

FOREWORD

The study of diasporic subjects and the literary representations of their lived experiences across the globe is interwoven with explorations of the politics of identity. Diasporic identity has mainly been theorized in terms of difference, rupture and discontinuity. Scholars of migration and diaspora studies traditionally used the term to refer to individuals who have been dispersed or displaced, often traumatically and permanently. Over the past few decades, the emergence of new phenomena such as globalization, transnationalism, and the creation of international communities has widened the scope of the conceptualization of cultural identity within diaspora and postcolonial studies.

In Asia, migration has always been an integral part of history, but over the past two decades it has reached an unprecedented scale and diversity, exerting enormous impact on the social, cultural and demographic landscapes of all Asian nations. Since the millennial turn, the peoples of this region have experienced greater mobility and displacement within and outside their territorial homelands. While some of these human transitions have resulted from voluntary choices made within emerging global networks of trade and communication, others are often tragically propelled by such factors as the social crises and political upheavals in West Asia and the Middle East; the conflicts in Myanmar, Kashmir, and Syria; the rising spectre of (semi-)authoritarian regimes throughout the continent; and competing interests and militancy for natural and human resources. These new patterns in migratory trajectories and the ensuing demographic/contextual changes reaffirm a pressing need for a critical reappraisal of the ways in which we understand the epistemological, ontological, practical and political implications and significance of the two umbrella terms “diaspora” and “identity.” Within the Asian context, the present-day dynamic shifts in the forms of migration within and outside the continent behave us to urgently problematize, interrogate and reevaluate the ways in which “diaspora” and “diasporic identity” have been conceived and represented in relation to Asian people and nations. An initial activity to promote the explorations of “old” and “new” formations of diasporic identity in Asia was organized by the School of Humanities,

Universiti Sains Malaysia. The School convened an international conference on “Asian Diasporic Literature: Past, Present, and Future” in Penang, Malaysia in July 2020. This conference, in which Emeritus Professor Bill Ashcroft delivered a keynote speech, brought together more than sixty scholars and students from seventeen countries who shared a similar interest in exploring politics of identity from multiple perspectives. The outcome of this conference materialized in this special issue.

Building on the existing body of knowledge, this special issue aims to shed light on some facets of the rich and complex relationships between diasporic conditions and identity making. Drawing upon theoretical articulations of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Bill Ashcroft, Paul Gilroy, Gloria Anzaldúa, Michel Foucault and others, the articles in this special issue navigate beyond the confines of the nation state to investigate current developments in diasporic literature and theory in Asian context. While the first five essays in the present collection focus on diasporic experiences of Asian people and nations, examining literary works by authors including K. H. Lim, Gina Apostol, Charlson Ong, as well as life writings by Samar Yazbek, Yashica Dutt and Thenmozhi Soundararajan, the sixth article explores the Western European reception of the East from the eighteenth to twenty-first century. With a particular focus on diasporic identity, the papers not only interrogate the essentialist conception of identity but also problematize the connection between identity and authenticity by examining the ways that identity is continually transformed through historical and existential processes.

The first two essays explore the identity construction of Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia to investigate how their individual and collective identities are shaped and reshaped. In the opening article, Hannah Ming Yit Ho considers the key issue of integration in the process of diasporic identity formation. She draws upon the model minority myth—a phrase that is widely used to describe the Chinese diaspora in the United States—to investigate how “Chinese values of familial cohesion, self-discipline, academic excellence, and economic success” similarly reverberate in Chinese diasporic communities in Brunei. She takes Kuah-Pearce’s conceptual framework of the transnational self as her analytical point to investigate the intricate ways in which the contestations as well as the negotiations between the three social circles of the individual, familial and transnational selves shape the Bruneian Chinese’s sense of self as represented in K. H. Lim’s *Written in Black* (2014). Through a particular focus

on the social units of family, nation and the global world, Ho demonstrates how Bruneian Chinese transcend their localized diasporic identity by navigating, rather than resisting, the differences between “ethno-cultural Chinese heritage and Brunei’s dominant Malay identity.”

The second essay by Chi Mia traces the construction of diasporic Chinese identity in the Philippines as illustrated in Charlson Ong’s award-winning novel *An Embarrassment of Riches* (2000). Using Stuart Hall’s theory on cultural identity and Aihwa Ong’s notion of flexible citizenship, Mia argues that the novel interrogates and redefines “mainstream notions of identity, citizenship and national belonging,” which propagate pigeonholed images of Chinese-Filipinos as stable and unchanging. The article sheds light on the distinctiveness of the three major characters in preserving their ethnic heritage and negotiating cultural prescriptions of the hostland at the same time. Such a flexible identity, however, is not without negative ramifications. In a world affected by contrasting phenomena of transnationality and populism, as Mia concludes, the distinctive diasporic Chinese experience of flexible citizenship in the Philippines offers them both “opportunities and threats in the evolving interplay of regimes of truth and power.”

