

اينستيتوت قشاجين اسيان



INSTITUTE OF
ASIAN STUDIES

Performative mimicry and postcolonial exoticism: A re-politicising of the female body in the work of Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan and Amir Falique

Mahfuzah Abd Wahab

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Working Paper No.54

Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Gadong 2020

Editorial Board, Working Paper Series

Professor Lian Kwen Fee, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Associate Professor Paul J. Carnegie, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Author

Mahfuzah Abd Wahab graduated with a BA in English Literature, Universiti Brunei Darussalam in 2019 and she is currently pursuing her MA by research on Cosmopolitanism Culture and Consumption in Asia.

Contact: 19M8181@ubd.edu.bn

The Views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute of Asian Studies or the Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

© Copyright is held by the author(s) of each working paper; no part of this publication may be republished, reprinted or reproduced in any form without permission of the paper's author(s).

Performative mimicry and postcolonial exoticism: A re-politicising of the female body in the work of Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan and Amir Falique

Mahfuzah Abd Wahab

Abstract:

While the myth of the exotic Oriental is a subject of rejection and subversion in conventional postcolonial studies, in contemporary studies of Southeast Asia, self-exoticism is evident at both the individual and national levels. It is deployed to achieve positional status in a globalised world. This paper investigates what Graham Huggan (2001) terms the postcolonial exotic, particularly in terms of a re-politicisation of the female body in contemporary literature concerning Southeast Asia. It also draws on Christopher B. Balme's theory of performative metonymy (where postcolonies mimic the expectations of the ex-colonisers) to foreground the workings of Huggan's postcolonial exotic in selected texts. The two primary texts selected for this purpose are Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's *Sarong Party Girls* (2016), which traces the practice of postcolonial exotic through the self-exoticising of the female body, and Amir Falique's *The Forlorn Adventure* (2014) in which the presentation of Brunei can be read as an extension of the politics of the female body. Additionally, a reading of the practice of postcolonial exoticism in David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* (1989) will assist in tracing the development of the postcolonial exotic from the 20th century to 21st century literature. The paper considers the applicability or otherwise of both Huggan's and Balme's theory in the contemporary literature-scape of Southeast Asia. It contends they have utility in understanding further the persistence of the myth of the exotic and the extent to which global consumer culture and commodification affects the politics of postcolonies.

Keywords: female body politics, feminine nation, gendered cultural commodification, performative metonymy, postcolonial exotic, *Sarong Party Girls*, *The Forlorn Adventure*, tourist gaze

List of IAS Working Papers

1. King, Victor T. Culture and Identity: Some Borneo Comparisons. Working Paper No. 1 Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2012.
2. Evers, Hans-Dieter and Solvay Gerke. Local Knowledge and the Digital Divide: Focus on Southeast Asia. Working Paper No. 2. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2012.
3. King, Victor T., Borneo and Beyond: Reflections on Borneo Studies, Anthropology and the Social Sciences. Working Paper No. 3. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
4. King, Victor T. UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective. Working Paper No. 4. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
5. Purwaningrum, Farah. Knowledge Transfer Within an Industrial Cluster in the Jakarta Metropolitan Area. Working Paper No. 5. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
6. Evers, Hans-Dieter, Ndah, Anthony Banyouko & Yahya, Liyana. Epistemic Landscape Atlas of Brunei Darussalam. Working Paper No. 6. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
7. Carnegie, Paul J. Is the Indonesian Transition a Model for the Arab Spring? Working Paper No. 7. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
8. Kwen Fee, Lian. Citizenship Regimes and the Politics of Difference in Southeast Asia. Working Paper No. 8. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
9. Purwaningrum, Farah, Ariff Lim, Syamimi, Evers, Hans-Dieter & Ndah, Anthony Banyouko, The Governance of Knowledge: Perspectives from Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia. Working Paper No. 9. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
10. Facal, Gabriel. Hyper-centralization of Political Power and Fragmentation of Local Authority Networks in Banten (Indonesia). Working Paper No.10. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
11. Hussainmiya, B.A. and Mail, Asbol Haji, “No Federation Please-We Are Bruneians”: Scuttling the Northern Borneo Closer Association Proposals. Working Paper No.11. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
12. Abdul Hakim, Mufidah. Pengangun as Ritual Specialist in Brunei Darussalam. Working Paper No.12. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
13. Bensaoud, Mariam. Between R2P and the ASEAN Way:The case of Myanmar’s Cylcone Nargis. Working Paper No.13. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
14. Abdul Razak, Nurul Umillah Binti, Anuar, Adira Rehafizzan Binti, Pg. Mohd Sahar, Dk. Siti Nurul Islam Binti & Matsuni, Nur Hidayah Binti. Domestic Maids in Brunei: A Case Study. Working Paper No.14. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
15. Ibrahim, Zawawi. From Island to Nation-state Formations and Developmentalism: Penan Story-telling as Narratives of ‘territorialising space’ and Reclaiming Stewardship. Working Paper No.15. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
16. Bui, Cuong The. Social Stratification in the Southeast Region of Viet Nam. Working Paper No. 16 Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
17. Sagoo, Kiran. Reconsidering Ethnicity: Classification and Boundary Formation. Working Paper No. 17. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.

