

BEYOND THE MALE GAZE: SEEKING OUT NEW TERRAINS FOR MALAYSIAN FEMINIST PRACTICE

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The Gaze of the Rafflesians Circa 1966

After a day's classes, the unsuspecting undergraduate of the University of Singapore (in the mid 1960's) heads towards Nassim Road where she will catch a bus. As she strolls past the all-male university college, Raffles Hall, by the second or third window of BLOCK B directly above her, a guttural shriek pierces the air in her direction. Then comes within minutes a whole chorus of "WOMAN! WOOMAAN! WOOOMAAAN! WOOOOMAAAN!" ringing out in rising decibels of mocked sensuality as the red-faced, toe-transfixed girl traverses a whole fifty metres to Block A. There she faces another excruciating fifty metres of the collective visual and verbal penetration of a precocious male psyche manifesting itself in a remarkable uniformity of expression which sweeps within its ambit even the least libidinous of the collegians.

The architecture of the three-storey concrete college block provides a convenient vantage point for a male surveillance over any unwitting female stroller. It is almost a perfect panopticon, not too high and not too low with a visual and vocal range that can capture enough of the features of the female stroller to stir excitement and thence systematic control. To continue the metaphor, the college block could be taken to represent the shell of a male symbolic order of power and control that men have over women. Ensconced behind concrete, the faceless collegians were bound to find the appearance of a single, palpably vulnerable female figure within their collective sensual range "easy meat" for mob male consumption as we have just described. Consider also that the occupants of the college were young Malaysian men, at the prime of their youth, but somewhat trapped by the conservative social mores of society which assigned them to spend their "best"

years in an all-male college. As such, it takes very little to trigger a phallo-centric outburst which is at once playful and yet tellingly potent on its "victim".

The episode above is produced not only to demonstrate the apparent preoccupation of the Rafflesians with sex *per se*. A Freudian or, better, Lacanian rendition might pin down the Rafflesians' sexual preoccupation to a mere phallo-centric discourse - one which was more than evident in the social predilections of Rafflesians. Speaking as an *alumnus* of Raffles Hall, I can vouch to such a preoccupation given that our "anthem" was the unprintable "DAISY, DAISY" which extolls the virtues of the womanly form in tones which were at once vulgar and sexist, not to mention that our favourite pastime during the ragging period was the "panty raid" on the neighbouring women's college. Rather, the more important point is that Rafflesians were epitomising, consciously or unconsciously, the exertion of a male power on the female Other by a series of social moves and practices which evidently accentuated and reinforced the men-women asymmetry at the "ontic" level of social discourse.¹ Sexual expression is merely one medium for the deployment of such power, albeit a highly pervasive one amongst collegian males. Such a discourse had become incorporated into the collegians' collective social beings, into their behavioural codes and into their "lingo."² Rafflesians, by their Gaze were indirectly appropriating the Other's body through an ocular surveillance and control. Through their "eye of power" (*cf.* Foucault, 1980, Ch.8 and Jay, 1986),³ women's bodies were turned into objects which were ultimately for the service and pleasure of men. The control is complete when "feminine behaviour" is defined according to what men desire of women by females themselves.

I would submit that the above anecdotal presentation is quite representative of the social predilections of Malaysian college or university students in the mid-1960s. The Rafflesians were predominantly residential Malaysian collegians studying in Singapore and their counterparts in the five residential colleges of the University of Malaya had similar habits. In more recent years there has been a noticeable clamp-down on ragging and the wilder pursuits of college students in both the Singapore and Malaysian universities. This

notwithstanding, the Gaze of the Rafflesians should be appreciated in the light of a suggestive beginning to a proper and systematic documentation of the prevalence of the male gaze in Malaysian social discourse in a host of other environments which still awaits more thorough-going research. I would however venture to posit that the male gaze is perhaps more pervasive in Malaysian society than most people (especially males) would care to admit. The precocious version of such a gaze in the case of the Rafflesians was merely symptomatic of a whole male practice which is already highly established in Malaysian society. Put in more "local" terms, the gaze phenomenon can with some modification be equated with the *buaya* syndrome, usually prevalent in urban middle class and yuppie circles. (Goh and Low, 1990). The *buaya* (or crocodile) is the would-be womanising male who is always on the look-out for a score or a kill, that is, always on the ready to prey on potential female victims. Thus, the *buaya* takes to its logical conclusion what the gazer aspires to achieve.

