

FOREWORD

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the world has witnessed dramatic transformations in social, political, cultural and economic landscapes. The recent rise of populist nationalism and the new hardline stance against immigration on the world stage have generated a need for reconsideration of the notions of identity, ethnicity, nationalism, transnationalism, and of the distinction between dominant and marginal cultures. The present special issue, which arose out of an international conference on “Contemporary Perspectives on/in Postcolonial and Diasporic Literature and Theory,” held at the Universiti Sains Malaysia from 25 to 26 July 2018, seeks to find creative and interdisciplinary ways of understanding diasporic and postcolonial conditions. The five essays and one interview in the issue investigate postcolonial and diasporic writings and their engagement with epistemological, ideological, ethical and political questions. Rethinking notions of dislocation, nostalgia, fractured identity, multi-locale attachments, colonization, imperialism, allegiance and resistance, the present collection contributes to current debates about the complex flows, diversity, and national and international issues across the globe. The authors’ navigation through various narrative forms of novel, memoir, drama and travel writing from a cross-cultural and comparative perspective displays the originality of the arguments in correspondence with the emerging patterns of migration and nationalism on a global scale. Notwithstanding the methodological and theoretical heterogeneity of the articles, the empirical focus of the contributions shares certain spatial similarities: comparing South Asian and South-East Asian writings with Western and African works to find alternative ways of understanding diasporic and postcolonial experiences, and to move toward the study of world literatures in the context of theoretical, aesthetic and cultural practices.

Historically speaking, the phenomena of diaspora and postcolonialism have been examined from perspectives relating mostly to notions of individual and collective identity. In the past three decades, the term “diaspora” has developed from its limited “horizontal” usage in explaining human dispersion to include more conceptual, theoretical and “vertical” phenomena. The understanding of diasporic experiences is now very much informed and influenced by postcolonial literary and cultural studies and by their particular

emphasis on the necessarily “hybrid” nature of decolonized nations in the new world order. The dividing lines between mainstream/diaspora and colonizer/colonized have become increasingly blurred—mainly because the “location of culture,” to use Bhabha’s terminology, is considered as an essentially dialogic, “interstitial” space. As an Azerbaijani-Iranian diaspora, I have experienced this intersubjective notion of culture and nationhood while living in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Penang since 2015. As a former British colony, Penang is highly diverse in ethnicity, culture, language and religion—now home to a heterogeneous population of the diasporic Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, Siamese and many other expatriate communities. The city’s colonial history, its present hybrid culture, and the inhabitants’ collective experiences of community interest exemplify the intimate link between diasporic and postcolonial conditions.

Within the diasporic and postcolonial context of Penang, this special issue aims to find new ways to push postcolonial and diaspora studies into new domains and to revisit some “classic” issues to interrogate them. The five essays in the present collection focus on diasporic and post-/colonial experiences of South and South-East Asian nations, examining literary works by authors including Tan Twan Eng, Beth Yahp, Alice Pung, M. G. Vassanji, Janaki Majumdar, Krishnabhagini and Shamsul Haq, in dialogue with trans-continental writers such as Emily Eden, Ann Wilson, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor.

The first two essays explore contemporary Malaysian, Bangladeshi and Kenyan postcolonial literature to investigate the fictional portrayal of indigenous people’s roles in the colonial past and the postcolonial present of their countries. In a comparative study, Annie Gagiano examines the parallel representations of local collaborators’ betrayal of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements in the Malaysian novelist Tan Twan Eng’s *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and the Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s *Dust* (2013). The article’s particular focus on the connection between politics and morality in previously colonized nations sheds light on the intertwinement and intersubjectivity of the colonized and the colonizer’s cultures. Gagiano demonstrates how contemporary postcolonial writings have increasingly become conscious of “a world beyond national borders” as they explore cross-cultural, inter- and intra-national, “humanly relational as much as the political roles of the colonial or imperial foreigners.” The second essay by Sabiha Huq

emphasizes the local subjects' pivotal role in the nationalist and anti-colonial initiatives in colonial Bangladesh. In this article, Huq explores the Bengali playwright Shamsul Haq's *Nuruldiner Sarajiban* (1992), arguing that the play's glorification of the "subaltern energy" in the Mughalhaat peasant uprising of 1783 in Rangpur, which led to anti-colonial nationalism across the country, serves as "an emissary of freedom and solidarity" in postcolonial Bangladesh against new forms of colonialization and imperialism.