18. Ibrahim, Zawawi. *Disciplining Rock Music and Identity Contestations: Hybridization, Islam and New Musical Genres in Contemporary Malaysian Popular Music*. Working Paper No.18. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
19. Shui, Kong Ho. *Digital Memoir of the South China Sea*. Working Paper No. 19. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
20. Ullah, AKM Ahsan, Yusof, Yusnani Mohamed, D’Aria, Maria. *How safe is Safe? ‘Safe migration’ in Southeast Asia*. Working Paper No. 20. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
21. Oishi, Mikio. *Co-existing Differences: Towards an East Asian Way Of Incompatibility Mangement*. Working Paper No. 21. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
22. Carnegie, Paul J. *Of Social Imaginary and Violence: Responding to Islamist Militancy in Indonesia*. Working Paper No. 22. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
23. Rosidi, Imron. *Being Active Consumers: Indonesian Muslim Youth Engaging With Korean Television Dramas*. Working Paper No. 23. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
24. King, Victor T. *Convergence and Divergence: Issues of State and Region in Tourism Development in Malaysian Borneo, Brunei Darussalam and Indonesian Kalimantan*. Working Paper No. 24. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
25. Dhont, Frank, Marles, Jane E. & Jukim, Maslin. *Memories of World War II: Oral History of Brunei Darussalam (Dec. 1941-June 1942)*. Working Paper No. 25. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
26. Chu, Ta-Wei. *Contestation between Riparian People and States: The Sesan River Hydropower Projects, Cambodia*. Working Paper No. 26. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
27. Nugroho, S. *Post-Authoritarian Discourses of “Indonesia” in Television Commercials*. Working Paper No. 27. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
28. Hamdi, Muhammad Faiz Zul, Abdullah, Norhidayah, and Narudin, Hazimatula Diyana. *Space, Place, and Identity: How Migration have Transformed Kampong Ayer*. Working Paper No. 28. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
29. Chin, Wei Lee. *Tourism, Communities, and Quality of Life Indicators in Bali*. Working Paper No. 29. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
30. Jetin, Bruno. *“One Belt-One Road Initiative” and ASEAN Connectivity: Synergy Issues and Potentialities*. Working Paper No. 30. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
31. Maier, Hendrik M.J. *Silent the Sea, Writing the Shores – Traveling over the South China Sea*. Working Paper No. 31. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
32. Hoon, Chang-Yau. *Between Hybridity and Identity: Chineseness as a Cultural Resource in Indonesia*. Working Paper No. 32. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
33. Forbes, Vivian Louis. *Re-framing the South China Sea: Geographical Reality and Historical Fact and Fiction*. Working Paper No. 33. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
34. Oishi, Mikio. *Absorbing External Shocks: ASEAN’s Approach to Regional Stability*. Working Paper No. 34. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.

35. King, Victor T. *Emerging Tourisms and Tourism Studies in Southeast Asia*. Working Paper No. 35. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
36. Hassan, Noor Hasharina. *Housing Matters: The Value of Housing*. Working Paper No. 36. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
37. Rahman, Md Mizanur. *Beyond Skilled Immigration: The Making of New Immigrant Enterprises in Canada*. Working Paper No. 37. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
38. Ibrahim, Faizul H. *Kitchen Anthropology: Understanding Food, Cooking and Eating in Bruneian Middle-Class Families*. Working Paper No. 38. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
39. Haji Mohamad, Siti Mazidah. *The Performance of Religiosity on Social Media: Three Future Research Directions*. Working Paper No. 39. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
40. King, Victor T. *Tourism and Leisure in Thailand: Erik Cohen and Beyond*. Working Paper No. 40. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
41. Munakata, Mizuki & Franco, F. M. *A comparative analysis of the Portrayal of Rainforests and People in Tourism Promotional Videos*. Working Paper No. 41. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
42. Sahrifulhafiz, Nur Shawatriqah Binti Hj Md. & Hoon, Chang-Yau. *The Cultural Identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei: Acculturation and Hybridity*. Working Paper No. 42. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
43. Knudsen, Magne. *Agrarian transition and smallholder success through local networks: A case study from Mindanao*. Working Paper No. 43. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
44. Huesca, Eliseo Jr. & Fiesta, Margie D. *Everyday Voices in Marginal Places: Political Anxiety, Resistance, and Mass Support under Duterte's Martial Law*. Working Paper No. 44. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
45. Abdul Samad, Nur E'zzati Rasyidah. *Malay Traditional Marriage Ceremonies in Brunei: Continuity and Change*. Working Paper No. 45. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2018.
46. Chattoraj, Diotima & Gerharz, Eva. *Difficult Return: Muslims' ambivalent attachment to Jaffna in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka*. Working Paper No. 46. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2019.
47. Samad, Nur E'zzati Rasyidah binti Haji Abdul. *Malay Traditional Marriage Ceremonies in Brunei: Continuity and Change*. Working Paper No. 47. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2019.
48. Jaidin, Izzati. *Ageing and Malay Muslim Women in Brunei*. Working Paper No. 48. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2019.
49. King, Victor T. *The Construction of Southeast Asia as an Academic Field of Study: Personages, Programmes and Problems*. Working Paper No. 49. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2019.
50. Haji Kifli, Hajah Siti Norfadzilah Binti. *Halal Certification in Brunei*. Working Paper No. 50. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2019.
51. Belezair, Cordelia. *Rethinking the Limits of Public Service Labour Casualization in Developing States*. Working Paper No. 51. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2019.

