'Women' in 'Asia': an interrogation

Devleena Ghosh, University of Technology, Sydney

The articles in this special issue section of *PORTAL* had their first iteration as presentations in the Eighth Women in Asia Conference in 2005,[1] the theme of which was 'Shadow Lines'. The concept 'Women in Asia' is problematic since some of the major debates in gender or women's studies have focused on the diversity of women's life worlds and beings and the contested nature of the term 'Asia'. As a theme it has the potential to become a holdall phrase for scholarship, research and activist work 'from Suez to Suva'. However, reflecting on these difficult terms can be a creative and rewarding process. The attempt to locate Australia within the region, rather than within a putative 'west', and to deal with her geography rather than just her white history, can be an effective way of challenging many current 'white blindfold' discourses. At the same time, gendered analyses of society, politics and culture that attempt a re-insertion of 'herstories' into academic discourses have to be sophisticated enough to demonstrate the intrinsic gendering of all-embracing, supposedly 'neutral', ideas such as race, nationalism, ethics, and the state, rather than simply 'adding in' women. The marginalised spaces of women's activities have to be legitimated as crucial elements of all social relations, highlighting the intimate relationships and connections between men and women.

---

[1] The Eighth Women in Asia Conference, organised by the Women's Caucus of the Asian Studies Association of Australia and the University of Technology Sydney, was held at the University of Technology Sydney from 26 to the 28 September 2005. The conveners of the conference were Devleena Ghosh and Barbara Leigh.

The sub-theme of the conference, 'Shadow Lines', was an attempt to unsettle discourses about limits. That lines, borders and boundaries exist, whether of prejudice, politics, economics, or culture, is undeniable. But how do we analyse these issues without ossifying them, creating implacable alterities that refuse the liminal spaces that people occupy? What about the hidden and shadowed spaces of the interior, both of the home and the domestic sphere, as well as the inner courtyard, of the psyche? These shadowed spaces in Asia are normally desired ones—they imply coolness, rest, and tranquility. Such spaces can be restrictive but they can also contain powerful emotions, subversions, and ironies. The presenters at the conference dealt with many of these contradictions in different regional and disciplinary contexts.

The shadow of colonialism provides the background to most of the contributions in this special issue. Gender was a crucial lens through which colonial societies viewed their populations. Patriarchy worked in these societies in pragmatic and discursive forms, normalising certain cultural practices, social customs and ways of being as 'true' or 'natural'. Women were twice colonised in their simultaneous experience of patriarchy and colonialism (Peterson & Rutherford 1986), doubly relegated to the obscure margins by patriarchal and imperial discourses and narratives that celebrated male-oriented values, such as bonding between men and reticent heroism, outdoor activities like battles, exploration and missionary activities, and the strong silent men who went to 'take up the white man's burden' in barbaric, uncomfortable, steaming colonies.

Anne McClintock elaborates on these points by emphasising that a main thrust of the imperial project was the attempt to 'fashion the identity of a large class of people (hitherto disunited) with clear affiliations, distinct boundaries and separate values … around the presiding domestic values of monogamy, thrift, order, accumulation' (McClintock 1995, 167–8). She claims that women and colonised peoples were both infantilised and characterised as irrational and primordial; this meant that they occupied an ahistorical 'anachronistic space' (16). The confluence of the contradictions and paradoxes of class, gender and race affiliations, according to McClintock, created the 'racialization of domestic space' as well as 'the domestication of colonial space'. Tropes such as gender, race, patriarchy, maternity, femininity, and domesticity, as well as the privileging of a clean, efficient and well-run home, good public hygiene, motherhood, scientific childbearing methods, and the instillation of proper morals,

were re-inscribed and reconstructed in the service of colonialism and modernity, and nations were frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. Within this space, women were represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition; men, by contrast, represented the progressive agent of national modernity, embodying nationalism's progressive or revolutionary principle of discontinuity (McClintock 1997). Thus 'undiscovered' land was frequently seen as virgin, untouched, a woman waiting to be deflowered by white conquerors.

