

“WE WOMEN AREN’T FREE TO DIE”

Transacting Asian Sexualities in a Feminism Classroom in Singapore

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ABSTRACT: Using feminist pedagogy and postcolonial theory, the authors of this article focus on the (re)presentation of Asian sexualities in an Asian classroom through a feminist reading of the short prose fiction “Bandong,” by Suchen Christine Lim. Constantly aware that representations of sexualities are closely linked to power, the authors question how academic knowledge can seek to (re)present Asian sexualities when that knowledge itself is deeply imbricated in power structures that empower global concepts of sexualities. The argument advanced in this article draws attention to essentialistic gender representations that continue to this day of Asian femininities and masculinities. For instance, the authors challenge the ways in which the trope of the subjugated Asian woman and man works in predictable ways to disempower Asian women and men far removed from such stereotypical locations. Critiquing dominant representations of Asian sexualities in the classroom involves teaching students to take ownership of their own reading and re-reading of texts. In addition, the article delves into how the authors attempt to make the academic package relevant to their students situated in the local Singaporean context.

Preamble

“Are mothers free to die?” asks Wong-soh, wife of clan leader Tai-Kor Wong, in the Singaporean short story “Bandong,” by Malaysian-born Singaporean writer Suchen Christine Lim (b.1948).¹ Wong-soh’s clear and lucid conclusion is, “We women aren’t free to die.” Set in late nineteenth- early twentieth-century Malaya, “Bandong” centers on the “woman question”: whereas women were not free to choose their fates in many societies in the past, women in the twenty-first century surely have more room to negotiate their destinies. Using Lim’s short

story with our students enabled us to probe the place of the Asian woman, her representation, and the ideologies involved in textual representation.

This article explores the textual presentation of Asian sexualities through unpacking issues such as sexuality and empowerment as they appear in “Bandong.” It also examines the power relations involved in academic (re)presentations of portrayals of Asian sexualities in texts and focuses on the ways in which we, as instructors in a feminism course, worked our ways around both local systemic and institutional constraints.² We consciously encouraged our students to assert their agency by claiming ownership of their own interpretation of local works.

We chose to focus on the reading of a text and its interpretation rather than any overt activism as radical feminist practice. We were eager to show our students that careful interpretation of a text is in itself a kind of feminist practice and feminist resistance.³ We have come to realize how difficult it is for young Asians, who have been intellectually nurtured by Western theoretical knowledges in universities, to resist the overwhelmingly dominant face of theory. To us, this is a clear instance of how timeworn academic practices may reify Western intellectual dominance. Consequently, counter-practices that attempt to liberate young minds from such compromised intellectual locations that teach them to resist such intellectual ascendancy seem to us worthwhile. Because there might be a certain dubiety about our making much of a single Singaporean text, we hasten to clarify that this text served merely as an example to illustrate strategies we used to empower our students. “Bandong” is by no means a “representative” text; it simply highlighted the specificities involved in using *any* marginal (read: noncanonical) Asian text to combat global theoretical concepts — in this case “Asian sexualities.”

Finally, our use of the term “Asian” in “Asian sexuality” might at first sight appear to be posited in an unproblematic way, as a homogenous and unspecified concept that stands for all of Asia, with differences collapsed. This is not true, however, as careful deliberation of the Singaporean context in this paper will show.

Positioning

Given that representations of sexualities are closely linked to issues of power, the process through which academic knowledge (re)presents Asian sexualities, when that knowledge itself is deeply embroiled in established power structures, becomes problematic. These structures work to empower certain global concepts of sexualities, imbricated in the fabric of colonial and postcolonial discourses. That this kind of dominant representation needs to be contested is evident in the fact that feminists of South Asian descent working in U.S. elite metropolitan academies such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty,⁴ and Sara Suleri,⁵ among others, and African feminists such as Kadiatu Kanneh⁶ have challenged the globalizing tendencies of mainstream feminism on specific locations.

Black and Asian feminists have drawn our attention to stereotypical gender representations that continue to this day. One such representation is the image of Asian women as disadvantaged and as unilaterally situated in third world con-

ditions. Mary E. John's *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Post-colonial Histories* focuses on the negligence of some Western feminist theorists who fail to distinguish between the different locations from which women of color speak.⁷ There is no awareness shown, she observes, of other contesting discourses such as class, and in some cases caste, religion, economic, and other social factors that clearly demarcate and position Asian women differentially into first, second, and third world locations. Similarly, Mirtha Quintanales points out that no attention is given to the fact that not all first world women are situated in first world locations.⁸ How and why are all these concepts relevant to us at all?

As feminist theorists and teachers in Singapore, it behooves us to teach — or, as we will explain below, *transact* — these dominant discourses in strategic ways so that our students are made aware of the pitfalls of accepting global images that construct them in specific ways. Our greatest challenge is to have students study these often negative images of certain Asian locations in a more positive light. In so doing, we hope to empower our students with a good measure of confidence and independence as they decide how textual representation and interpretation might be effected, i.e., how they themselves can challenge the textual representations.