52. King, Victor T. 'Wild Borneo': Anthropologists at War in the Rainforest. Working Paper No. 52. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2020.
53. Kwen Fee, Lian. Retracing the Political Construction of Race and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia and Singapore: Career of a Concept. Working Paper No. 53. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2020.

Performative mimicry and postcolonial exoticism: A re-politicising of the female body in the work of Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan and Amir Falique

Mahfuzah Abd Wahab

INTRODUCTION

In their study of Anglophone literature in Southeast Asia, Patke and Holden (2010: 4) note that, “decolonization proved a complex and problematic undertaking, and [...] cultural decolonization remains an incomplete and ongoing project in many former colonies, despite decades of political autonomy”. The encounter “altered colonisers and the colonised in ways that proved long-lasting.” (Patke and Holden 2010: 4) This suggests that certain practices and tropes established in the colonial era remain difficult to erase especially a recurring Orientalism. The reiterative and complex ways in which it plays out in contemporary Southeast Asia is a focus of this paper.

To elaborate, the practice of postcolonial exoticism indicates how post-colonies have to constantly re-negotiate themselves, in particular the reconfiguration of the female body (*politic*). Traditional postcolonial studies tend to concentrate on how subjects reject, challenge, or subvert the idealised Oriental figure, the exotic and feminine, as part of the process of regaining back a sense of identity and power. Nonetheless, in past decades, scholars of postcolonial literatures have identified digressions from this practice. Instead of challenging the myth of the Oriental body and nation, certain postcolonies play into the myth in order to elicit socio-economic benefits and a more prominent recognition globally. In this sense, self-

exoticism is seen as an increasingly necessary practice to compete in the contemporary world (Liu 2016, & Puzar 2011).

Scholarship of the postcolonial exotic has so far been limited to non-southeast Asian literature and the commodification of culture. This scholarship tends to lack a gendered approach to the texts that scholars have dealt with in terms of both female character and female authorship. As such, this paper investigates postcolonial exoticism in relation to the commodification of the female body in contemporary Southeast Asian novels, namely *Sarong Party Girls (SPG)* (2016) by Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan and Amir Faliq's *The Forlorn Adventure (TFA)* (2014). These texts are selected from work published within the past ten years that is representative of how the postcolonial exotic works in postcolonial Southeast Asian literatures. This paper also draws on David Henry Hwang's *M.Butterfly* (1989) as a working contrast to highlight the changes and developments in the practice of self-exoticism since the 1980s. The paper underscores the ways in which postcolonies self-exotify aspects of themselves by adopting the fantasy of Orientalism under conditions of consumer capitalism.

Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001) marks a turn in the studies of postcolonial literature from analyses of attempts to de-exotify and de-commodify marginalised nations to focusing on the nuanced complicity of post-colonies in re-exotifying and re-commodifying Oriental values for globalised consumption. For Huggan (2001: vii), the postcolonial exotic is "the global commodification of cultural difference". It is a process by which "minority groups dramatise their 'subordinate' status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience." (Huggan 2001: xii) Huggan's work draws attention to the "complicity" of postcolonies in strategically reproducing and maintaining a sense of the myth of the Oriental exotic vis-à-vis the global market and metropolitan consumers.

Similarly Brouillette (2007) agrees that strategic exoticism is part of a culture that has become a product of politics. For Brouillette (2007: 28) “authentic ‘culture’” is “aligned” with “tourism and the state” because it is “economically and politically expedient”. A recognition of the “tourist” and the “tourist gaze” is crucial to understanding precisely how cultural commodification, as well as the myth of the exotic Oriental body, is produced and consumed. As in *TFA*, culture is (re)presented as a consumable commodity, made safe and ‘palatable’ for the metropolitan consumer. However, somewhat differently, Brouillette (2007: 17) is critical of Huggan’s take on the “metropolitan consumer”, or the global market reader, as it too is a “myth”. For Brouillette (2007: 7) “strategic exoticism [is not] something designed to teach a reader about her own exoticizing tendencies” but it is a strategy that “operate[s] through assumptions shared between the author and the reader, as both producer and consumer work to negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of, postcoloniality’s touristic guilt.”