But where do women stand in the imaginary of the postcolonial nation? When anti-colonial movements in many parts of Asia began to challenge imperial rule, women were inscribed with other values. They were categorised as 'mothers of the nation', biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities, and central participants in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of its culture, for example as mothers or teachers (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989, 7). The dilemma of women and nationalism can be presented as: 'How could women be nationalists when they did not have equal rights? How could women not be nationalists when they loved their country, people and home?' (West 1997, xii). National liberation movements are also inadvertently the record of a triumphant nationalism that makes its gains at the expense of women. They make common cause with women's issues because nationalism requires a certain self-representational vocabulary—a definitional apparatus to imagine and describe itself (Heng 1997, 31). The identification of women as bearers of cultural identity and boundary markers inevitably has a negative effect on their emergence as fully-fledged citizens (Kandiyoti 1991, 429-43). Rowena Ward's paper, 'Japanese Government Policy and the Reality of the Lives of the *zanryu-fujin*', illustrates this conundrum by examining the Japanese Government's changing response to the return of the *zanryu-fujin,* (women aged 13 years and over at the time of the Russian invasion of Manchuria on 9 August 1945 who did not undergo repatriation to Japan at the end of the war). The Japanese Government assumed that the *zanryu-fujin* had chosen to remain in China and imposed differential policies on them regarding citizenship and rights. However, the narratives of the *zanryu-fujin* complicate the notions of national citizenship by highlighting the complex reality of their lives since many of them did not initially have a choice about whether to return to Japan.

In the metropoles, nationalism manifested itself differently. White women also bore the burden of empire, since their bodies and characters were inscribed with the superiority of European moral and civic virtues that distinguished them from women of other societies. They were neither patriarchal victims nor brave heroines; rather, their racial privileges in colonial society ran the gamut of complicity and resistance (Midgley 1998, 7). In E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the ambiguous attitude of the British expatriate community to Adela Quested after she makes her accusation of rape against Dr Aziz subtly reflects this paradox (2000). European women, as family members of imperial functionaries, were both complicit in the colonising mission as well as affected by the patriarchy of their own cultures. At the same time, Oriental men bore the double burden of being constructed as both incurably lascivious and rampantly sexual, as well as effeminate, effete, and languid.

Such sentiments meant that when colonial powers wished to consolidate their hegemony over their subjects, the terrain occupied by women was one that was most disputed. Many imperial powers concluded that the major priority of reform or renaissance of native societies was the reform of the status of women. Women represented the backward and barbaric traditions of native society, and the necessity for the renovation of tradition thus became increasingly based on debates about the rights and status of women, and the colonisation of minds as well as bodies (Nandy 1983). Such reforms were not imposed by law but by such means as education whereby European values could be subtly disseminated through colonised societies. In this context, Partha Chatterjee has argued that in anti-colonial nationalist struggles women were confined to the context of the family, even where the latter was being reconstructed. In India, for example, the discourse over nationalism situated 'the women's question' in an 'inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest and the colonial state' (Chatterjee 1993, 117). The condition of Indian women, defined by such cultural practices as widow burning, was extrapolated to mark the 'unworthiness' of all Indian tradition and culture, and to provide the justifications needed to exhort Indian civilisation to embrace the modernising aspects of colonialism. Thus, the women's question in the agenda of Indian social reform in the early 19th century was not so much about the specific condition of women within a specific set of social relations, as it was about the political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed 'tradition' of a conquered people (Chatterjee 1993, 119).

In the postcolonial era, nationalism is still constructed as a gendered dynamic in the arena of the family. An article published in a popular annual three years after India's independence in 1950, which concluded with the English proverb, 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world', claimed:

> Women are the creators of the nation. The community is created by human beings but each of these humans was once nurtured in the lap of a mother, hence who else can be the maker of the nation than women? This is certain that human resources are more valuable than wealth and the creator has left the development of this human wealth in the hands of women (N. Devi 1950, 157).

In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Spivak (1987) posed a challenging question for scholars of gender and colonialism. She asked if the double eliding of native women by colonisation and patriarchy precludes their voices from ever being heard. If human subjectivity is inscribed like a palimpsest; written and re-written by 'violently shuttling' discourses of power and knowledge and from shifting positions and locations, then it is impossible to retrieve subaltern agency from the colonial archives since one cannot assume that the colonised person has autonomy and that the archive presents a transparent record of her/his agency. The issue of gender further complicates this task, as the colonial archive usually contains the stories of men: 'As object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (1987, 287). However, Spivak does not imply that the engaged intellectual who wishes to highlight the oppression should therefore do nothing (Loomba 1998, 234). Rather, she advocates the adoption of the Gramscian maxim, 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will', or the combination of a philosophical scepticism about recovering any subaltern agency with a political commitment to making visible the position of the marginalised: 'The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish' (Spivak 1987, 308). Several of the papers in this special issue attempt to engage in the 'circumscribed task' cited by Spivak. In 'The Way to Entrepreneurship: Education and Work Experience for Female Entrepreneurs, Jiaocheng County, Shanxi Province', Minglu Chen examines