At some risk of over-generalization, the point seems to be that the Malaysian Male at the ontic level of consciousness (that is, what obtains in actual practice as opposed to what is ideally desired to be practised) is quintessentially sexist and patriarchal. Ironically when males are at great pains to deny that they are sexist or patriarchal, their very acts of denial are apologies for behaviour which is the epitome of patriarchal stances. (e.g. "Come on, I'm not sexist, I let my wife wear what she likes"). I would argue that sexism and patriarchy form the underpinnings of contemporary male social discourse in Malaysian society cutting across ethnicity and class. This is a claim made without a full empirical investigation at this stage but the hypothesis must surely be worth exploring that contemporary Malaysian men of different ethnic communities share a considerably higher commonality of notions about male superiority and authority than is usually admitted. If obvious, I believe the point is nevertheless an important one to make, given the multicultural context of our society and the recent explicit or implicit post-colonial critique especially of liberal, Western feminist stances as being still somewhat trapped within an orientalist discourse (*cf.* Spivak, 1990, Ong, 1982 and the discussion below).

If patriarchy is pervasive and fairly universal in Malaysian society, feminists cannot evade the fundamental agenda of addressing gender inequality, even when that inequality is articulated within indigenous cultures. If not, the feminist project is itself negated. This is clearly a dilemma which is not easily resolvable and we will next discuss this question, which I will cast in terms of a double problematic: that of the issue of ontological difference of man and woman and the ontological difference of "West" and "Non-West", if one is allowed to juxtapose a highly complex set of differences and pluralities, simply. Our project, as I see it is: how do these questions pertain to the constructing of a Malaysian feminist practice? However, we must first address the question of ontological difference between Man and Woman before we can satisfactorily answer our second-order questions relating to Malaysian feminist practice.

The Question of Ontological Difference

One of the most original treatments of alterity comes from Jean-Paul Sartre and I would like to venture a reading of Sartre's *No Exit* to illuminate the issue of ontological difference. In this short drama comes the celebrated line, "Hell is - other people," Inez (Woman) seems to be making the seemingly paradoxical assertion that Garcin (Man) deprives Her of her own identity by defining Her in the image that He wants her to be, suggesting that, since Woman defines Herself in no other way, She then is a virtual captive of Man.⁴ Even Estelle (Sister) is lost for the same reason. Thus Selfhood and Sisterhood is denied by Man's ontologically superior position in the tripartite relationship:

INEZ: Forget? How silly you can get! I feel you even in my bones. Your silence shrieks in my ears. You can nail up your mouth, cut your tongue out, but how can that keep you from being there? Can you stop thinking? I hear it, ticking away like an alarm clock, and I know you hear me thinking. Its all very well slouching on your sofa, but you are everywhere, and every sound comes to me soiled, because you've intercepted it on its

... way. Why you've stolen even my face from me: you know it, and I don't! And what about Estelle? You've stolen her from me, too; if she and I were alone, do you think she dare to treat me as she does? (Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* as cited in Cumming, 1965: 187).

Sartre is noted for his rejection of the Transcendental Ego and solipsism in general. I am however inscribing a meaning to his text in which the Self is seen as Woman, which is not necessarily Sartre's overall posture on the question of alterity. The Other is said to exist autonomously, given Sartre's rejection of solipsism, but in a highly complex relationship to the Self. As Cumming puts it:

Self-consciousness is consciousness of myself as something of which the other is conscious but of which I cannot become conscious. His consciousness of me transcends my consciousness, because I have become for him the object that I can never become for myself. When he looks at me I am conscious of his consciousness identifying me as having this or that character; I cannot pass comparable value judgements on myself, except by attempting the impossible - to look at myself with another's eyes. ... When the other looks at me in Sartre, its insight and its source are beyond my control. I am no longer master of the phenomenological situation; it is his consciousness which endows my actions with their meanings. To regain control, my consciousness cannot simply reflect - "turn back" upon itself. To elude the self the other is conscious of as mine, my consciousness must detour, turn upon him, and alter his consciousness of me. Thus we have a more complicated "flight" than we anticipated earlier (Cumming, 1965: 26).