Significantly, Dias Martins (2013: 145) details how previous scholars such as Huggan and Brouillette have been “negligent” in investigating “gender and sexual difference variables when discussing how marginality is valued and affected by local and global markets.” Although Martins focuses on the voice of the marginalised within the context of the coloniser’s literature (in Martin’s example, Lusophone literature), her stratification of the levels of the colonisers has utility in analysing the colonised marginalised groups, such as women. Martins’ critique and focus on marginalised voices, i.e. the female voice, provides a platform from which to illuminate the largely unacknowledged but lucrative economy of the female body in the postcolonial world.

While the work of Huggan and Brouillette outline the basic contours of the postcolonial exotic and the ways in which culture is re-politicised for economic benefit, it is Balme’s work on *Pacific performative mimicry* that maps in detail how postcolonies (re)produce culture as a consumable product for western consumption. Using the case study of Samoans and Tongans,

Balme identifies the process of self-Orientalism and self-exoticism as a specific type of “performative mimicry”. Instead of postcolonies “imitating the coloniser and developing forms of subversion by holding up a distorted image of the European [as Homi Bhabha’s theory on mimicry explains], the Samoans and Tongans [the ‘othered’] appear to be mimicking European projections of themselves.” (Balme 2007: 182) Balme builds on the work of Huggan by unravelling further the relationship between “mimetic capital and exotic commodities” as a system capitalised during the colonial era and subsequently re-capitalised and re-politicised for the ‘benefit’ of postcolonies (Balme 2007: 7).

The following sections of the paper highlight the ways in which the concept of postcolonial exotic has reconfigured in Southeast Asia and its literature-scape from the late 1980s onwards.. Firstly, it considers David Henry Hwang’s *M.Butterfly* and how it assists in gaining purchase on the practice of performative mimicry and strategic exoticism and by extension the implementation of both practices in relational contestations between East and West. In the second and third part, the paper examines the extent to which the positionality of the player (East) and consumer (West) has changed in *Sarong Party Girls* and *The Forlorn Adventure*. These sections illustrate how contemporary politics and market relations of both countries affect the practice of postcolonial exotic for both player and consumer. By reading the post-colonial exotic through both *SPG* and *TFA*, this paper contends that its subversive impetus is now of less importance than the potential gains such encounters can provide for the individual and the nation. The paper seeks to realign assumptions on the singularly subversive character of the post- colonial exotic towards a more nuanced understanding as simultaneously subversive and economically advantageous.

M.Butterfly

David Henry Hwang's 1989 award-winning theatrical production of *M.Butterfly* follows the life of Rene Gallimard, a Frenchman living in China who falls in love with Song Liling, an actress in the 1960s Peking Opera. He sees her as the personification of his fantasy of the Oriental woman: beautiful, demure, desiring to be conquered by him a white man, as exotic as she can be in his eyes. However, it turns out that what Song appears to be, the perfect Oriental woman, is merely a performance to lure Gallimard into revealing state secrets which she relays to China's Communist Party. Playing into Gallimard's fantasy allows her to exert influence on his thoughts and by extension America with disinformation. It is also revealed at the end of the play that Song Liling is actually a man. It is a play that reveals the inner workings of postcolonial exoticism in three stages: a performance of self-Orientalism, a political reason behind it, and finally, the consumption of the fantasy of the exotic Oriental body.

Liling's performance as 'the fantasy of the white man' is what Balme terms performative mimicry. A form of mimicry attributed to a set of actions, behaviour, and appearance based on what is expected of Oriental others. In this play, it becomes a tool that preys on the fantasy of the white men. By becoming the "feminine mystique", the weak, desired-to-be-dominated, exotic, and erotic Oriental female, she is able to convince Gallimard that she is harmless. By extending this feminine presentation of self onto the image of Indo-China, she convinces Gallimard (and through him the Americans) that this country in truth desires to be dominated by "whoever shows strength and power" (Hwang 1989: 45). Liling's clandestine ruse is effective precisely because she plays into a mythic fantasised image of the Oriental female as open to 'consumption' by the western male. It exemplifies what Huggan terms the postcolonial exotic; a practice of the commodification and consumption of the image of the exotic by a metropolitan consumer embedded in the context of power politics. The

consumption of “women and women’s sexuality” by Gallimard mirrors the consumption of Asian femininity as “spoils of power” (Cynthia Enloe, 1989 as cited in Christiansen, 2009)

In *M.Butterfly*, what starts as a performance of self-exoticism turns into a powerful tool of emasculation that eventually ends in Gallimard’s imprisonment. It ridicules French and American attempts at diplomacy and the forcing of Indochina to surrender (Hwang 1989: 69). This underlines the ambivalent threat of self-exoticism vis à vis the western world. However, despite Hwang’s positioning of *M.Butterfly* as a play that seeks to undo and destroy the myth of the exotic and a cautionary tale against misconceptions, the myth of the exotic is still prevalent today. Nevertheless, as this paper contends the objective of practicing self-exoticism as portrayed in contemporary Southeast Asian literature has realigned itself differently from the 1980s in a less destructive manner.