the education background and work history of a newly emerged group of women entrepreneurs in the People's Republic of China (PRC). She compares and analyses the situation of women enterprise owners, wives of male enterprise owners and those who take leadership positions in the enterprises as workshop leaders, share holders, managers and de facto managers and suggests that qualities other than higher education may be crucial in the trajectory of their careers. Elaine Jeffreys, on the other hand, examines some of the tensions surrounding the PRC's official policy of banning prostitution by focusing on two highly publicized cases of deceptive recruiting for sexual services in her essay, 'Over My Dead Body! Media Constructions of Forced Prostitution in the People's Republic of China'. The two cases involved young rural women who had migrated from their native homes to other more economically developed parts of China to look for work. Both were forced to sell sex and both resisted, one jumping from a building and the other stabbing her employer. In both these articles, if one listens closely, faint but insistent subaltern voices emerge from the silence.

Histories of European and colonial discourses have often elided key sites in the production of those discourses. For example, Ann Laura Stoler argues that Michel Foucault's analysis of key processes in modernity in Europe (as in his unfinished *History of Sexuality*), by short-circuiting empire, ignored the ways in which colonial experiences were imbricated in these processes. Instead, 'bourgeois identities in both metropole and colony emerge tacitly and emphatically coded by race' (Stoler 1995, 7) and 'a racialized regime of truth operated in cultural-anthropological, environmental-geographical, and sociological-political registers' (Howell 2004). Stoler describes how an implicit 'racial grammar … circulated through empire and back through Europe' (1995, 14 & 30). Colonial societies became obsessed with finding and controlling internal enemies who destabilised the colonial power structure, transgressing bourgeois norms such as sexual control, domesticity and racial purity. Thus Europeanness in the colonies was constructed as a delicate and beleaguered identity, needing self-discipline to resist degeneration or 'going native', in the face of the tide of 'native' biological and cultural contamination. McClintock notes, like Stoler, that the categories of class, gender and race overlapped and criss-crossed in imperial politics and that the family offered national narratives an indispensable metaphoric figure for sanctioning national hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interests (McClintock 1997, 91). Stoler

recasts the connections between race, imperialism and sexuality by showing how bourgeois sexuality in Europe was discursively and practically implicated in the colonial sexual order (Howell 2004) and 'control over sexuality and reproduction was at the core of defining colonial privilege and its boundaries' (Stoler 1995, 39).

According to Stoler, colonies functioned as 'laboratories of modernity' (1995, 15), whose experiments on discourses and policies of race, class, and sexual relations, were exported to the metropoles. For example, Dutch colonialism in South-East Asia produced significant and complex hybrid cultures through the influence of native and mixed-race mothers on their children and the intimate relationships between white Dutch children and their local, 'native' nursemaids and nannies. Not only did people shuttle between metropole and colony but so did ideas, practices, and policies, especially those that were mundane, domestic, and intimate. 'Modern' ideas about gender roles, domestic management, or middle and working-class 'respectability,' were tried out in the colonies before being exported to imperial centres. Modern discourses of sexuality and gender were created by interconnected engagements and dialogues between colonies and metropoles; thus, race/biology, as well as sex/biology/gender, were central elements in the fears and the desires of the colonial and metropolitan populations. These themes are addressed in 'Dancing in the "Contact Zone"' and 'Ibu Sawitri and the A/Occidental Oriental' where Monica Wulff, a Sydney-based contemporary dancer and performance artist, reflects on a multimedia installation, *Troppo Obscura*, in which she addressed her personal relationship with a traditional mask dancer, Ibu Sawitri from Cirebon on the West coast of Java, Indonesia. She explores some aspects of the complex relationships developed in the liminal spaces of contact zones, interrogating the colonial gaze and meditating on the human ties forged through artistic endeavour. Wulff examines the ways in which the dance context and the dance have been transformed over time in the 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992) as a result of rapidly changing socio-historical conditions, and discusses the nuances of cross-cultural encounters in the embodied practice and function of dance.

