

## **INTRODUCTION: MALAYSIAN CRITIQUE AND EXPERIENCE OF FEMINISM**

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All the essays in this compilation take the feminist influence for granted in Malaysian society. Yet, this would be impossible if not for the involvement of women scholars in multifarious activities to advance the cause of women. Many Malaysian women have participated simultaneously as social activists, policy consultants as well as academics in the stream of activities involving women's concerns. Along with these developments came many insinuations about and criticisms against the women's movement. It is undeniable that Malaysian women who became involved and organized in the women's cause especially during the last decade were largely educated in secular and western institutions. A liberal lifestyle, an open democratic system were some of the values which these groups of women advocated. They reacted to the criticisms of the fundamentalist and conservative forces by claiming that they were struggling for universal rights. In countering opposition forces, Malaysian women pointed out that the branding of women's aspirations as a western import, was not really a criticism against the West but in actual fact was an expression of the fear of women's growing power in society.

Given this backdrop, the use of the term feminism to describe women's involvement in society is generally avoided among the Malaysian public, including scholars. Nevertheless, women here have mobilized around the question of achieving women's rights and recognition. Prominent issues such as violence against women, and legal reforms to reflect women's demand for equal status, have been brought to the mainstream political and governmental agenda, and been successfully championed through the effort of various organizations. While recognising that the question of women's advancement is not to be sidelined, the identification of feminism as a

western import, still prevails in mainstream discourse. At best, it can be said that many quarters are unclear about what feminism entails, thus rendering the concept its contentious meaning. As a result it is a term which both fascinates and repels, its meaning still being contested and negotiated.

The intention of this collection of essays is not to debate the various and divergent beliefs regarding women's status, but to move on from a position which essentially accepts, albeit critically, many of the analytical premises of feminism. Underlying all the papers is the belief that the ideal society is one without the exploitation of women, and that women's positive capacity should not be curbed by social constructs. The purpose of putting together this volume then, is to explore within the realm of such a feminist belief, the range of issues, questions and contentions that can emanate from a discussion of what such a belief entails. All the papers (except the ones written by Mustafa K. Anuar, Shakila Manan and Tan Sooi Beng) were initially written for presentations at a seminar series titled, "Feminist Discourse from a Malaysian Perspective", held from January to May 1992, organized under the auspices of the Unit of Women and Human Resource Studies at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The original attempt was to seek, if possible, a novel and perhaps indigenous perspective to the understanding and practice of feminism. It was clear by the end of the series that such an endeavour was not possible as the paper writers had many different issues and subjects that they wanted to focus on. Some went along with established paradigms of feminist scholarship, inserting gender perspectives into their empirical and theoretical analyses. Others merely explored the female variable in various settings, such as in philosophy, semantics or postmodernist debates. The approaches used did not introduce new ground-breaking theories nor advanced a clear sense of how the indigenous may be used to construct such theories. At the end of the seminar series, there were more questions on feminism which were left unanswered than when the series first began. All is not lost, we hope, as the questions were enlightening rather than crippling ones. The diverse ways in which the subject feminism is approached is a revelation that the gender dimension pervades most areas of study, and that here in Malaysia we can begin to critique it, not for the sake of accepting or rejecting it *per*

se but for moving it on to other planes relevant to our Malaysian experience.

None of the essays in this volume criticizes the necessity of supporting feminist-oriented ideologies in society. However, they differ in their approaches to the problem in their analysis of causation and critique of the issues and social experiences cited. For example, the analysis of the causation of gender inequality in society differs in the following ways:

- 1) Sexual differences and domination came as a by-product of modernisation, thus to recover and resuscitate conditions for equality, knowledge of the pre-modern, informal and marginalised cultural ethos should be foregrounded. Papers by Wazir Jahan Karim and Otome Hutheesing represent these tendencies.
- 2) Ontic level difference which is biased against women and cannot be significantly altered without radical overhauls. The most that the present circumstance can expect is to institute "damage-control" which can mitigate extreme male oppression against women, or heterosexual power over homosexual norms. These were some of the underlying conclusions in Johan Saravanamuttu's and Ray Langenbach's papers.
- 3) Economic structures such as capitalism are predicated on the existence of inequality in society, whether on the basis of class, ethnicity or gender. Thus gender inequality is only one aspect of other inequalities present in society. Nevertheless, gender inequality in capitalist society is even more complex as it is also supported by patriarchal forces which can exist independent of capitalism. The discussion of Malaysian experiences and cases by Rohana Ariffin, Mustafa Anuar and Shakila Manan would support this hypothesis.