In order to highlight problems in Western theorizing that can be guilty of collapsing differences into monoliths (e.g., portraying all Asian women as a homogenous group), we need to transact “knowledges” that our students can use to resist these debilitating global theories. In this enterprise, students may be conceived of as consumers of packaged knowledge (a notion that is increasingly promoted in many universities today), as Susan Margarey and Susan Sheridan have observed: “The metaphor most commonly used in the late 1990s about the pursuit of knowledge in any field was that of the identification of commodities that can be sold in an increasingly global market.”⁹

In this context, the use of the word “transaction” becomes significant. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines transaction as “the action of dealing with or handling a subject.” As transactors of knowledge we had to repackage global knowledge for the student-consumers in ways that attracted them to these mediated knowledges; at the same time, we discovered the means to empower them to contest the negativism of the global images. Therefore, the process of knowledge transaction and transmission became an extremely complex process that went beyond mere knowledge transfer.

To refocus on “Bandong,” our aim was to explore the question of sexuality in a specific Asian location through an examination of a locally authored short story. The choice of “Bandong” was deliberate. In our local context, an overwhelming number of institutions and readers still tend to choose texts authored by non-Asian authors over Asian ones. If we choose a “Western” canonical text, we are less likely to encounter questions from institutional decision-makers than if we choose a local text. Additional justifications are required when we select a local text for use in the classroom: we have to parry queries such as “Is this text ‘significant?’” “How is this text relevant?” Our conscious choice of a text like “Bandong,” therefore, testified to our desire to make visible and establish

the relevance of the work of a local author like Suchen Christine Lim against the preferred choice of an established (Western) canonical text. We sought to facilitate a warmer reception for local writing and to cultivate pride in local works by foregrounding the relevant issues presented in a story such as “Bandong.”

The question then arose as to how a text written by a local Asian woman writer could help to combat global images of Asian sexualities. This was a question that we carefully thought through as we compiled our syllabus. The following compelling reasons persuaded us to proceed with our choice.

The primary reason for choosing Lim’s text was to break the relentless East/West binary that is often built into many theoretical perspectives. Homi Bhabha clearly spells out the pitfalls in notions of binarism — in the colonizer/colonized or East/West dichotomy: “The epistemological distance between subject and object, inside and outside, that is part of the cultural binarism that emerges from relativism is now replaced by a social process of enunciation.”¹⁰

Though the author of “Bandong” is an Asian woman, we found that she consciously or unconsciously reifies the deeply ingrained impressions of Asian sexualities manifest in discourse either by overt replication of the established images or by overly subtle resistance. The reasons for the author’s use of Western images could be several. Obvious ones include the fact that she received her schooling before independence, no doubt directly from British teachers or from Asian teachers who were deeply embroiled in the intellectual preoccupations of the colonialists. These images might also have been chosen for artistic purposes, perhaps to draw the extremity of the historical and social context of early Chinese immigrants for the longer narrative to follow. A more complex reason that interests us as theorists would be that the images in “Bandong” are so pervasive that most of us have already internalized them to a greater or lesser degree.

Thus, a study of this phenomenon of textual representations of Asian sexualities taps into our central inquiry about “global-Asian” images. By using a local writer’s work, we show that constructions of a certain kind of Asian sexuality are ubiquitous and not confined to foreign authors intent on romanticizing or stereotyping the East. “Bandong” was particularly appropriate for this purpose.

“Bandong” is a text that replays most of the stereotypical representations of the Chinese woman in Eurocentric and Anglo-American discourses, and yet it is a narrative by an Asian woman. The short story thus exemplifies Bhabha’s concept of “third space.” According to Bhabha, “third space” describes a space between cultural monocentrism and relativism. This is the home that the multicultural, diasporic individual makes when the realization hits her that the nostalgic “home” of her memory is nonexistent and that what exists is the home that she makes out of her lived experiences, i.e., a third space, where otherness takes refuge.¹¹ Thus, the authorial space in “Bandong” seems approximate to Bhabha’s third space of hybridity that conveys a “crisis of identification.” This identification is not situated in the clear binary space of Self and Other but in “the otherness of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity.”¹² To us,

this is an important way of diffusing the otherwise relentless East/West dichotomy that would be set up by the choice of a Western text.

Thus, the images of the victimized Asian woman that emerge in Lim's text, far from discouraging us, spurred us on to undertake an inquest into the creative efforts of a colonial product. This, along with the notion of "packaging knowledge" in palatable forms for student consumption, led us to indulge in a judicious mixing of Asian creative writing and Western feminist theory.