Whilst the practice of postcolonial exotic is no less strategic in *SPG* and *TFA* than *M.Butterfly* but the consumption of Oriental femininity is more heavily invested in the focus on self-Orientalism for economic gain both individually (*SPG*) and for the nation (*TFA*). This difference in attitude toward commodifying the exotic ‘Other’ is perhaps due to the situational temporality of the texts. Hwang’s 1980s text is still in the period of postcolonial literature that attempts to de-commodify and subvert the myth of the exotic, in order to free both West and East from the myth that traps both. *SPG* and *TFA*, however, are set in a more ‘liquid modernity’, where “everything and anything is consumable” (Poon, Holden, & Lim, 2009). It is not surprising that this extends not just to bodies but the fantasy of the body as commodity for sale and consumption. The following sections investigate the ways in which the female body in Southeast Asia has been re-politicised for consumption and in the service of economic development.

Sarong Party Girls

Cheryl Lu Lien Tan's *Sarong Party Girls* (2016) reflects the practice of postcolonial exotic in contemporary Singapore. This section draws on Puzar's dollification theory and Balme's performative mimicry to interrogate the ways in which the women in the novel self-Orientalise themselves for personal economic gain.

Sarong Party Girls (SPG) details the story of Jazzy and her close friends, Imo, Fann, and Sher as they strive to achieve their ultimate goal: marriage with an *ang moh* (white man), give birth to their Eurasian children or "Chanel Baby" and secure their "dowager status". Primarily the novel highlights how these SPGs try to achieve social mobility, entering an upper social strata where they have access to cosmopolitan lifestyles of branded goods and travel. In contrast, marrying a Singaporean guy is seen as a humdrum capitulation. Jazzy and her friends are part of Singapore's SPG culture. They dress sexily, are always "chio" looking, and promiscuous with their nightly bar-hopping activities. In short, they self-exoticise themselves in order to hook an *ang moh* guy and facilitate entry into the world of high level jobs (such as Jazzy's career in the publishing house).

Sarong Party Girls depicts the re-politicisation of the female Oriental body through commodification. The attitudes, behaviour, and appearance of SPGs is a self-exotification that employs ideals of the Oriental women. SPGs was originally used as a derogatory term for Singaporean women who were considered a "sexualised and troublesome stereotype". A "national and social 'Other', defined by her sexuality on a pejorative scale of otherness in Singapore, and who interrupts the normative marriage patterns" (Hudson, 2015: 16). The "normative" marriage in this instance being to another Singaporean, not the deliberate and sometimes, aggressive, pursuit of white men. However, Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan (2016) asserts in an interview that she sought to alter this definition and contemporise it. Her own articulation

of SPGs is as an attempt to “own it [the label] in a different way [...] trying to get away from [...] traditional patriarchal structure, and the traditional Singaporean husband who might want them to fit into that structure” (Tan 2016). In this sense, marrying an *ang moh* is way of preventing themselves from being subjected to the “traditional patriarchal structure” and the “traditional Singaporean husband”. There is method behind why they “dollify” and “ornamentalise” themselves.

For Puzar (2011: 85) “dollification” is the “gradual commodification and fetishizing of static femininity”. It can be read as a reflection of the “old Orientalist gaze” being “normalised” (Puzar 2011: 90). As Puzar (2011: 85) notes,

“The gradual commodification and fetishizing of static femininity, including adjacent elaborated embodiments and fashions, did not wait for mature industrial modernity and capitalism or for the spectacular capitalism of the post-industrial era, having been entrenched throughout the history of patriarchy in the West and in the East alike.”

Although ‘dollification’ and ‘performative mimicry’ share some similarities, the former does offer more specificity on how and why Oriental women adopt the typical “China doll” and “Madame Butterfly” image. They both operate simultaneously on “the plane of vulnerable innocence and the plane of seduction” (Puzar 2011:106). Yet, to be “dollified” is something more. It allows for social mobility and “has become the important fuel of affective and material exchange, including the exchange of commodities and the flow of capital” (Puzar 2011: 104-105). While patriarchy is the initiator of this practice, the ‘western gaze’ amplifies the commodification of these ‘dollified’ women and perpetuates an avenue of mobility and advancement not just at the local level but in the context of global market relations (Puzar 2011: 90).

In 2016, Helena Liu interviewed a number of Chinese-Australians on the practice of self-exoticism. Her findings echoed those of Puzar. They underscore the “rising tendency to self-Orientalize under western economic pressures to satisfy consumers’ fantasies” (Lui 2016: 785). It was a means by which participants “secure recognition” and “re-allay the anxieties of the white Australians” (Lui 2016: 783). In other words, “self-Orientalising” is used as a means of preservation. Similarly, Anne Anlin Cheng’s (2018: 415-418) *Ornamentalism* captures the idea of “Asiatic femininity” as a “style” that “can be enlisted by those wielding power and, more disturbingly, those deprived of it”. This mirrors Huggan’s strategic exoticism as the postcolonies “style” themselves to the figure of the Oriental exotic, to gain power over the post-empire. In the world of SPG, “Asiatic femininity” is expressed in the form of “chio” and “sexy”, girls with “almond-shaped eyes” and “glossy [...] black hair”. Accentuate the characteristics and the fantasy is given form.