This collection also exhibits variations in the analysis of feminist experience at achieving liberation. Three dimensions are highlighted. The first is on women's emancipatory experience within an isolated social nexus, a condition which can be termed "niche liberation". In

this Malaysian experience, women found means to counter their conventional status through involvement in specialised careers, such as popular Malay theatre. The story unfolded in Tan Sooi Beng's paper aptly describes the journey through which some Malay women found an alternative means of self-expression. The second kind of liberating process distinguished are from both organized and disorganized forms of mass consciousness which have the eventual effect of igniting women's power. The paper by Maznah Mohamad discerns the necessity to analyse power in a poststructuralist way. Rohana Ariffin's paper, on the other hand, focuses only on organized pressure groups, making transformational processes highly dependent on such movements. Thirdly, a dimension which brings the feminist question full circle, foregrounding the realisation about the possible contradictions in feminism itself, especially the contentions on difference and exclusion is seen in Michael Chai's and Wazir Jahan Karim's essays which may profitably be read together. In Michael Chai's paper, this debate is discussed, and in Wazir Jahan Karim's paper, the impact of western epistemological hegemony upon indigenous world-views is critically scrutinized.

By and large Malaysian feminist practices and understanding are guided and influenced by liberal theoretical paradigms. However, forays into the field of theorization have remained undeveloped among Malaysian scholars. The questions explored in Cecilia Ng's and Syed Farid Alatas' papers are, how much has Malaysian scholarly writings and research inform actions at the ground level and how much have local conditions been used to construct indigenous theories? Do academic reflections and writings occur in a vacuum, separate from everyday realities? Are they constructions of the western experience and mind-set? Cecilia Ng describes the categories of western theoretical perspectives deconstructing the causation of gender inequality and the solutions against it. It also identifies an emerging new paradigm that would have to be taken into consideration, that is, the question of difference and diversity, in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Malaysia. There are four main typologies identified by the writer, namely, liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, and postmodern feminism. The paper describes the theoretical basis upon which the various feminist practices and politics

have evolved. Ng's main concern is that theory can never be separated from practice, since experience has re-questioned some of the assumptions behind these theories. Postmodern conditions and awareness, have for instance, queried whether the woman question is a universal concern, or that woman can in fact be a multiple subject defined by race, culture, class or nationality, among other affiliations.

Syed Farid Alatas reviews the theoretical traditions which have been applied to the study of gender in Malaysia, and questions whether any new theoretical insights have been developed out of the Malaysian data. The paper begins with a critical overview of feminist theories in existence, broadly categorised under three rubrics, viz. theories of gender difference, inequality and oppression. Within these broad typologies the writer also lists the various theoretical sub-variants, ranging from biosocial theories of difference to postmodern theories. He contends that most Malaysian works merely fit their data into existing theories without any concordant attempt to refine, enrich or remodify some of these theories. He aptly states that "the application of theory is more than just a recasting of data in new terminology". In accordance with this assessment, the paper also posits the possibility of indigenizing the social sciences, through exploring indigenous philosophies, epistemologies and histories. The possible emergence of a Malaysian or Third World feminist theory is seen as fulfilling two stances - separation from the Eurocentric as well as the male-centred social sciences.