The repackaging and transaction of knowledge occurred on several levels. At the most pragmatic level, it involved us — the instructors — as conscious decision-makers negotiating our way through various local constraints as we made decisions about the choice of text, and how this text should be presented. Besides institutional pressures to choose "safe" (read: established) texts, we faced other constraints that came in the form of a lack of support for gender issues in Singapore. Other than nongovernmental organizations like AWARE (a women's group that focuses on women's issues), Singapore has little in terms of established feminist tradition, theories and theorists. Against this backdrop, our reading of a local text was not just a challenge to dominant readings and representations but also a means of establishing a mode of feminist reasoning in our local context. At another level, we had to consider how our students may or may not relate to this text and to the issues of representation that we wanted to highlight using "Bandong" as the point of departure. And most importantly, our ultimate aim was to help our students gain in confidence as they developed their own ways of challenging dominant representations and local repressions. Before proceeding further with this exploration, we provide a synopsis of "Bandong" to show how a certain kind of Asian sexuality is presented in this particular text.

Synopsis

"Bandong," which is now a chapter in Suchen Christine Lim's novel, *Bit of Earth*, first appeared as a self-contained story in a collection of short works edited by Leong Liew Geok.¹³ The year is 1874, the physical setting is British-ruled Malaya, more specifically Perak, a tin mining state in Malaya. On this terrain, three ethnic communities — represented by the Wongs, "sons of the Chinese earth," the Wees, "subjects of the English gods," and the Mahmuds, "scions of the Malayan soil" — struggle for survival, for their very own "bit of earth." Inspired by "a footnote in a history textbook about the adultery of a tin miner's wife," Lim creates Bandong, a fictional village in Perak — the site of the tin mining wars. Against this historical backdrop, the women of Bandong live their lives in a tapestry of dependent relationships with their men, some of whom are poor, some rich; some downtrodden, some powerful; some Chinese, some Muslim; some vernacular-speaking, some English-speaking. As the men engage in local politics, in tussles of power and struggles for their livelihood, the women are embroiled in domestic affairs that sometimes, as in Ah Fah's story (see below), spills over into cross-clan warfare. In this setting, both the colonial and gender dynamics of life in Bandong unfold.

The narrative focuses on the story of Ah Fah, a young woman accused of adultery with an unidentified rival clansman. Ah Fah was a prostitute, bought by a woman we know as Ah Lai for fifteen dollars from a brothel owner to become the wife of her son, the village idiot, Ah Lai. The tale is told from the perspective of the male protagonist, Wong Tuck Heng, a 16-year-old newcomer to Bandung. Wong is greeted on his arrival by the public spectacle of the torture of Ah Fah by the local White Crane community, whose members, both male and female, are enraged by Ah Fah's adultery. The torture ends with the traditional punishment meted out to transgressors of clan rules: drowning in a pig basket. The narrative then shifts to the women's quarters where the women discuss Ah Fah's plight, with the younger women gradually, cautiously, taking her part, and the embittered mother-in-law refusing to forgive her.

This narrative portrays the sorry plight of women — as daughters-in-law, mothers, mothers-in-law, and wives — in a relentlessly patriarchal commune. Above all else, the problematic but inexorable link between women's sexuality and patriarchal notions of morality are held up for our attention. The story becomes important for our purposes in the way this issue of female sexuality in an Asian location is packaged — as servile and underprivileged.

In designing this course, we felt the need to challenge the presentation of Asian women and their sexuality in "Bandong" because while the writer passionately depicts the oppressive nature of women's lives in the local community, bound by local customs and "Asian" values, the nature of the representation seems to us non-liberating in ways that suggest, as Homi Bhabha does, that Lim, like many Asian scholars/writers, is positioned ambivalently in a state of resistance *and* unconscious absorption of Western stereotypes of Asian images. From the image of the stoic and long-suffering woman-victim, to the fiercely single-minded and hard-hearted mother-in-law, the portrayal of Asian women in "Bandong" reinforces Eurocentric and Anglo-American stereotypes of helpless oppressed damsels and equally oppressive dragon ladies, even as we imbibe the lessons of patriarchal oppression. These are precisely the kinds of mainstream images of Asian women that need to be actively deconstructed and re-viewed in the classroom.

Our class was made up of fifty-five Singaporean students, all aged between twenty and twenty-three, with female students in the majority. Ethnically, Chinese students were the dominant group; about one-quarter were Malay or Indians. Although their genders and ethnicities varied, all were products of a Singaporean education system that emphasizes academic excellence and equal opportunity. Indeed, these students belonged to an elite group, having worked their way up the education ladder and earned a place in a prestigious local university. In terms of social class, they ranged from working-class to upper-middle-class. In the last two decades Singapore has made giant strides economically. Socially, its landscape has been effectively and creatively urbanized. With an efficient government in place, it has also managed to acquire one of the lowest crime rates in Asia. Our target audience, therefore, were heirs to prosperous living who had never experienced any significant hardships in their lives. Thus,

what they read in “Bandong” was rather far removed from their own lived experiences.

Repackaging for an Asian Classroom

This section deals with the textual presentation of Ah Fah and other women in the narrative and our subsequent re-presentations of these characters. We also elaborate on how students reacted to these (re)presentations.

