Preface

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, almost a century after Western colonial powers and their empires were being dismantled, the globe, it has been argued, has become flat (non-hierarchical, decentralised) and transnational (Friedman 2005). Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) paradigm of global cultural flows of people, media, technology, capital and ideologies has incontestably replaced the spatial divisions of West and East, North and South with their unequal binaries of superior, civilised, advanced West/inferior, barbaric, undeveloped East. The essays in this pioneering collection, *The Southeast Asian Woman Writes Back: Gender, Identity, and Nation in the literatures of Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines*, coming out of a post-postcolonial intellectual era, nonetheless underscore that transnational and global flows have not eliminated the ways in which state apparatuses, entrenched patriarchal social values, traditional belief and kinship systems, and globalised, often predatory, institutions of capital accumulation within and outside the nation-state continue to maintain firm national borders that manage the ongoing historical subordination of groups categorised through gender, racial and ethnic, language, religious and other identities deemed marginal and minoritarian. Such a study can only emerge out of Southeast Asia in the intersection of bounded national interests and global flows. As the editors, Grace V. S. Chin and Kathrina Mohd Daud, note in their introductory chapter, the catalyst to their valuable research originated while working in Universiti Brunei Darussalam, where “‘gender’ and ‘feminism’ were terms that so vexed the ingrained, male-oriented academic orthodoxies that they were not accepted as academic discourse until 2010 when, under new directives from the top, gender was finally formalised as part of the syllabi in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences” (8). That is, this very local moment illuminated that “gender is subject to local discourses and understandings of women and the feminine, inasmuch as it is affected by the globalising tropes of human rights and civil liberties”.

This collection enacts a double move: towards examination of global/transnational Anglophone writing and Southeast Asian non-Anglophone literary worlds, meshing together a discourse universe that is broad, sweeping and still chiefly unknown in contemporary world literature studies. This opening double
move takes on a challenge seldom undertaken in academic publishing, and the editors, scholars and publisher are to be congratulated on their endeavour. The decision to foreground research that examines Southeast Asian women’s Anglophone and indigenous and national language writings also opens the collection to studies of women’s representations of national imaginaries in media other than writing, for example, to such representation in the wayang, cinema and more.

The questions the editors posed to their contributors and thence to the readers of this volume are particularly pertinent in the twenty-first century. How “Southeast Asian women writers and artists explore and engage the images of womanhood, or symbols of the feminine, in the narration of nationhood” (3) is not merely a literary matter, although recuperating forgotten or neglected women’s writing is in itself a momentous goal. These imaginaries interrogate, subvert and create alternative narratives of the nation, offering their contemporaries and newer generations critical ways of negotiating individual subjects within prescribed communal and state concepts of social being. What is “female citizenship”, and how do/are these women’s texts published for small local markets reproduce and/or shaped by globalised concepts of gender?

The collection, as the editors boldly declare, also “address(es) the geopolitical implications of place and identity” (4), in the incorporation of concerns rising out of the increasingly urgent pressures of migration, diaspora, globalisation and transnationalism. The “literary nation”, as the editors coined the phrase, is like the quintessential nature of literariness, elusive, allusive, indeterminable and in the play of différence and signifiers, thereby deferring meaning. That is, the nation, as these women writers critique and reimagine the community in their works, is not merely a postcolonial but a postmodern construction, so radically political as to be anti-systemic, anti-authoritarian and post-patriarchal.

A lamentable lacuna in this collection is studies that examine LGBTQ representations and sensibilities. This very absence, however, proffers a testimony to the persistent power of state authority that still regulates in the phallocentric logos of the father, when LGBTQ voices can incur expulsion, exile and even mob- or state-mandated execution. This erasure is partly recompensed by the collection’s openness to research on women’s literary imaginations inscribed through multiple genres and media platforms: e.g. prose narrative and poetic forms and the eminent modernistic genre of the cinema.

The seven chapters cover five Southeast Asian countries, with the Philippines, Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia being partially culturally Anglophone (Malaysia after more than half a century of governmental national language policies requiring Bahasa Malaysia education instruction). The chapters offer original and rare scholarship on women’s writing hardly known outside of their original language audience. A major strength in the collection is the new work on Indonesia and Brunei and the inclusion of women’s writing in Malay and Indonesian. A second strength is the inclusion of such “local” literature (the local being inevitably a consequence of writing in a language offering little access outside of the specific language community) in a careful and stringent engagement with feminist work.
A third strength is the reach and surprising expansion of the theories that undergird the individual studies; the epistemology that unpacks the textual investigations is interdisciplinary, cognisant of Western theorists, sociologists and historians, yet also drawing on substantial readings and generously acknowledging work in the national languages by researchers and academics whose audience up to now has been restricted to their circumscribed readers.

Grace V. S. Chin and Kathrina Mohd Daud are to be lauded for their double roles as co-editors of this splendid collection and as scholars whose chapters on contemporary Indonesian and Bruneian women’s literature form a solid segment of the collection. The full value of this volume lies in its spectrum of studies that separately examine single nations’ women’s writing but together, in the convergence of multiple theoretical, interdisciplinary directions, ramps their power of inquiry and analyses to an nth degree. The thetic purpose underlying these converging studies is a testament to the editors’ discerning investigative eye, evidence of how successful scholarly production rises from patient, steady mentoring, to result in the volume’s syncretic unity.

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References

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