The feminist project, viewed from Sartre's version of gaze ("look" for Sartre), becomes problematic when it would seem that being ontological feminine necessitates the masculine gaze as the means whereby the female body is objectified. Such objectifying is

presumably beyond feminine control. The act of negating this objectification of the female by the male in the feminist project would also negate the feminine being itself. The solution lies, of course, in the complicated dialectical flight of altering His consciousness through a detour route of My consciousness to His although this still begs the question that female in the original version is defined in terms of male values. The problem can be resolved, I believe, by a move insisting that the "ontic" reality of male hegemony is not to be taken as an ontological truth.⁵ Such a move could entail, for example, the reversal of gender of the characters in "No Exit" and, thus, by a dialectical twist and a reversal of meanings and signifieds, Malehood, then, is defined in terms of feminine values.

However, the "facticity" of male dominance would render the last move ineffectual and certainly somewhat irrelevant for the question of feminist praxis. Yet, its stance should not be denied for the reason that it provides not only solace and dignity for the feminist project but a genuinely defensible ontological stance. It may not be incorrect to say that this is the stance of eco-feminists. I would therefore reject some psychoanalytical stances associated with Jacques Lacan wherein, "meaning and symbolic order as a whole is fixed in relation to a primary, transcendental signifier which Lacan calls phallus, the signifier of sexual difference, which guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order." (Weedon, 1987: 53). As further explained by Weedon, the Lacanian stance is premised on the notion of the satisfaction of desire which can only be fulfilled by assuming control of the symbolic order which is signified by the phallus. Lacan has, in a sense, merely moved Freudian analysis from the anatomical level to that of the fully symbolic. In rejecting Lacan or Freud, one does not deny, however, that phallo-centric discourses are hegemonic at the ontic level. And, one can find no better statement of the ontic reality of male domination than in Simone de Beauvoir's classic, *The Second Sex* in which she writes:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep women in a state of dependence; their codes of law

have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic interests of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions. Once the subject seeks to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is none the less a necessity to him: he attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself (1974: 171).

The issue of ontological difference is addressed politically by Braidotti (Brennan, 1989) who raises the problem of feminist praxis in the face of the poststructural, postmodernist and psychoanalytical reconstitution of the "woman question" *à la* Lacan or Irigaray. I am generally in empathy with her stance that the crucial issues do not hinge around psychoanalysis or even around ontology but rather around politics. To quote:

Impressed as I may be by the argumentation of Lacanian critics of the logic of phallo-logocentrism I am nevertheless convinced that the conceptual challenge of feminism is radically other than the project of psychoanalysis. It has to do with the epistemological dimension mentioned above: how to connect the 'differences within' each woman to political practice which requires mediation of the 'differences among' women, so as to enact and implement sexual difference. Within feminism, the politico-epistemological question of achieving structural transformations of the subject cannot be disassociated from the need to effect changes in the socio-material frames of reference, which is one of the points of divergence between the feminist and the psychoanalytical 'sciences' (Brennan, 1989: 95).

If one could put it even more plainly, the prevalence of domination on the basis of sexual difference is such a universal practice effected at the different "layers, registers and levels" of consciousness and

articulated in such a thorough-going fashion in phallo-logocentric knowledges that a two-track agenda has long been the imperative for feminism, namely, the emancipation of women from sexual domination as well as from male-dominated discourses. If our understanding is now improved given the new poststructural theorising and analysis of feminism (*cf.* Weedon, 1987), this can only serve to further address and champion the most problematic and celebrated cause of this century.