Ah Fah

Though Ah Fah is central to the narrative, in her extreme subalternity as a former prostitute and the purchased wife of the village idiot, she cannot claim to be the protagonist of this text. Instead, this narrative is cast from the perspective of a 16-year-old male, Wong Tuck Heng, a newcomer to Bandong. In other words, from the beginning, Ah Fah and her plight are filtered through and subjugated by the male gaze.

Our primary challenge started precisely at this point — to reinstate the female gaze in giving this narrative a feminist reading. When asked if this narrative could have been rewritten from a *female* point of view, i.e., not from Wong Tuck Heng’s point of view, but, say, from the point of view of Ah Fah or another female character, Lee-soh, our students debated the complexities involved in gendered narrations of either kind. Some students interrogated the male perspective and its underpinning of the woman, while others felt that such a charged narrative about the subaltern woman could never be narrated with any degree of objectivity by another woman. This led to discussions of bias and perspective, effectively enabling a deeper insight into correlations between genders and perspectives and also between subalternity and expression. This enabled us, as transactors of knowledge, to draw interesting parallels between “Bandong” and the Bengali writer Mahasveta Devi’s short story “Draupadi,”¹⁴ translated and discussed at length by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “More on Power/Knowledge.”¹⁵ Thus, after acknowledging the limitations induced by issues of perspective and representation, as well as the pervasive presentation of the “Asian” female in two such distinct locations as the hunted and the victimized, we immediately directed our students to restore the female and the female condition that are the primary focus of “Bandong.”

When we first encounter Ah Fah in this narrative, it is through the words of the angry mob that is torturing her for her crime. Through the mob, we hear Ah Fah indexed linguistically as “bitch,” “whore,” and “slut.” Only *after* we have encountered her linguistically are we presented with her physical image: “Kneeling before the temple was the object of the crowd’s wrath — a woman splattered with mud and dung, and bleeding from several lacerations on her face and arms.”¹⁶ One student wrote the following response to this scene: “One cannot read the story of ‘Bandong’ and not feel an overwhelming sense of pity for Ah Fah.” Indeed, we see presented before us the all-too-familiar picture of the disempowered Chinese woman, bound hand and foot, defeated and reduced to an object of pity.

The final six pages of “Bandong” describe in graphic detail the torture and eventual drowning of Ah Fah at the hands of her clan members, the mob being made up predominantly of males and of a small number of equally angry females. Working with this image of Ah Fah, we repackaged this narrative to highlight important (and oftentimes, ambiguous) elements in Lim’s description that are easily lost in a text filled with such graphic details of her torture. One such emphasis involved foregrounding the meaning of Ah Fah’s silence throughout her torture. Apart from emitting a final shrill cry, Ah Fah, as depicted in this narrative, maintains a stony silence and an impassive expression. While some students expressed their frustration over the stoic silence maintained by Ah Fah, others saw her silence as a kind of power. One student, for example, noted: “Silence is turned into an expression of power when Ah Fah’s absolute quiet throughout the ordeal is viewed as a resistance against the power of speech and the patriarchal order.” Rather than encouraging the acceptance of the image of the stoic but silent Asian woman — the eternal victim, we took up such a reading of silence as empowering resistance and encouraged a reading of this silence as one of strength and defiance and as the pivotal reason for provoking the crowd, which in the final analysis appears weaker than Ah Fah.

We also prodded our students to question the motives of the men and the women who tortured Ah Fah. We asked why the women participated in the torture of their sister? The use of the word “sister” here is particularly significant given the context of the story and of Singapore. In the Chinese (and indeed several Asian) cultural context(s), “sister” is a common term of address among women; it assumes a level of camaraderie and female bonding as “sisters share the same fate.” Also, the term foregrounds the pan-Asian notion of “community as extended family” that, for instance, prompts Singaporeans to address complete strangers as “uncles” and “aunties” in everyday interactions. As such, most Singaporeans reading this word on the page will not question its use. However, as feminist agents of change we deliberately highlighted the word and its cultural usage and encouraged our students to perceive it as contestational — as a cultural act of resistance against Western individualizing processes and “Western” representations. In this way, the word acquires a political overtone. We saw this as one example of leading students to subvert dominant tropes and resist alien value systems. We then asked what could be at stake that caused both the men and the women to mete out such harsh punishment on Ah Fah? Two students responded in the following way:

[There is a] lack of sisterly solidarity between the women in patriarchal society....The women in “Bandong” collaborate with the patriarchal law even if it means killing their own kind. The women are pressured by the men to identify themselves with men and stand firm [against] patriarchal ideology.

The torture of Ah Fah is like a witch burning — an incensed mob and a “guilty” woman. In this act we see the premium society places on a

woman's chastity....The mob is furious with her because she has transgressed their law. The women are furious with her because now they again have to prove to men their fidelity.

We took up these lines of thought and encouraged our students to resist the fates of the women and men meted out in the text, by highlighting the need to cultivate critical awareness of and reflection on one's actions and to challenge blind obedience to social norms. By steering the discussion in these ways, we hoped to nurture a tradition of feminist critique of a text that draws characters along predictable racial and sexist lines of representation, rather than perpetuating pervasive gender ideologies.