Displacement, multi-locale attachments, fractured identity and longing for the homeland are the main themes of the other three essays, which investigate specifically how diasporic subjectivities are formed and transformed in transnational and translocal contexts. The article by Zerin Alam is an attempt to trace the roots of contemporary diasporic discourse in the colonial past, when the colonizer and the colonized experienced similar, but not equal, displacement, transculturation, psychic trauma and identity fracturing. Through a comparative study of Indian and British women travel writings—Krishnabhabhini Das's *Englande-ek-Bangamahila* (1885), Janaki Majumdar's *A Family History* (1935), Emily Eden's *Up the Country* (1866), and Ann Wilson's *Letter from India* (1911)—Zerin identifies three main effects of diaspora that recur in all the narratives: "hybridization, maternal loss, trauma and nostalgia for the homeland." After problematizing the traditional gender relations in diasporic studies, the author concludes that notwithstanding heterogeneous responses of a common gender to physical and cultural crossovers, both groups of women "articulate a diasporic consciousness" through travel narratives "to find moorings in geographical and cultural dislocations."

Another notion of cross-cultural transformation emerges in Shizen Ozawa's essay, which reads M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land* (1991) in the light of diasporic double dislocation—that of Tanzanians of Indian origin emigrating to Canada. Ozawa examines the diasporic characters' sense of cultural belonging, first in Tanzania and then in Canada, to show that the migrants' sense of dislocation in both countries "is a by-product of their hybridised identity." Ozawa argues that culture is an "interstitial" space where community interest appropriates the diasporic subject's "thinking and behavior." Finally, by contextualizing the equivocal ending of the novel and relating it to the real-life ambivalence of the novelist as a postcolonial writer—i.e., "a preserver of the collective tradition"—the article underscores Vassanji's awareness of "exploring possibilities in cross-cultural transformation."

The diasporic subject's struggle with a sense of belonging and with cultural transformation are also explored in Siti Nuraishah Ahmad's article on Asian Australian women memoirists Beth Yahp's *Eat First, Talk Later* (2015) and Alice Pung's *Unpolished Gem* (2006). Both works demonstrate the importance of food on a broader social-cultural level—as a means of negotiating personal and cultural identities of the diasporic subjects and maintaining ties with the homeland. As Nuraishah elaborates, the difference in the deployment of food as “symbols, metaphors, or idioms of ‘home,’ origins, identity and authenticity or inauthenticity” in the two memoirs underlines the complexity and heterogeneity of Asian (Malaysian-/Chinese-Cambodian-) Australians' diasporic experiences in their new land. Whereas Yahp uses food to forge transnational identities by “interrogating and reconstituting” notions of home, Pung deploys it to express the second-generation Asian Australian immigrants' latent anxieties in “searching for a sense of belonging in Australia.”

The special issue concludes with Li-hsin Hsu's interview with Bill Ashcroft on the relationship between colonialism and Enlightenment and the significance of hope and utopia in postcolonial thought. According to Ashcroft, since the colonized intellectuals' engagement with colonial power continues even after independence, “postcolonial writers need a different view of hope, because the former utopian goals of the independent nations have failed.” Within the context of Asian and African nations, Ashcroft problematizes cosmopolitanism, arguing that it does not really “apply to the kind of multiplicity going on in their postcolonial world.” The term “transnation,” he continues, is more relevant as it expands the realm of citizenship and “acknowledges that everyone is in a relation with a nation of some kind or other, whether they're a citizen of it or fleeing from it.”

With these diverse perspectives on diasporic and postcolonial experiences, this special issue deepens the critical understanding of the conditions of both phenomena. In each of the articles, we find the intricacies of identity recreation and renegotiation brought about by social, cultural and textual affiliations: local betrayers to nationalist movements; the anti-colonial heroic figures; fractured identities of women travelers; twice-dislocated subjects, and ambivalent diasporic characters. Each of the articles negotiates subtleties of nationalism, transnationalism, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism to disclose the nature of diasporic and postcolonial experiences as processes, rather than as fixed and stable objects. In doing so, this special issue contributes to the current debate

about the emerging patterns of nationalist discourses and trans-/inter-national migration.

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