Seeking out New Terrains of Malaysian Feminist Practice

The second problem of ontological difference hinging around the issue of Western versus Non-Western feminist discourses is best addressed to the question of Malaysian feminist practice which is the main focus of this discussion. Aihwa Ong propounds the view that Western feminist perspectives on the Third World, whether of the liberal or socialist ilk, betray a neo-orientalist posture wherein,

By and large, non-Western women are taken as an unproblematic universal category; feminists mainly differ over whether modernization of the capitalist or socialist kind will emancipate or reinforce systems of gender inequality found in the Third World. The status of non-Western women is analyzed and gauged according to a set of legal, political and social benchmarks that Western feminists consider critical in achieving a power balance between men and women (Ong, 1988: 82).

Ong documents in highly convincing fashion how the tropes of Western scholarship are transposed on the non-Western Other through the inscriptions of meanings essentially culled from Western discourses. Her own project and work, if I may paraphrase her, attempts to reveal gender in symbolic orders embedded in the social domains and boundaries of self-reflective identities in their own cultural contexts (Ong, 1988: 88).

Addressing the problematic of post-colonial feminism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, answers the question of who should be the speaking subject in her usual ebullient way:

A hundred years ago it was impossible for me to speak, for the precise reason that makes it only possible for me to speak in certain circles now. I see in that a kind of reversal, which is again suspicious. On the other hand, it is very important to hold on to it as a slogan in our time. The question of "speaking as" involves a distancing from oneself. The moment I have to think of the ways in which I will speak as an Indian, or as a feminist, the ways I speak as a woman, what I am doing is trying to generalise myself, make myself a representative, trying to distance myself from such kind of inchoate speaking as such. There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing. That is when a political consciousness comes in. (Spivak, 1990: 60).

Two important points, I believe, have been made in the foregoing discussion by Ong and Spivak which I will relate to my understanding of Malaysian feminist practice. While Ong had touched upon the need to deconstruct Western scholarship of the non-West Other, Spivak poses the dilemmas encountered by the post-colonial feminist in refurbishing a political praxis. There are no easy answers to this question. Even the question of deconstructing and reconstructing non-Western scholarship is not as easy as it seems.

We noted earlier that in constructing a Malaysian feminist discourse, we will begin with the assumption of male hegemony as a fact of life. Malaysian male hegemony, epitomized by the male gaze, is however, constituted in various multicultural and social contexts within Malaysia itself, never mind, its differences with Western culture. It is imperative that the deconstruction of such cultural practices, following Ong's strictures, should not also devalue cultural sensibilities and sensitivities existent within Malaysia. The range of cultural *difference* one faces in approaching the Malaysian problem is more daunting than

in most situations as one would have to deconstruct not only the three major ethnic components on the Peninsula -- Malay, Chinese and Indian (and even these categories are only generic) -- but one has to further deal with the range of cultural differences in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, each with its own composition of indigenous and immigrant communities.

To illustrate the problem, I would like to take an example from Ong's own important work where the focus is on Malay-Muslim cultural dimensions and where she alludes to the *Dakwah* (Muslim revivalist-missionary) movement in relation to the subordinate position of Muslim women within it. Employing a Foucauldian mode of analysis, she argues that the veiling of women and other revivalist Islamic practices were part of an "Arabization of Malay society" which ensured male disciplinary control over women as well as their deployment in the propagation of conservative, middle-class values (Ong, 1990: 266-269). Paradoxically, though, muslims donning the *hijab* (female ankle-length dress), *mini-telekung* (head-veil), *pardah* (face-veil), *jubah* (male ankle-length dress), *serban* (male turban) and the like may be said in Ong's own words to "register protest over cultural dislocation linked to colonial and postcolonial domination." (*Ibid.*:269). In short, through dressing and other more demonstrative means *dakwah* males and females alike could well be making political statements in unison against a putative Western-secularism in everyday life spawned by a colonial past. Here one could suggest is an almost unmistakable discernible shift of the female subject to a Spivak-like political position which is anti-West and anti-colonial, though not necessarily feminist. I would argue that such a reading is entirely possible and that readings of the *dakwah* movement that have tended to portray the women as making defensive manoeuvres in the face of alienation growing out of social dislocation is only half the story.