Other Women in "Bandong"

Ah Fah is the only woman in the narrative who is given a name. Interestingly, the name "Ah Fah" literally means "flower," and "flower" stands for "prostitute" in the Cantonese dialect used by the characters in "Bandong." The names of the other women characters in the narrative are based on their kinship ties with males. For example, women are named "Ah Lai's mother," "miner's wife," "Lee-soh," and "Wong-soh," the last two meaning, "Lee's/Wong's wife." Hence the women seem more like male appendages rather than persons in their own right. We looked at the textual presentation of two of these women, Ah Lai's mother and Lee-soh in more detail here, because they are central characters in the narrative. Our students, for their part, noted this essential anonymity of the women and discussed how this reinforces their lack of individual identity.

Ah Lai's Mother

Our first encounter with Ah Lai's mother is when she appears amidst the angry mob, rushing forward to throttle Ah Fah before the crowd. Later, after Ah Fah's drowning, Ah Lai's mother joins a group of women at the temple who, watched by the newcomer Wong, discuss Ah Fah's situation. Here, Ah Lai's mother laments loudly that not only was she unsuccessful in fulfilling her wish to have a grandson by effecting the marriage of her son Ah Lai to Ah Fah, but Ah Fah has now brought shame to her family and her community because she has committed adultery. The traditional and often oppressive relationship between the hard-hearted mother-in-law (seeking to secure the family line by any means) and her defenseless daughter-in-law is thus reenacted.

A student characterized Ah Lai's mother as a symbol of the betrayal of womankind, describing his encounter with Ah Lai's mother in the text in these words:

She is a traitor to her own kind, responsible for objectifying and perpetuating the objectification of Ah Fah. She seems wholly indifferent to the fact that Ah Fah is a woman just as she is, and in her thirst for family honor, [she] refused to apportion any blame on her idiot son. It becomes worse because she is a party to the torture of Ah Fah, both on the communal level when she tried to strangle Ah Fah, and on the individual level, caning Ah

Fah even though it was clearly because of her idiot son that the marriage could not be consummated.

Our students discussed how Ah Lai's mother's own position within patriarchy is what leads her to get a wife for her idiot son. To counter the image of a dragon lady blinded by power, we steered the discussion to question why a figure such as Ah Lai's mother was pressured to produce a grandson in the first place, and why she had to provoke Ah Fah's lynching as atonement for adultery. Instead of accepting the dominant reading of women oppressing women, of women conforming to patriarchal norms, we encouraged our students to look upon women like Ah Lai's mother as equally victims of patriarchal injunctions. Bound by customs, such women "aren't free to die," i.e., to choose the way their lives are to be lived.¹⁷ Through such readings, we tried not to replicate the seemingly immutable ways of mothers-in-law in relation to daughters-in-law. Instead, we hoped that students would view women as sharing a predicament that cuts across their social positions, thus challenging the prevalent image of the dragon lady preying on her weaker sisters.

Lee-soh

We encounter Lee-soh, the butcher's wife, when she challenges Ah Lai's mother over the ill-treatment of Ah Fah. From Lee-soh, we hear the details of Ah Fah's life, which Ah Fah confided to her while they both washed clothes by the riverbank. In Lee-soh, we highlighted what one student called "the voice of reason" — a woman who dared to "speak up for the truth and to let the truth be known even though the other women tried to quieten her." Another student described Lee-soh as "the only one who dared raise the alternative viewpoint even in the face of the ranting mother of Ah Lai. She is the only one who offers a glimpse of the grim reality that Ah Fah faced in her life."

We took up this observation and underscored what we see exemplified in Lee-soh, namely, the moral courage and the presence of sympathy/empathy in one woman to speak the truth in the face of society's oppression. Though Lee-soh only speaks up in a circle of women, and not to the wider community, she does nevertheless speak in the presence of Wong-soh, the wife of the clan leader. More importantly, she dares to associate with Ah Fah, not minding the "contamination" the other women fear. We posited that Lee-soh's part in the narrative is thus extremely important, even though Lim granted her only a few lines in the entire story. In our repackaging, it was Lee-soh's narrative that we held up in our classroom as an important thread to be noted. Following Lee-soh's revelations, we prompted our students to examine Ah Fah's undeclared motivations for committing adultery given that she lives in a society that is so unforgiving of women's transgression. In so doing, we encouraged our students to think in ways that would not have been open to them if they had read "Bandong" in a manner unmediated by an empowering feminist perspective.

Presenting and Representing Asian Sexualities

Within feminism the call has gone out for women to recognize that there are no power-free sites from which to speak and act, i.e., that feminists need to be at-

tentive to the workings of power differentials between particular groups of women, within their own theorization and politics.¹⁸ Mohanty discusses how “colonization [and by implication, “globalization,”¹⁹ which has been identified by theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman²⁰ as working along the lines of remarkably similar power relations] almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression — often violent — of the heterogeneity of the subjects(s) in question.”²¹ Mohanty demonstrates by an analysis of several feminist texts how differences of class, race, religions, and cultures have been erased to produce the monolithic category of the “third world woman.” This, of course, is deeply significant to the ways in which women’s sexualities are represented in these texts.