The parallels between *SPG* and reality is a reflection on the postcolonial women’s condition and experience in an age of liquid modernity. SPGs look at their practice of self-exoticism as a ways and means of avoiding the grasp of their traditional patriarchal society. It opens potential doors into the lives of the *ang moh* where social mobility, luxury and security are possible and attainable. The act of self-exotification is a way to gain greater acceptance in the workplace and appear more attractive to *ang mohs*. For Jazzy, Sharon and Moon both can lead to financial freedom and an independent liberation from societal constraints.

As Simon Tay in *Alien Asian* (1997: 125) notes, it is “not so much as the authenticity of identity formation but a strategic and essentialised performance of it.” There is a shift from cultural identity to a world of performance where the performance of these identities is what is ‘essential’. This essentialism of expectation finds a correspondence with Liu’s (2016) work on Asian(ness). It suggest that the ideals of the exotic Oriental women are being reproduced as a performance in order to achieve social mobility and financial security.

In *Sarong Party Girls*, the SPGs groom themselves into the Oriental ideal in two ways: appearance and behaviour, both in contradistinction to white women. For Jazzy, this act of self-exoticism is a “strategy” and suggestive of some sort of mission. As such, to succeed they must be “calculative” and superficially conform to what these prospective husbands desire, i.e. the image of the Oriental female: submissive yet sensual. In *Sarong Party Girls*, this desirous image of the eastern woman is played into again and again. For instance, the girls are always “chio” or “sexy”, especially Jazzy. But it is not enough to look “chio”, it has to be a specific kind of “chio”. As Jazzy highlights on the way Imo dresses, “Imo’s dress is exactly the kind of chio that these Euro guys like” (para.77, Chapter 4). Appearances are being tailored to a specific target. Jazzy sums up the hyper-sexualisation of the female body for the western male gaze:

“The *ang moh* guys I’ve met are always talking about how glossy and black my long hair is and how soft and smooth my skin is—so I guess I at least have two things going for me. Of us all though, Sher was the best looking—skin very fair like a Japanese princess, eyes not as big as Imo’s but beautiful almond-shape type. And she really knows how to put on eyeliner so the sides of her eyes look pulled out a bit, like those exotic Asian girls in *ang moh* movies. Also, she was the tallest of us all. But she wasn’t the skinny giraffe type—her breasts were small but quite nice (at least got cleavage, unlike Fann or Imo), and with her small small waist and legs long long and so shapely, my god, when she wears a miniskirt she almost looks like a Barbie doll.” (Tan 2016: Chapter 4)

Here, Jazzy is underlining how physical appearance appears to be what attracts the *ang moh* guys the most, from the “glossy [...] black hair” and “fair skin” to the distinct ‘typical’ “almond-shaped” Asian eyes that look “pulled out a bit, like those exotic Asian girls in *ang moh* movies”. Roy (an *ang moh*) himself admits his attraction to Asian girls’ “skin, [...] eyes, [...] hair” (para. 41, Chapter 10). SPGs are playing up to the images of the “exotic Asian girls”,

the “Japanese princess” and “Barbie doll”. The use of the term “Barbie doll” is telling in that it suggests a western construction and describing Sher like one is to imply she has tailored herself to this construct: the exotic, and perfect, Oriental woman.

Combining Balme’s ideas on ‘performative mimicry’ and Huggan’s notion of ‘postcolonial exoticism’ makes the terms of the exchange of fantasy for socio-economic advantage more visible. It lends greater interpretive shape to the strategic exoticism evident in *Sarong Party Girls*, namely the exotified and commodified east (this time the female body), the global market (the gains of the “commodified culture”), and the metropolitan consumer (the *ang mohs*). There is, however, a re-politicisation going on here. Instead of the body being used exclusively to subjectify, objectify, and undermine women by men, particularly western men, now women themselves Orientalise or exotify their bodies. They play into the male desire, in order to get what they want: social access, social mobility and financial security through marriage. The act of performing the feminine ideal is rendered beneficial through the transactional quality of the encounter.

Significantly, the feminine ideal in SPG is not limited to just appearance but also pertains to behaviour. Submissive, mysterious, weak and demure are the other half of the feminine Oriental coin. In SPG, it forms part of the overall “strategy” of hooking an *ang moh*. As Charlie, another SPG, schools Jazzy and her friends, you have to be more “toot”, to “be in the shadows”, to be “discover[ed]” and “chased” by the expats. In other words, be mysterious. The word “discovered” is redolent of a familiar colonial trope. But by pretending to be “discovered” who is playing into whose hands? As per Huggan’s strategic exoticism, the commodification and consumption of exoticised products by metropolitan consumers is re-politicised for personal gain via the strategic performance of the ex-coloniser’s fantasies.