In this light, Ong's overall conclusion that Muslim women are neither simply resisting nor passive but "by yielding to religious and class forces and by working to protect the integrity of their bodies, families and the body politic, women have found new ways of belonging in a changing Malaysia," is also well taken. It may be yet another reading which somewhat devalues politics but substitutes the social realm in its

place. This "other" reading of meaning must also not be silenced in the feminist's enthusiasm to project a cause which makes no ontological link with the local subject. This notwithstanding, Ong's overall approach to the *dakwah* issue may have fallen into the pitfall she herself has identified in Western, colonial discourses. A critical view of Ong's work may pose the following issues: Has she inscribed a meaning on the *dakwah* women as an Other rather than allowing them to speak for themselves? Is Ong's own reading of the *dakwah* movement verging on the margins of a neo-orientalism, implicit in the use of phrases like "Arabization"? How would a decentred *dakwah* Malay subject speak if she had the occasion, Spivak-fashion, to voice her own perspective?

Another reading of the *dakwah* movement is offered by Zainah Anwar (1987: 76-77) who found in her study that the movement was by no means monolithic, appealing to different individuals for quite a variety of reasons, while at the same time having an appeal at the mass level as a protest ideology. Drawing from her case studies, Zainah Anwar (1987: 76) suggests that,

The case studies show up the fact that the *dakwah* movement is not monolithic. They reflect different levels of belief, commitment and lifestyles which have led to rivalry and disunity between different groups. But overriding this is the more important factor that the wide-ranging manifestations of its ideology makes it appealing to a wider group of adherents. For different people it provides fulfilment of different needs, whether it is spiritual, social, political or psychological, or all of them. It is this ability and flexibility to be interpreted and perceived differently as answering one's special needs that has contributed much to the success of the *dakwah* movement.

This broad and plural reading of the meaning of *dakwah* perhaps makes even better sense in the context of seeking out the terrains for feminist practice in the Malaysian context. To take Zainah's pluralistic reading a step further, one could even suggest that the act of veiling in

some instances could constitute a denial of their deployment as sexual objects by men. As an analogy, many standpoint feminists are wont to "de-sex" their appearance by various dressing styles which underplay their "femininity", a femininity that is invariably defined and exploited by males. The *dakwah* woman by doing much the same apparently removes herself from the male gaze. Unfortunately, the reasons often given by women for covering up isn't this but rather that it is a religious obligation and a means to reduce sexual temptations for the men. The notion of veiling as a "weapon of the weak" against a male surveillance of power is not yet a current one. Furthermore, the appearance of a plethora of *dakwah* fashions calculated to catch the male eye suggests that we may have gone full circle on this question. The male gaze has returned with a vengeance!

By and large, Malaysian feminist practice will pose serious dilemmas for a Muslim feminist, as it would for a Confucian or Hindu one, given that phallo-centric discourses are far from absent in Asian cultures. However, a deep dilemma that particularly confronts and confounds Malaysian feminists at the level of praxis is the practice of polygamy, condoned by Islam and various other customary, Asian cultural climes. In Islam's case, one would be hard put to proffer a feminist solution to such a question which will not at the same instance compromise the ontological being of a Muslim. However, a Spivak-like answer to this question would be clear (given her quotation above), and, if I may try to "represent" her, can be stated as follows. Having accepted that any subject occupies different subject positions (in this case, Muslim and Feminist), the political stance of the feminist must be to reject being Muslim when confronted with a feminist question, and with it, polygamy. But will that be too much to ask of Malaysian Muslim women or any one making a similar choice for that matter?