If sexuality is understood as an intimate relationship between humans, then the ways in which images of the masculine and the feminine are constructed become pivotal to this understanding. Theorists have noted how from the first point of colonial contact Eurocentric discourses pin the various Asian sexualities in ways that work to either emasculate and feminize, or primitivize, Asian males while positioning Asian women as helpless victims subjugated by native males. Such constructions made it possible for imperialists to intervene in native affairs and for the “white imperialist knight” to intercede in behalf of the colonized woman of color. In her article “The Rani of Sirmur,” Spivak highlights British discourses on *sati* as an example of this very process at work.²² However, despite recognizing the ideological underpinnings of such processes, theorists have pointed to the lingering potency and strangely persistent effects of these colonial constructs on native minds. Bhabha’s “mimic man” illustrates this pervasive phenomenon where natives and imperialists resist yet absorb such representations simultaneously.²³

A telling illustration of this is the way in which, through the ages, both Indian and Chinese cultures have constructed empowered females who have had a great psychological impact on their peoples. The story of the Chinese woman warrior Fa Mulan, who led her people in war against her evil emperor and who gave birth to a child on the battlefield, is well known enough not to need elaboration here. Similarly, the story of the brave woman Kannagi, who burnt a city because the king unjustly killed her husband, and the brave Rani Jhansi, who led her women to war. These women all counter the image of the docile and feeble Asian woman. This space of empowerment is further reinforced by the discourse set up in schools and in all public forums that insist on Singapore being a merit-based society in which men and women, regardless of their race, class, sex, or religion, can reach the top by sheer hard work and application. This influential discourse finds great favor among the youth, especially since, by and large, they see it materializing around them in metropolitan and (within certain social constraints) meritocratic Singapore.

The central female figure in “Bandong” and the other women in the narrative embody the very image of the “average third world woman” depicted in many Western discourses: They are poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, and victimized.²⁴ The contrast with the implicit self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, having control over their own bodies and

sexualities, and with the freedom to make their own decisions is predictably set up in the traditional binary-induced ways of thinking. Similarly, the males in “Bandong” are everything that is stereotypical of the colonial constructs of native males: primitive, barbaric, unthinking, superstitious, licentious, and practicing double standards on their women. Again, the implied contrast with the rational, civilized white male is inescapable. The picture set up in “Bandong” of Asian sexualities is far from attractive — an instance of a pervasive textual representation of Asian sexualities that imbricates both Asian and non-Asian mind-sets.

Our students also discussed the term “sexuality” in great detail, recognizing it as a system of differential power relations that would vary when located in different matrices, cultures, and histories. They wondered, however, how often such differentials have been collapsed in order to construct a monolithic representation of Asian sexuality. Many of them acknowledged the need to be made aware of these pervasive images because of the influence they still wield in locations outside their own secure environments. They discussed the need to understand that their security, brought about by the enormous affluence of Singapore as a nation (with one of the highest national reserves in the world) and through the meticulously programmed cosmopolitanism that is carefully nurtured by the government, is actually highly volatile given the political and economic insecurities facing Singapore and the world. Our own choice of text complicates this task.

We chose to teach “Bandong” to a class of present-day Singaporean students, located in a space and time that is far removed from the short story’s textual setting. This made our task of inducing them to engage with the text highly problematic. However, aware as we are of the transformative and liberatory potential of thinking about sexualities and sexual representations, we realized that using this text might yield greater insights into how power relations work and might foster the creation of necessary spaces to counter their effects. This view propelled us in our efforts.

In our search for a way to bridge the distance between the contemporary Singapore social setting and the textual setting of “Bandong,” we found that Messer-Davidow’s concept of “perspectivism” was extremely useful in anchoring our students to a text that was alien to them in its narration of an episode that seems from their perspective rather melodramatic and very far removed from their social circumstances.²⁵ Perspectivism brings together the personal, cultural, subjective, and objective in the knowledge-gathering process, replacing binary oppositions that inhibit and fix the knower into a particular location with a systematic understanding of how and what we see. Messer-Davidow asks readers to affiliate with their culture and deliberate on how one acquires a self-centered perspective. Becoming conscious of their own perspectives in this way, readers are pushed to reflect on the perspectives of others who occupy alien positions and to attempt to deploy multiple perspectives in conducting enquiries into texts. The advantage of perspectivism is that it exposes the location of the knowers of texts and encourages them to reflect on what dictates their reactions to texts and to examine their contingent standpoints.