Some papers maintain that there are similarities of causation and incidence of sexism, whether in the East or the West. Rohana Ariffin, Mustafa Anuar and Shakila Manan blame sexism on the capitalist system which prospers on the subordination of women. Rohana Ariffin's paper argues that capitalism wears a patriarchal face. Male-dominated trade unions are only interested in challenging capitalism, but overlook the patriarchal bias in the system which also exists alongside class bias. In her paper a case is made about the absence of feminist consciousness in Malaysian labour unions despite the increasing surge of women industrial workers in the country starting from the 1970s onwards. However, this particular thrust of industrialization is packaged with several labour restrictive conditions,

one of which is the prohibition against unionising activities. The automatic exclusion of the new labour force, namely women workers in unions, especially in labour organizations that were formed prior to this phase of the country's industrialisation, meant that these unions were not only underrepresented as far as female membership is concerned, but remained institutions where patriarchal norms are conserved. Despite the identification of new issues in the workplace, such as the double-day syndrome, sexual harassment of female workers, inadequate family care provisions provided by employers and women's restricted career mobility, the established unions studied by the writer were not able to articulate these new causes. Rohana makes a case for a feminist framework in the appraisal of industrial and labour relations practices and argues that a different approach from the West need not be adopted as work and gender problems faced by industrial workers are the same everywhere.

In Mustafa Anuar's and Shakila Manan's paper, it is argued that capitalist interests which also control the media, portray women, no matter how successful they are, to be lesser beings than men. Due to this women are constantly packaged in order to be desired by men. This ideology seduces women to the world of consumerism, the ultimate logic of capitalism. Thus capitalism, which is also patriarchal works at every stage to subordinate all women, but especially poor and marginalised women, who do not get represented in the media as they have no consumerist appeal. Yet they will also be the women who will aspire to fit into the role model of the "glamorous" women portrayed in these popular magazines. Not only does the media discriminate against poor women in not giving them a voice but binds them into a consumer culture which is often not in accordance to their economic means.

Other writers in this collection feel that the elements of equality, complementarity, balance and harmony can most easily be discovered among primary societies before the coming of modernisation and destructive development. While critical of the debilitating potential of modernity Wazir Jahan Karim does not however see any value in postmodernist thinking as it merely reflects the condition of the West and its need to fulfill its own developmental logic of expansion and

innovation. The latter is believed to be an imposition of constructs and de-constructs upon the rest of the non-western intellectual society. Wazir critiques postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist theories which employ biology, psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic unconscious to inform gender differences, primarily based on European experiences. Deconstruction theory creates heterogeneous and qualitative thinking and is the reflection of the western drive towards more complex and innovative consciousness, which is an exercise in self-criticism. Wazir Jahan Karim re-assesses western deconstruction theories by foregrounding her own analysis of gender relations among the Ma' betise, an indigenous community with whom she had lived. The "engendering" process happens during the critical phases of survival among the Ma'betise,. Her suggestion is for social scientists to build upon personal society first and compare it with others, to understand how much "we are still indigenous and heterogeneous in relation to world events and how much control we have over this".

Otome Hutheesing postulates that the construction of language by academicians to understand the social world which she calls "jargonisation" is a domineering exercise. Jargon is a wall constructed by scholars to divide themselves from the subjects they seek to study, thus reinforcing their own superior positions. Real change in people's lives cannot depend on cues culled from theories. Her paper specifically discusses "the predicament of language and the ways in which social reality is conceptualised and constructed by the sexes". The essay critiques the "jargonisation" of theory (the postmodern type) and makes a case for the contrasting of male speech with female thought expressions. Results from her own study of a Northern Thai tribal community suggest that one sex does not dominate the other as far as verbal power is concerned. This is different in modern societies which have evolved stately and formalised language patterns, turning male speech into jargon making it the imperative and central voice at the expense of any other alternative including the female paradigm. Hutheesing suggests that "feminists researchers in sociology should be committed to underline a different kind of knowledge than that proposed by Cartesian scientism..". She maintains that the current trend in postmodern

theorising towards a search for a feminine epistemology does not depart from the old version of male jargonising and "ism-ing". The more preferred endeavour would be, "...characterised by a knowledge gathering through action without 'isms', forgetting about jargon." The conclusion from this essay is that if there were to be a change in the academic *status quo*, research questions would then have to veer into the areas of subjectivity, which will better uncover the richness of gender communication and create a "culture of theory" which overcomes the distinction between day to day talk and elitist 'isms'."