Postcolonial attempts at subaltern retrieval have been criticised by cultural critics other than Spivak. The influential critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) accuses European feminist discourses of constructing a monolithic, 'third world' female victim as its

object of research. She argues that these discourses assume that 'third world' women have the same interests and priorities as European women and that the struggle against patriarchal oppression is homogenous and global. Thus the vast material and historical variances and contingencies within 'third world' women are elided. Mohanty rejects such essentialist ideas of potential solidarities by advocating 'imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but systemic' (1991, 4). It is thus possible for such communities and solidarities to 'retain the idea of multiple fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while at the same time insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and their engagement in "daily life"' (1991, 13). Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-ha considers that the popularity of the 'third world woman' is due to the exoticising of the native woman into a fixed ineluctable alterity: 'It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone's private zoo' (1989, 82). Trinh concludes that the creation of the 'third world' woman emphasises the European feminists' solidarity, support and mediation of these oppressed women in the global struggle against patriarchy, solidifies the difference between first and third world women, and subverts the egalitarian discourses of western feminism. Both Mohanty and Trinh powerfully repudiate Marx's dictum: 'They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented' (Marx 1954, 106). Heike Hermanns takes up this question of representation by examining the reasons for the increase in female representation in South Korean politics in the early 21st century. In 'Women in South Korean Politics: A Long Road to Equality', she discusses the democratic procedures that influence female representation, to show that female representation in parliaments is not the only way to influence politics and policies on women's issues.

In the twenty-first century, globalisation and the flows of information, capital, and people, have produced a multi-faceted and complex set of studies on women and migration. Many contributions to this issue reflect on the multiple ways that women participate in different forms of negotiation between the blurred shadow lines of identity, notions of tradition and cultural change, love, sex and romance, the associations and intermeshings of family, community and the collective with the individual, and the ongoing mediations and meditation on silence and speaking. What are the historical dimensions to these kinds of negotiations and conversations? How

might we understand the transforming desires and wants of women in Asia, their preoccupations and lived realities? Nicole Constable, in her subtle and rich essay, 'Brides, Maids, and Prostitutes: Reflections on "Trafficked" Women', critically examines the blurred boundaries—or the analytical shadow lines—in scholarly and popular conceptualizations of Asian women migrants. She interrogates the commonalities and distinctions between women who migrate from the global South to the North as maids, brides, or sex workers and reflects on the importance of these factors. What are the implications of such blurs for women's self-perceptions and life experiences, for feminist scholarship, and for immigration policies? Drawing from ethnographic field research among Chinese and Filipina correspondence brides, Filipina domestic workers, and from the wider literature on sex workers, Constable considers some of the problems with a 'trafficking' framework, and discusses the analytical and ethnographic possibilities that emerge from a closer examination of the real and imagined shadow lines between sex workers, domestic workers, and migrant brides.

The sites of being for migrant women are the spaces, both public and private, of their new landscapes where they perform and practice forms of social, economic and political action. Nikos Papastergiadis has suggested that the place of belonging can no longer by purely geographic (a notion of place) or historical (a sense of connection) because it is 'cross-cut by a variety of global forces' (1998, 1). If identities are fluid, unfixed and changing, it is perhaps appropriate that women can function across various arenas, appropriating the accoutrements of difference as they need them. Christina Ho delineates the imaginative projections of home and its traces in the present in 'Women Crossing Borders: The Changing Identities of Professional Chinese Migrant Women in Australia'. Ho analyses migration programs in the western world that increasingly target skilled professionals, as governments view migration through the lens of economic efficiency. However, once skilled migrants arrive in their new homes, they confront many barriers to re-establishing their careers in a new labour market. Ho's paper uses qualitative and quantitative data to explore the consequences of this career disruption for professional women from Hong Kong, now settled in Australia, who often find themselves reorienting their identities and values away from the world of work towards non-market-based spheres of life, such as family, leisure and self-

development, thus challenging the Australian Government's economistic definitions of social citizenship.