Having said this, the practice is not just limited to the politics of the individual and personal female body. As the next section highlights, self-exotifying values attributed as the ‘feminine exotic’ can extend to the self-Orientalising of a nation. In Amir Faliq’s *The Forlorn Adventure*, values considered feminine are inscribed and attached onto the body of the nation in the representation of Brunei.

The Forlorn Adventure

From the above discussion, it is apparent that the tactic of self-exoticism or self-Orientalism is closely associated with the feminine gender. Yet, there is limited work on how Brunei’s Anglophone literature deals with the relationship between the country and the western world. Can notions of self-exoticism and the female body and the tourist gaze extend to reading a nation? Moreover, to what extent is the ‘imagining’ of Brunei linked to its colonial encounter as a protectorate of the British Empire and the concomitant ‘gaze’? This section further considers these matters in relation to *The Forlorn Adventure* (TFA) by Amir Faliq

Amir Faliq’s novel is a science-fiction adventure in which the main character A’jon, Brunei’s first astronaut and a computer genius is sent to space. However, the mission fails after the spaceship is attacked and goes missing for 500 years. Upon its re-discovery, A’jon is still alive and he returns a much changed Brunei. It has become an eco-tourist attraction.

As noted in Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan’s work, the female body is re-politicised for the purpose of postcolonial exoticism. Similarly, if we apply Huggan’s theory in the reading of TFA there is a symbolic representation of the nation as feminine nation: a nation feminised. This embodiment is manifested through its commodification as a tourist attraction. The country, culture and national ideology become inseparable from the landscape and its touristic commodification.

Just as nature is considered feminine, nations closely associated with their natural environment, as is the case with Brunei Darussalam, become “geopolitical[ly] implied” as feminine. As Shohat (2009: 52) notes,

“The masculinist desire of mastering a new land is deeply linked to colonial history and even to its contemporary companion, philosophy, in which epistemology partially modelled itself on geography. The traditional discourse on nature as feminine—for example Francis Bacon's idea that insofar as we learn the laws of nature through science, we become her master, as we are now, in ignorance, "her thralls"—gains, within the colonial context, clear geopolitical implications.”

As such, the emphasis on nature, its mystery and exotic wildlife, when presenting Brunei in *TFA* is the conjuring of a feminine nation.

The first way that *TFA* plays on the theme of the postcolonial exotic is through its commentary on Brunei's Temburong nature resort. In the future of *TFA*, Brunei, despite being a “sprawling metropolis” is a “tourist attraction” prized for its “rainforest” and “endangered” “geckos”. As Said (1978) noted, the Orient is often depicted as a more “natural” place, invoking ideas of backwardness, mysteriousness, and the exotic. For Amin Sweeney (as cited in Gunn, 1997: xxiii), the fantasy of Borneo and the Orient's special place in western ideology where “fictionalized accounts of Borneo, too, added the Western impressions of nature and landscape.”

Ironically, A'jon as with other locals, “don't find [Temburong] interesting” (Faliqie 2014: 130). Nonetheless, there is a linking of colonialism, feminisation and an implicit exoticisation of natural landscapes. An interpellation that contributes to the reading of Brunei as a feminised body and by extension a product of the postcolonial exotic. The exchange

between consumption and national economic advantage in TFA renders Brunei as being passive and safe, absent of militarised institutions.

Reading Brunei as a feminised nation is due large part to a polarised ‘Otherness’ in contrast to western ‘masculine’ militarised countries. The country is underpinned by the ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB): an image given tripartite personification in the shape of Kampong Ayer (Malay), Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque (SOAS) (Islamic), and Istana Nurul Iman (Monarchy). In the future of TFA, these three components remain largely unchanged. When A’jon first returns his eyes are drawn to these buildings, almost as if he himself is a tourist. They have become the primary places to visit when visiting Brunei (Falique 2014: 5-27). In Huggan’s (2001) terms, culture then, in the form of these iconic places, becomes a ‘commodity’. Of course, a touristic impression of culture is not limited to these places. In TFA, Albert’s commentary as a repeat tourist to Brunei indicates his pride at participating in aspects of Brunei culture,

“I’ve been here so many times; I even spent Ramadhan here once. I can speak a little bit of Malay myself. Maybe one day, when I’m done with my duty, I’ll settle down and get myself a Bruneian wife.” (Falique 2014: 130)

Albert’s pride and desire encapsulate the ways in which culture is exotified and commodified for the consumption of the Western audience. It underscores Ahmad’s (as cited in Huggan, 2001: 10) assertion that it is a “fetishisation of cultural otherness that allows metropolitan readers to exercise fantasies of unrestricted movement and free will [...where the...] fetishizing process [...] turns the literatures/cultures of the ‘non-Western’ world into saleable exotic objects.”

The depiction and performance of “safe” forms of Bruneian-ness for economic gains in TFA plays into the image of the exotic and its implicit representation as a feminine nation. It

provides another example of the workings of self-exoticism in the context of postcolonial exoticism.