At the level of experience one study shows that opposition and resistance against male domination exist even before the recognition of any formal consciousness about feminism. It would seem therefore that there was already existent among certain groups of women the impulse to create alternative lifestyles. The paper on Bangsawan women by Tan Sooi Beng, may be said to portray a kind of first-wave "feminism" in Malaysia. Bangsawan, a form of popular Malay theatre flourished in early twentieth century Malaya. The Malay women who were involved in the acting profession, were different from other women during their time, because they went against tradition and had a lifestyle that was unconventional. These women did not organize themselves, to win their emancipation but found a niche through the Bangsawan in which they could express their impulse or need to be free and liberated from the traditional expectations of how the trajectory of a woman's life should be.

Formalised resistance, concludes Maznah Mohamad, only began in quite recent times. It is argued that the involvement of women in organized movements was fashioned after the civil-rights movements of the West. This has remained the most vocal and effective form of resistance. Third World women's movements during the last twenty years were built by women's groups which were organized, systematic, collective and dependent on the building up of a mass consciousness, such as support for women's rights. The assessment of women's movements in the Third World is set against a discussion of the relevance of postmodernist thinking in understanding the question of power. The paper concludes that postmodernism/poststructuralism is a useful concept in the study of power, but maintains that in the

Third World, modernist stances are more politically correct as the women's movement is really part and parcel of the modernist human rights movement rather than specifically feminist. However, while the Malaysian women's movement has emerged more forcefully during the last twenty years, unrecognized forms of empowerment culture also exist, such as in instances of defiance through dressing, or in the acts of every-day negotiations between men and women. While the potency of such culture is easily weakened and dissipated it should not be discounted as having a role in the feminist revolution of the East.

Questioning these waves of feminist organising is Michael Chai. He argues that in order for feminist groups to become stronger they must define larger and larger commonalities among all women and suppress any tendency to recognize difference. The exclusionary and repressive tendencies of any movement is inevitable in the process of demarcating its distinctiveness. The "language of violence" is inadvertently used in order to define women as victims or complainants of abuse. That in itself forecloses the dissolution of the male-female divide or unequal gender representation. Pluralism and relativism make a case for localised struggles but on the other hand make for weak politics. The writer contends that the epistemological questioning taking place in academic circles regarding the representation of social theory and political agency is not just limited within the postmodern debate, but will, sooner or later confront Third World feminists in the course of their activism.

Johan Saravanamuttu's essay explores in discourse terms prospects for the expansion of new terrains of feminist practice in the Malaysian context. The female as an "other" in Sartrian terms is defined with respect to a male conception of its essence. This conception inevitably places the male gaze in a superior position which then enables it to fashion female consciousness in its own image. The reversal of this posture is ontologically conceivable but not in fact present at the everyday ontic level of practices. The male gaze is a dominant empirical and historical phenomenon. The Malaysian condition is no different. The essay suggests that the practice of Malaysian feminism should address the most starkly debilitating and oppressive forms of male dominance and gaze, such as sexual crimes against women. This

calls for a multi-varied and pluralistic practice, which can achieve some victories but not a total one. The author tends to agree with Sartre's position that there is "no exit" out of the male gaze. The "way out" is at best an imperfect one, which is to "civilize" and humanize the gaze. This may not overturn the situation but to address the everyday form of domination, e.g. abuses towards women is still important. Although such an approach does not resolve the whole problem of the male gaze it will still address the most repugnant aspects of the gaze.

Ray Langenbach's article is about sexual identity and practice, a topic not directly touched upon by any of the other articles. Langenbach feels that discourses on feminism must also speak of the "body-particular and its various sexual expressions, particularly homosexuality", if not, it is, "... in danger of being co-opted into the epistemic domain of heterosexual patriarchy". Ironically, as the only white, male, westerner, Langenbach is also the one to speak of the ultimate subalterns - those outside the confines of "patriarchal heterosexualism". He tears apart the polemics of patriarchy by delving into the question of sexuality while juxtaposing the discourse on AIDS upon it.