Yet another problem which blurs the easy distinction between Western and non-Western feminist practice centres around the "distanciation" of global order.⁶ If such distanciation and a concomitant globalization has meant the inevitable collision and/or coming together of cultures, and, thereby, the emergence of an inchoate, "universalistic" world culture, however fragmented, then the insistence on the West and non-

West categories may become increasingly superficial. In a politically consciously decolonised world and now a post-Cold War order, dichotomies such as these would become increasingly devalorised in discourse terms. Indeed, I would posit that the pluralistic praxis of recognising *difference* on a larger continuum and across a larger spectrum of social practices becomes imperative in the contemporary world, and may differ little in Western and non-Western contexts. The resurgence of ethnic and minority groups and their cross-penetration across the globe poses for feminism a more plural agenda and, thereby, a more pluralistic practice situated within multifarious cultural contexts.

This brings us back to Malaysian feminist practice, which also needs to be addressed at the level of advocacy. Advocacy of women's issues today hinges largely on the work of government and non-governmental organizations led by middle-class activists, the two main groups being the government sponsored National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women (NACIWID) in Development and the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO). (Ng and Yong, 1990: 9-10). Both sets of organisations have their respective roles to play. Day to day advocacy of women's issues in Malaysia involves few dilemmas for women's groups although they have to be constantly attuned to the plural social fabric of the Malaysian polity. To place this in the context of our earlier discussion, advocacy must by necessity deal with the ontic level of existing practices which discriminate women in rather obvious sorts of ways. The bulk of the concerns of Malaysian "feminists" pivot around those of improving women's lot in society, redressing gender inequality in work and other contexts, addressing violence against women and carrying out welfare projects. Fringe and more radical women's groups by and large have small followings and usually problems of sustainability. It would seem that expanding the terrain of advocacy seems less a matter of delving into esoteric areas confronting feminism today than in the multiplication of organisations that deal with the more commonplace problems faced by all strata of Malaysian society. Needless to say, vast areas of advocacy with respect to gender-directed violence and stark discriminatory practices and excesses in the media remained uncharted. As was suggested at the outset of the paper, Malaysian

society taken as a whole exhibits strongly sexist and deeply patriarchal features and much work needs to be done to produce even a modicum of real change for the better. While I have argued that as Malaysian feminists we should look beyond the male gaze, by which I meant transcending the fixation with pure ontological difference, we must nonetheless, direct our gaze on the ontic level of human practices, constituted in Malaysia's multivarious cultural contexts, and identify those areas where Malaysian women are simply and obviously in dire need of advocacy.

The larger concerns of feminism are ultimately coeval with the emancipation of the oppression of all others in civil society under the unrelenting gaze of the authoritarian state. The gaze of the state is ungendered, Lacan notwithstanding; it is one which aims at homogenizing and disciplining citizens in the service of some totalizing vision or other. Malaysian feminists in their struggle against a dominant male order are symbolically and ontically resisting the homogenizing power of the authoritarian state.

Notes

- ¹ See the discussion below of the ontic-ontological distinction, a concept taken from Heidegger.
- ² This is not the place to document this in any systematic way. To give a couple of examples, the most frequently used epithet to describe the state of sexual failure or frustration was "fras" and "screwing" or "jumping" women were the usual signifiers for the sexual act.
- ³ The two main works of Michel Foucault on the gaze are his *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1973) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977). Both are powerful works demonstrating the power of surveillance in the one case through the privilege of "knowledge" and the other through "authority."

- ⁴ This is something of the transposition of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, in which the slave can only find his liberation in relation to his work, never with respect to his master. (cf. Caws, 1984: 135).
- ⁵ I am using Heidegger's important distinction between the ontic and ontological levels wherein the ontic is used to refer to ontological questions pertaining to "things" as well as facts and facticity while larger and more fundamental questions of the meaning of being are more correctly referred to as "ontological" (cf. Smith, 1976: 16ff).
- ⁶ In sociologist Anthony Giddens' meaning, this refers to the increasing propinquity and compression of social orders in time and space, a feature of social existence that was absent in premodern societies.

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