Introduction to this section of four essays, which were originally presented as papers at the colloquium on “Journeys of/toward Identity” convened on 15 October 2015 by the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. Professor Mohammad A. Quayum delivered Colloquium 2015’s opening keynote address. The articles that appear here have been specifically selected and revised for publication in *Asiatic*. They also help situate and (re)historicise a theoretically abstracted concept like “identity.”

Indeed, the section that follows offers an engaging range of critical work that addresses ongoing issues of identity construction both within historical and contemporary contexts. Whilst these essays showcase different routes and contexts for the formation of identity and its systems of difference, they do so from the shared underlying premise that representations do not merely reflect identity, but are constitutive of it. This gives representation a much more active role in the way people think about identity and their place in its construction and their larger social world. The flip side to this is that representations exist alongside *mis*representations in the continuum of representation. The ways in which we may wish to represent ourselves and our social world may not coincide with the ways in which we are in turn represented. Commodification, stereotyping, fetishisation, objectification – along the axes of “race,” ethnicity, class, gender and national identity – abound.

Interestingly, for a mainly literary journal, a plea is made in this section to play down the idea of “literariness” by drawing attention instead to literature’s function as a protector of genes. Through a productive, and highly innovative, reading of Shahrazad’s role in the palimpsest of narratives that constitutes *The Arabian Nights*, the paper by Nicholas Pagan foregrounds the ways in which literature is used as an instrument designed to achieve a pragmatic end, and, in this instance, probably the most pragmatic goal of all – the survival of identity. The paper advances the intriguing notion that a fundamental aspect of Shahrazad’s identity as a storyteller is that she is a vehicle for the spreading of genes. Bringing ideas from the domains of cognitive science and evolutionary

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biology to bear on his reading of this legendary concatenation of stories allows Pagan to propose that other literary narratives may also turn out to be essentially more gene-protective than they are “literary.”

The paper by Mustapha Bala Ruma analyses the rhetorical strategies employed by Gandhi in his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, to open up a space of symbolic difference between himself and the oppressed classes of India and South Africa, principally through the hierarchies embedded within binary categorisations. Mustapha’s paper is important not only because autobiography remains a relatively under-examined field of literary and cultural study, but also because it dares to broach a controversial topic – how, despite Gandhi’s vision of inclusive social reform, his self-authored text articulates identity in terms of Gandhi’s difference from the subaltern masses, who are subsequently also robbed of agency and objectified. The paper does not so much seek to discover the biographical “truth” about Gandhi, as it does to examine the ways in which Gandhi has written about himself and his experiences through the rubric of “autobiography as self-representation,” which inevitably offers opportunities for the misrepresentation of *others*. Autobiography can thus be seen to be a(nother) system of domination.

The remaining two essays point to how the production and consumption of imagery, products, desires and passions in advertising and visual and print culture play a major role in the construction, maintenance and representation of identity, gendered bodies and ideologies. The paper by Su Soon Peng analyses the cultural construction of femininity via the topic of dress and positioning, specifically by explicating the visual and textual representations of the female body in advertising. It focuses on the way contemporary print advertisements in a selection of English-language newspapers in Malaysia express and inscribe a number of contradictory conceptions of female identity within the economic logic of the market. The paper argues that the female body is a discursive “effect” created at the intersection of consumer culture, nationalist ideologies, patriarchy, gendered power relations and advertising imperatives that manipulate social signifiers to their advantage.

The essay by Jacqui Kong investigates the social and cultural functions of culinary television programmes that exploit the genre of documentary to educate as well as entertain. It focuses on contemporary “reality” cooking shows, along with cookery books, from an Australian context, critically examining the visual and written texts of “celebrity chef” Kylie Kwong as purveyors of “Chineseness,” which construct, maintain, circulate and generate meanings and conceptions of identity via certain imagery and strategies within the realms of the production and consumption of culture. The paper argues that Kwong’s culinary TV shows and cookbooks should undoubtedly be understood as performing two key interconnecting forms of cultural work: representation and misrepresentation, stereotype and spectacle.

This section, as well as its Introduction, merely offers a window to the contents of this issue, which highlight *Asiatic's* distinctive and continuing role in providing a lively critical forum for scholars researching the richness and variety of languages and literatures in English of Asia. The contribution of this segment rests in its providing a necessary complement to the literary and linguistic realms as sites of cultural meaning. It does so in three main ways. It demonstrates how advertising and reality TV as predominantly visual cultural texts also work as important representational systems and signifying practices; it deploys the genre of autobiography to show how acts of misrepresentation function as an inherent part of any given system of self-representation; and, by explicating the novel idea of “gene-protective” story-telling, it draws attention to the very limits of “literariness.”

I am grateful that *Asiatic* has been a willing, receptive and generous participant in this conversation.