Another aspect of diasporic identity is explored in Marikit Tara Alto Uychoco’s essay, which examines the configurations of the Filipina identity in relation to the notions of hybridity and solidarity in Philippine-American literature. In this article, Uychoco provides a compelling illustration of the power of narrative strategies of historiographic metafiction and counter-memory in negotiating Filipina identities in the United States as depicted in Gina Apostol’s novels. Through contextualization and discussion of the selected novels, Uychoco argues that Apostol’s narrative strategies challenge and reject traditional “articulations about national myths and identities,” and provide instead alternative modes of “thinking, being, and remembering.” In doing so, as Uychoco asserts, the novels depict “solidarity with Filipinos in the homeland and in the diaspora” at the same time. What makes Uychoco’s article distinctive is its definite emphasis on the importance of counter-narratives in transforming identities and generating “hope for greater solidarity” among individuals in the homeland and in the diaspora—a critical point that is similarly investigated in relation to Indian Dalit diaspora in the next article.

In “Dalit Diaspora: Perspectives on Caste, Identity and Migration,” Pratibha explores the expression and the vitality of transnational solidarity by Dalit diaspora to mobilize anti-caste resistance and forge new narratives of Indian identity. The article begins by problematizing the dominant depiction and perception of Indian diaspora as a “monolithic whole” that has brought about a systematic erasure of Dalit diaspora from academic and critical discourses. Then, it goes on to examine the creative and literary ways that Dalits have recently used not only to “contest caste discrimination, [to] expose casteism and [to] dislodge pejorative cultural values ascribed to them” but also to formulate new identity constructs on a global level. Through a particular focus on life writings by Yashica Dutt and Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Pratibha argues that Dalit writers have utilized the genre as a dissident and emancipatory space to “counter the hegemonic brahmanical discourse” and to desubjugate themselves in the process. The potential of life writing as a revealing and liberating platform for the marginalized diasporic subject is the analytical point that links Pratibha’s article to the following contribution in which a Syrian refugee’s memoir similarly incorporates suffering into a meaningful life story.

Construction of new identities in the aftermath of forced relocations within and outside the borders of the country is the main topic of the fourth essay, which takes the discussion on diasporic identity to West Asia, and the region of civil war-stricken Syria. In this article, Rahma Mohammad Abedalqader et al. explore both physical and psychological displacements of Syrian citizens as recounted in Samar Yazbek’s war memoir, *The Crossing* (2015). This article argues that Yazbek’s testimonial account demonstrates the formation of new Syrian diasporic identities that ontologically differ from the traditional understanding of diasporic subject in that they are completely “stripped of their past and culture.” In part, the formation of new identities is argued to be influenced by internal factors that have brought about a certain kind of corporeal and psychological annihilation. The authors conclude with appreciating Yazbek’s counter-hegemonic narrative in exposing the appalling atrocities enacted by the Syrian regime against its own citizens.

The special issue concludes with Mariusz Pisarski and Bogumiła Suwara’s research on Western Europe’s apprehension and representation of the East since the eighteenth century. Specifically, the essay is concerned with the ways in which the motif of avatar—that is an incarnated identity—has been artistically, politically and philosophically utilized from the earlier days of its

“reception in Romantic orientalism to its contemporary usage in posthumanist orientalism” (139). Through a comparative study of a few literary texts produced in Europe, the writers argue that the appropriation and reconfiguration of the Hindu motif of avatar in Western European societies begins with “poetic inspiration and ends with biological embodiment” (159). This means that the discursive dynamics of avatarism fosters a direct link between heterogeneous cultural practices and identities—a pattern that discloses the connection between neo-orientalist, postcolonial and post-humanist thought and studies. Pisarski and Suwara’s article thus underscores the use of the Hindu motif of avatar not only as a literary device for constructing “an oriental alter-ego” but also as an embodiment in relation to “messianic ideals” of emancipation and the “spiritual enhancement of humankind” (159).

Each of the articles in this special issue in a different way expands our understanding of Asian diasporic literature. Together, they offer us a panoramic view of traditional practices, contemporary thought and future directions. Whether examining “transnational shifting” of the individual and familial self as experienced by Chinese diaspora in Brunei, or the “flexible citizenship” of the Chinese immigrants in the Philippines, or the “hybridity and solidarity” of the Filipinas in the United States, or the formation of new collective selfhood by Indian Dalit diaspora, or the “local” and “transnational” subjectivities of the Syrian refugees within and outside their country, or the historical legacies of “avatarism” in relation to the Orient, these special issue contributions share a common view of diasporic identity as fluid, changing, and in flux—as being constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Such a focus on the humanizing and anti-essentialist nuances of diasporic identity have become most relevant in this era of mutating viral pandemic, which has closed geographical borders and imposed mobility restrictions across the globe. It is hoped that this special issue on diasporic identity unfolds an ethical map for ourselves and future generations and contributes toward expanding and enhancing efforts to foster solidarity, hybridity, flexibility, and transnationalism.

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