This mediating between the past and present, the domestic and the wider social world, mirrors the preoccupations of contemporary society and the way in which people's material lives enter the imaginary and symbolic. This corporeality is at the generative core of meaning making, extending the materialist trajectory of what people do in domestic space into the more intimate waters of subjectivity, embodiment, and culture. The wider productive and social processes of labour and class intersect with the experiential modalities of sexuality and consumption within domestic spaces and women's desires. These intimate experiences of broad social and economic practices contain much of the most compelling and memorable moments of social life. Their affect generates much of the immediate meaning and connection with broader socialities, since women do not construct themselves in either/or categories, either in relation to a nativist longing for a homeland past, or in a global representational economy of the new capitalist culture of modernity. In this context, Schaffer and Song's paper, 'Writing Beyond the Wall: Translation, Cross-cultural Exchange, and Chen Ran's "A Private Life"', examines the translation of Chinese women's autobiographical writing into English. By locating Chen Ran's work in the global flow of ideas between China and modern western democracies, the authors explore issues of translingual practice, reflecting on what escapes or is lost in translation, as well as the additive potential of the host text. Can translation deliberately make certain ambiguities visible by negotiating meaning so that the text remains open-ended, with multiple possibilities for interpretation? Schaffer and Song claim that the translation process creates new spaces for dialogue among readers, writers and theorists, despite inhibiting factors like the imposition of local restraints, the universalising pressures of western modernity, and asymmetrical relations of power between guest and host language contexts.

The contributors to the Women in Asia conference were exemplary in not romanticizing women, diasporic, and/or local cultures. Rather, most attempted a kind of radical re-enchantment in celebrating the contingent character of the present, always seeking what is still undiscovered. To borrow from Amitabh Kumar, the possibilities of the papers at the conference had to do with their potential to resist national wills and

narrowly nationalist identities (2000, 229). Mohanty has cautioned that the very process of constructing a narrative for oneself imposes a coherence that is never entirely there. But, she adds, this perhaps is the lesson to be learnt. Home, community and identity all fall somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities, and friendships (Kumar 2000, v).

The spectre that consistently haunts these papers is the construction of woman as anomaly, as object of uneasy reflections about the nature of cultural boundaries. New cultural spaces are being created that are framed by counter-politics and interventions. The loss of boundaries in the processes of living also influences the reinterpretation of the past and the translation of the present, so that the nature of subjectivity is contingent and contested. It does not float aimlessly in a postmodern moment; rather it is grounded in a thousand plateaus, felt and experienced through the body, historical landscapes, domestic spaces, through performance as well as through the realm of the imaginary, in the impact of ideals and the weight of history.

Reference list

Chatterjee, P. 1993, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Devi, N. 1950, *Desh Saradiya Sankhya*, Anandabazar Patrika, Calcutta.

Forster, E.M. 2000 (1908), *A Passage to India*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Heng, G. 1997, '"A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State and the Varieties of Third-world Feminism', in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds M. J. Alexander & C. T. Mohanty, Routledge, New York, 30-46.

Howell, P. 2004, quoted in 'Anonymous review article on "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule"', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* vol. 10, no. 3 (September): 709-10.

Kandiyoti, D. 1991, 'Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 429-43.

Kumar, A. 2000, *Passport Photos*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, London, New York and Victoria.

Loomba, A. 1998, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Routledge, New York.

McClintock, A.1995, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Routledge, New York.

——— 1997, '"No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race and Nationalism', in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds A. McClintock, A. Mufti & E. Shohat, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 89-112.

Marx, K. 1954 (1852), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

Mohanty, C.T. 1984, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' in *boundary* vol. 213, no. 1: 333-57.

——— 1991, 'Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism', in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds C. Mohanty, A. Russo & L. Torres, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana. 1-47.

Nandy, A. 1983, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Midgley, A. 1998, *Gender and Imperialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Minh-ha, T.T. 1989, *Women, Native, Other*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Papastergiadis, N. 1998, *Dialogues in the Diasporas: Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity*, Rivers Oram Press, London and New York, 1998.

Peterson, K.H. & A. Rutherford (eds) 1986, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-colonial Women*, Dangaroo Press, Denmark and England.

Pratt, M.L. 1992, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London and New York.

Said, E. 1979, *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York.

Sangari, K.K & S. Vaid (eds) 1989, *Recasting Women: Essays on Colonial History*, Kali for Women, New Delhi.

Spivak, G. 1987, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds C. Nelson & L. Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 271-315

Stoler, A.L. 1995, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's* History of Sexuality *and the Colonial Order of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, and London.

Subrahmanyam, S. 1997, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

West, L.A. (ed.) 1997, *Feminist Nationalism*, Routledge, London and New York.

Yuval-Davis, N. & F. Anthias 1989, *Women–Nation–State*, Macmillan, London.