As one student put it, “Bandong” is “quite interesting in offering a range of different perspectives” — referring to how the narrative starts from the point of view of Wong Tuck Heng, and then moves through various characters like Ah Lai’s mother, and finally to Lee-soh, who provides a voice for the dead Ah Fah. All these characters are historically, indeed even culturally, in very alien spaces as far as our students were concerned. This student’s response enabled us to raise an awareness of all of our students’ own locations and their ideological affiliations. Similarly, students were encouraged to examine the location of the author and to reflect on what could have prompted the writer to adopt certain types of textual constructions and representations. In class discussions with the writer Suchen Christine Lim, students wanted Lim to explain, for example, why she did not give the women names that would express their individual identities. Such opportunities for examining alternatives to what is found in a particular text, we maintain, can only enrich one’s understanding and appreciation of the text used in the classroom. For us, as instructors, this exercise in externalizing one’s intrinsic psychological reactions gave us an opportunity to underscore with our students the role of ideology in the construction of texts.

In reading “Bandong,” we encouraged students to reflect on their reactions to the oppressed Ah Fah, to the rampaging male horde, and to the vindictive mother-in-law and her friends. Furthermore, we introduced the perspective of history, using the fact that the story is set at the turn of the twentieth century, about one hundred years ago. One student underscored this need for contextualizing when he wrote: “Bandong is set in an age when petty superstitions and archaic tribal laws often dictated the conduct of the simple villagers. *The character of Ah Lai’s mother is quite expected for someone [living] in this age*” (emphasis added). This perspective of history is an important one as it teaches us to read with a conscious understanding of social/political/historical contexts in mind.

A second concept that was rather useful to our purposes is W.E.B. du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness” as “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”²⁶ This is an idea that Elaine Showalter feels is natural to women as they emerge from their divided consciousness, as daughters of male tradition and sisters in a feminist movement.²⁷ This concept helped us to introduce feminist concepts into the students’ reading of texts, and removed their reservations about engaging with negative and seemingly unrealistic images of Asian women and Asian sexualities. In the process, students were made aware of the fact that they can comfortably occupy a perspective that is distanced yet engaged, subjective yet objective.

Implications

For Us

When exploring the implications of this pedagogical endeavor, the primary fact that struck us was that given the Singaporean social context, we had an overarching empowerment available to us as university teachers. The university is a relatively homogeneous environment in that it brings together a group of young, elite Singaporeans in a pursuit of higher education. This homogeneity

insulates us to a large extent from discriminatory trajectories of class and race (very much in evidence elsewhere in Singapore) that could well have affected our class dynamics and taken our discussion along entirely different channels. But this does not blind us to the fact that this immunity is entirely circumstantial and might well disappear with the changes that are occurring rapidly in our society.

Even given our immunity, we have to walk a narrow line, carefully mediating between global politics and local forces, aware that we could face potential resistance from our students. Unlike the situation that Arun Mukherjee relates regarding student attitudes in Canada, where he feels that students are (deliberately) disengaged from the political context of textual representations, our students were deeply involved with the images that we presented in class simply because they are “Asian” images.²⁸ This meant that we had to tread sensitively by neither encouraging an overt hostility toward negative representations, yet not discouraging an active resistance to such representations of themselves.

In addition, as transactors/teachers situated within higher institutions of learning, we realized that we have the power to influence the direction of knowledge flow and to determine to some extent the process of knowledge production and negotiation. For this reason, we had to take great care as to the manner of repackaging and re-presenting the textual images, and we had to be fully conscious of our own ideological locations that guided us in the way in which we reconstructed these textual readings. We also acknowledge the need to take measures not to drive away future target audiences of such repackaged knowledge because these students constitute a future generation of critics, and possibly teachers like us.

For Our Students

We have had to reflect seriously on the implications such repackaging has for the targeted audience, our student-consumers. Students, like us, are consumers in the global market, extensively influenced by powerful discourses. For this reason, we see the need for students to cultivate a critical awareness of the origins of knowledge and the direction of its flow, and what ideologies are in place during the packaging and repackaging of images. In the future, what we will need to survive in a globalized world will be measured by how well the next generation is trained to handle the influx of global knowledge and change. In our role as university teachers in Singapore, we see knowledge transaction as a way to teach our students to look at theories and ideas in more critical and creative ways, i.e., in ways that take into consideration the politics of our own Asian location, both in itself and as viewed from the West.

Our students, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world today, are anxious to translate the world into their own idiom. We hope we provide our students with a much-needed space to respond to the issues that confront them. For example, we find more and more of our brighter students asking us why it is that in syllabi throughout our university curriculum, local texts are so noticeably absent. They want to know how to introduce such texts into the curriculum and what we could do with them once we bring them into our course of studies.

Our choice of “Bandong” is a direct demonstration of how a local work can be legitimately and usefully included in a university course on feminism. By offering a feminist critique of this work, we hope we have shown our students how useful work can be done with our own materials, from our own perspective.

At the same time, however, we are aware that our students also possess the power of choice, i.e., to accept or to reject our transacted knowledge, whether in its global form or in its repackaged form. Therefore, the space we provide serves also as a potential site of resistance. This potential resistance is welcomed simply because in many ways, such resistance can be an expression of a critical mind at work, and critical awareness is indeed our goal. Hence, we do not consciously seek our students’ acceptance of our transaction; we only ask that they understand our motivations for doing what we do, in the way that we do it. This inevitably means diluting our theoretical concerns to make them palatable and interesting to students faced with feminist theory for the first time and for the length of only a semester.