### Conclusion

These essays should serve as the basis for critically reassessing western feminist ideas, among Malaysian scholars who now have a stronger sense of self than that found in the first phases of the women's rights movement in the country. In time there will be a need for a clearer understanding of indigenous world-views and the pluralistic conception on women's rights. This critical re-evaluation of what used to be accepted as "universal" standards on women's rights is being spurred on by the many instances in which western feminists have either ignored or misunderstood the perspectives of non-western women. Third World feminist scholarship has for so long been informed and directed by western analysis and epistemic standards that the time has come for a more autonomous intellectual tradition to emerge among Third World scholars. Thus the need to review the

maxims, yardsticks and indicators which western or western-oriented feminist scholars and activists have used to interpret Third World women and in particular Malaysian women.<sup>1</sup> Some western feminists imply that other women are somehow lower down in the scale of development as is frequently seen in the evolutionary assumptions of their work. Others have stated that it is actually western imposition through colonialism, and imperialistic policies that have actually skewed if not setback the progressive evolution of Third World Women in society. Such debates have prompted many scholars, Malaysians included, to attempt to reassess the actual status of Third World and Malaysian women prior to contacts with alien institutions of the West.<sup>2</sup> Yet other works claim that uneven development brought about by capitalism has made existing gender divisions even more unequal. Third World women are caught in the paradox of blaming the West or modernisation and capitalism for planting the roots of inequality while at the same time looking towards the same forces for progress and liberation. Overall, it has been difficult to shake off the evolutionary paradigm in the deconstruction or construction of the gendered society. Disempowered women are expected to evolve towards an empowered and inevitably "masculine" standard of achievement, or that of the western ethos of individualism over community. Is it possible at all to revise this conception, and if so what good will it bring? Although the essays in this collection may not deal exhaustively with these issues, nonetheless their value may lie in the fact that they are pioneer attempts to articulate a critique of feminism in a Malaysian context.

The impending indigenization process need not be cut off from universal influence, even though the understanding of the gender experience ought to be more culturally specific. The impulse to unearth indigenous elements and paradigms is timely, although a number of issues remain to be discussed if this move is not to result in a more reactionary, and more enhanced patriarchal perspective. For instance what constitutes the "indigenous"? Should not "patriarchy" be re-examined so that it is not a monolithic concept? How is "patriarchy" culture-specific? What are its various manifestations in different cultures and historical periods? Does the "indigenous" mitigate the evolutionary discourse thus promising a better alternative

for women? Is there a danger of a return to parochialism to the detriment of a new and forward-looking universalism? Further questions which emanate from the essays in this volume are the following: What constitutes the feminist experience and consciousness? Can we explore different areas of causation that underlie the condition of gender inequality in Malaysia? How will feminist scholarship take off, and in what direction will it progress? How can new theoretical paradigms inform practice? Is feminism a globalised phenomenon? Is there a Malaysian or an Eastern version? Can we conceive of the female gaze as having an equally insidious side as the male gaze? Can the question of homo/hetero-sexuality move beyond the anatomical markers to explore the daily round of the psychological, social and cultural manifestations? These are issues that can be further explored so that the input of Malaysian feminist scholars will contribute significantly to the universal debate on the woman question. If the Malaysian women's movement and feminist scholarship do not want to be defined by patriarchy or the West in its search for a meaningful return to the indigenous, then it must brave the frontiers for new redefinitions of what traditions hold.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Would Malaysian women look at other Malaysian women in the same light as that done by Rosemary Firth (1966)? Other examples of studies done by western scholars are, Heather Strange (1981) and Maila Stivens (1985).
- <sup>2</sup> This view was proposed by Marie-Andree Couillard (1990) and critiqued by Khoo Khay Jin, (1990).

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