Conclusion

This paper mapped the operational contours of postcolonial exoticism in select contemporary Southeast Asian literature and the ways in which the feminine body has been re-politicised for economic gain at both the individual and national levels. By drawing together the conceptual considerations of Balme, Huggan and Puzar, the paper traced a more nuanced appreciation of the persistence of the myth of the exotic and the extent to which global consumer culture and commodification affects the politics of postcolonies. The unfolding of a complicit postcolonial exoticism in the work of Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan and Amir Faliq challenges a previous commonly held assumption that performative mimicry is deployed solely to reject or thwart dominating control by the West. In *Sarong Party Girls*, the practice of self-Orientalism is primarily and knowingly used for individual economical gain. Whereas *The Forlorn Adventure's* implicit presentation of Brunei as a 'feminine' nation through its natural landscape and 'safe' culture is a form of postcolonial exoticism enacted for national economic benefit.

References

- Balme, C. B. (2007). *Pacific Performances: Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bechler, R. (2011). *Discussing gender and international cultural relations: A collection of interviews with women working in international cultural relations, exploring perceptions of gender and diversity*. Retrieved on 8 April 2019 from <http://www.focusintl.com/GD166-%20Discussing%20gender%20and%20international%20cultural%20relations.pdf>
- Bhabha, H. (1984). Of mimicry and men, October, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984), pp. 125-133.
- Brouillette, Sarah. (2007). *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Marketplace*. UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cheng, A. A. (2018). Ornamentation: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman, *Critical Inquiry*, 44(3), 415-446.
- Christiansen, L. B. (2009). *Gendering the nation: Negotiations of gender, power and culture in Zimbabwe 2004-2008* (Ph.D. dissertation). Roskilde University, Denmark.
- Etzioni, A. (n. d.). Communitarianism. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/communitarianism>
- Falique, A. (2014). *The Forlorn Adventure*. Singapore: Trafford.
- Gunn, G. C. (1997). *Language, Power, & Ideology in Brunei Darussalam*. USA: Ohio University Press.
- Hudson, C. (2015). Dangerous sexuality in Singapore. In A. Koh & Y. Balasingamchow (Eds.). *Women and the politics of representation in Southeast Asia: Engendering discourse in Singapore and Malaysia* (pp. 16-32). Retrieved on 1 September 2019 from https://books.google.com.bn/books?id=zSDICQAAQBAJ&pg=PR5&lpg=PR5&dq=Chris+Hudson,+Dangerous+sexuality+in+Singapore&source=bl&ots=quID_VUP17&sig=xckBUoIXZzFfRRuJ_1mWcw9fRuc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj6yPm6-4DeAhXBZt4KHfi2AUUQ6AEwAnoEAcQAQ#v=onepage&q=Chris%20Hudson%20Dangerous%20sexuality%20in%20Singapore&f=false
- Huggan, G. (2001). *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the margins*. NY: Routledge.
- Hwang, D. H. (1989). *M. Butterfly*. NY: New American Library.
- Lau, J. (2016, November 14). Cheryl Tan on her novel *Sarong Party Girls*, Singlish and young women in Asia. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved on 1 September 2018 from <https://www.scmp.com/culture/books/article/2045728/cheryl-tan-her-novel-sarong-party-girls-singlish-and-young-women-asia>

- Liu, H. (2016). Beneath the white gaze: Strategic self-Orientalism among Chinese Australians, *Human Relations* 2017, 70(7), 781 –804.
- Martins, A. M. D. (2013). Gender and the “postcolonial exotic”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 48(1), 145 –158.
- Patke, R. S., & Holden, P. (2010). *The Routledge concise history of Southeast Asian writing in English*. NY: Routledge.
- Poon, A., Holden, P., & Lim, S. G. (2009). *Writing Singapore: An historical anthology of Singapore literature*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Puzar, Aljosa. (2011). Asian Dolls and the Westernized Gaze: Notes on the Female Dollification in South Korea, *Asian Women* 27(2), 81-111.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, USA: Pantheon.
- Wong, M. W. (2012). Negotiating class, taste, and culture via the arts scene in Singapore: Postcolonial or cosmopolitan global? *Asian Theatre Journal*, 29(1), 233-254.
- Shabanirad, E., & Marandi, S.M. (2015). Edward Said’s Orientalism and the representation of Oriental women in George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*, *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 60, 22-33.
- Shabanirad, E., & Marandi, S.M. (2015). Edward Said’s Orientalism and the representation of Oriental women in George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*, *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 60, 22-33.
- Shohat, E. (2009). Gender and culture of empire: Toward a feminist ethnography of the cinema, *Quarterly review of film and video*, 13(1-3), pp. 45-84.
- Tan, C. L. (2016). *Sarong Party Girls* [EPUB File]. NY: William Morrow.
- Tay, E. (2011). *Colony, nation, and globalisation: Not at home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Ueno, C. (1997). In the feminine guise: A trap of reverse Orientalism, *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal English Supplement*, 13, 3-25.