For Theory

As transactors of theory, we are in the process of critically analyzing, mediating, and repackaging global concepts, representations, and ideologies for local consumption; at the same time, we take heed of local constraints. In so doing, our space is interestingly the reverse of “the postcolonial discursive space” that Asian American critic Rey Chow identifies as the problematic space “in which many Third world intellectuals who choose to function in the First World” operate. As Chow remarks, “in Western academic institutions, notably in North America, . . . many intellectuals ‘of colour’ are serving as providers of knowledge about their nations and cultures. The way these intellectuals function is therefore inseparable from their status as cultural workers/brokers in diaspora.”²⁹

As mentioned earlier, however, insulated as we are in our academic space in Singapore and operating within our own communities, this is one burden we do not carry. Indeed, in our repackaging, we stressed two factors. First, like Lim, who writes from specific locations, forces similar to hers shape our readings as well. Second, *unlike* Lim, we are feminist theorists/teachers actively producing local theory to combat universalizing theories, and also fulfilling a lacuna that exists here in Singapore where there is a marked lack of active feminist theorizing. By this we mean that as Singaporeans (and insiders), we are involved in feminist redefinitions that retrieve these representations/images from disempowered positions by our attempts at a liberatory, postcolonial reading of them. This certainly puts us at a site of heavy responsibility: we need to be aware of the power of ideologies that have constructed “minority discourses.” As Abdul Jan Mohamed remarks, “minority discourses are the product of damage, of damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture.”³⁰ This ideological power of the dominant culture has determined that emigrant flow is westward and knowledge flow, eastward. Power structures dictate that the knowledge valorized is that of immigrants and rarely of emigrants, i.e., the focus is on the point of arrival, namely, the first world and rarely the points of departures: the originary points.

Asian women, like these immigrants, are monolithic constructions. Our focus on the consequences and impact of global theory on *our* people and *our* location is a small but impassioned effort at reshaping the focus and flow of knowledge. This, in our opinion, is our greatest endeavor — that we reshape knowledge starting with a small group of students in one corner of the globe — a modest but not insignificant enterprise.

Notes

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1. Suchen Christine Lim, "Bandong," in *More Than Half the Sky: Creative Writings by Thirty Singaporean Women*, ed. Leong Liew Geok (Singapore, Times Books International, 1998), 24-46.
2. By "systemic constraints" we refer to the fact that in Singapore gender issues are not prominent on any national agenda, and the Singaporean public is generally not critically aware of gender issues. By "institutional constraints" we refer to the general lack of a coherent gender studies focus in the university curriculum, and the lack of recognition given to courses on gender issues.
3. Our students, and for that matter members of the general public in Singapore, have a tendency to associate feminism negatively with images of radical banner-waving activities that are periodically highlighted in the media.
4. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (for the *Social Text* collective) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 255-77.
5. Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 756-69.
6. Kadiatu Kanneh, "Feminism and the Colonial Body," in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 346-48.
7. Mary E. John, *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).
8. Mirtha Quintanales, "I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance," in *The Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Woman of Color Press, 1983), 151.
9. Susan Margery and Susan Sheridan, "Local, Global, Regional: Women's Studies in Australia," *Feminist Studies* 28, no.1 (2002): 129.
10. Homi Bhabha, "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt/Discussion," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.
11. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 64-65.
12. Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 44.
13. Suchen Christine Lim, *A Bit of Earth* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 2001). Leong Liew Geok, ed., *More than Half the Sky: Creative Writings by Thirty Singaporean Women* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1998).

14. Mahasveta Devi, "Draupadi," in *Blood into Ink: South Asian and Middle Eastern Women Write War*, ed. Miriam Cook and Roshni Rustomji-Kerns (Boulder, Colo., San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994): 136-47.
15. Gayatri Spivak, "More on Power/Knowledge," in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 141-74.
16. Suchen Christine Lim, "Bandong," in Leong, *More than Half the Sky*, 29.
17. *Ibid.*, 38.
18. Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 1 (1990): 131.
19. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes."
20. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequence* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1998).
21. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 337.
22. Gayatri Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur," in Vol. 1, *Europe and Its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iverson, and Diana Loxley (Colchester: University of Essex, 1985): 128-51.
23. Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 152-63.
24. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 333-58.
25. Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Manufacturing the Attack on Liberalized Higher Education," in *Marxism in the Postmodern Age: Confronting the New World Order*, ed. Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener (New York: Guilford Press), 526-37.
26. W.E.B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 3.
27. Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 141.
28. Arun P. Mukherjee, "Ideology in the Classroom: A Case Study in the Teaching of English Literature in Canadian Universities," in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 447-51.
29. Rey Chow, "Against the Lures of Diaspora: Minority Discourse, Chinese Women, and Intellectual Hegemony," in *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society*, ed. Tonglin Lu (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 23-24.
30. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, "Introduction. Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?" in *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987).

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