



Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development

**THE PORTRAYAL OF MAIN FEMALE CHARACTERS FROM ACROSS
COUNTRY USING THE POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM APPROACH: A
STUDY ON FOUR NOVELS FROM INDIA, MALAYSIA, NIGERIA, AND
SINGAPORE**

Marie Albina Ho Pei Pei

**Kota Samarahan
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ABSTRACT

The Portrayal of Main Female Characters from Across Country Using the Postcolonial Feminism Approach: A Study on Four Novels from India, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Singapore.

Marie Albina Ho Pei Pei

This study aims to find out the portrayal of main female characters in novels by female authors from postcolonial countries, in which the foci are on the placement of women in her culture and society, the strength to rise as a woman, and the influence of double colonization upon these women. The texts used are; (i) *Joss and Gold* by Shirley Lim, (ii) *Following the Wrong God Home* by Catherine Lim, (iii) *Arranged Marriages* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and (iv) *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta. Data collection is done through textual analysis using the postcolonial feminism theoretical framework. The results of this study shows distinctive cultural bondage exists and determines the placement of women in her society. Besides that, the emergence of female figures is prominent due to circumstances these women encountered. However, double colonization occurs and is inevitable amongst postcolonial women. The findings of this study bridge the existing knowledge gap noted from related previous studies.

ABSTRAK

Penggambaran Watak Wanita Utama Merentasi Negara Menggunakan Pendekatan Poskolonialisasi Feminisma: Suatu Kajian Tentang Empat Novel dari India, Malaysia, Nigeria, dan Singapura.

Marie Albina Ho Pei Pei

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengetahui gambaran watak wanita utama dalam cerpen hasil tulisan penulis-penulis wanita daripada negara-negara bekas jajahan, di mana tumpuan diberikan kepada kedudukan wanita-wanita ini dalam budaya dan masyarakat mereka, kebangkitan mereka sebagai wanita dan pengaruh 'double colonization' ke atas mereka. Cerpen-cerpen yang digunakan adalah; (i) Joss and Gold oleh Shirley Lim, (ii) Following the Wrong God Home oleh Catherine Lim, (iii) Arranged Marriage oleh Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, dan (iv) The Joys of Motherhood oleh Buchi Emecheta. Kajian ini mengaplikasikan analisis textual menggunakan teori poskolonial feminisme. Hasil kajian menunjukkan kewujudan pegangan budaya yang kuat dan ini menentukan kedudukan wanita dalam masyarakatnya. Selain itu, kemunculan wanita-wanita ini semakin ketara disebabkan keadaan-keadaan yang perlu mereka lalui. Bagaimanapun, 'double colonization' tetap berlaku dan ketara dikalangan wanita pos-kolonial. Hasil kajian ini mampu mengurangkan jurang pengetahuan yang didapati wujud daripada kajian-kajian sebelum ini.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This section of the paper will provide a brief overview in relation to the proposed study. In this chapter, it will revolve around the purpose of the study and the significance of the study in concordance to the portrayal of female characters in novels written by various prominent women writers especially from postcolonial countries. Operational definitional of terms are included as well to help other researcher in understanding the scope of the study. The scope of study is also included to notify future researchers who are interested in conducting the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Postcolonial countries are countries that have been colonized by imperial powers. For instances, countries like South Africa, Philippines, Malaya, India, and Hong Kong are the few countries being colonized under the British Empire before these countries gained their independence. Literary texts offer especially good illustrations of how the colony deranges and disorders the sense not only of place but also of time. The colony has to do with the colonizing powers and effects of language itself, with language as colonization (Bennett & Royle 206). According to Chambers Dictionary as cited in Bennett and Royle (205), colonialism refers to:

“The policy or practice of obtaining, or maintaining hold over, colonies, especially with the purpose of exploiting them.”

However, these countries eventually gained their independence, free from the control and domination of the colonizers. Postcolonial countries emerged from the experience of colonization (Ashcroft et al. 1). Postcolonial countries do not only suffer from the crisis of national identity, but it is also affecting the transformation of nation itself from its usual traditional practices to a more ‘civilised’ practices. From there, postcolonial writers tempt to produce works that could help the establishment of identity that could reflect its independence without being in the shadows of the colonizers or past history of being colonized. They try to see the effects of colonizers have upon the nation or country such as depicted in the works of Chinua Achebe. In Bennett and Royle, Achebe’s novel *Things Falls Apart* recounts the rise and fall of a man called Okonkwo, and tells how Christian white men come to colonize and largely destroy the culture and identity of the Igbo tribe to which he belongs (207).

According to McEwan (94), the politics of postcolonialism often diverge sharply from other perspectives and its radicalism rejects established agendas and accustomed ways of seeing. The postcolonial viewpoint challenges the norms of the domination of the colonizers practices while guarding the values and meanings of the other cultures. Hence, postcolonial is driven in creating an identity on its own, away from the ‘inferiority’ as claimed by the colonizers. In literature, writers attempt to challenge the colonial domination through the challenges imposed to canonical literature by producing their own works. The challenge is in response to the domination in terms of standards set by the colonizers such as their political system, religion, behaviour, acceptance, and the notion on gender roles. Theorists such as Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak, Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Edward Said, for example, have transformed the nature of contemporary literary studies through their emphasis on questions of colonization, ethnic difference, racial oppression and discrimination, the position of the subaltern, the West and its construction of the ‘other’, imperialism and Orientalism (Bennett & Royle 15 – 16).

This study focuses on literature that portrays the dilemmas of women in countries which had been colonized and experiencing the implications of double colonization as illustrated in novels by postcolonial countries’ female writers. According to Raghumatha and Thomas (1), women in many societies (the colonized) have been degraded to the position of ‘other’, marginalized and ‘colonized’. Cultural

practices and the expectations of women from their culture in terms of valuing their position as women in their society is viewed as backward and primitive by the female colonizers. These women's situations were understood by the female colonizers as lack of welfare due to the practices of their traditional norms which is not in terms with the standards the female colonizers have established as 'civilized' beings.

Therefore, the Western or the colonized feminists tend to generalize the need to educate the 'other' women from the oppression of men. Western feminists assumed that their political project was universal, and that women globally faced the same universal forms of oppression (McEwan 96). Consequently, these leading feminists tend to generalize that the discrimination is also felt and experienced similar to their account by the other women in the globe without taking into account the other women's culture and society that they are bounded together. Differences between these women's specific cultural locations were ignored (McEwan 104). This is due to the inferior fixation imposed by the western feminists against the women from the colonized countries which are now postcolonial countries.

Women displacement before the colonization was subjugated to the oppression of the culture that is embedded within the societal circle. It is the essence of the culture that is imposed to different people from different groups and different places that plays the major role in determining the women's role within their societal sphere. According to Dube (218), the culture is the major concern of oppression as it sets its expectations to affirm all members of the group equally in terms of their roles. It is the culture that sets the standards of the societal norms in relation to the expectations from the women on their respective cultural and societal basis.

According to Mohanty (1), main feminists defined 'women' primarily by their 'object status' in the way they are affected or not affected by a variety of systems and institutions. However, feminists may not comprehend the disparity in the treatment of women across cultures. Feminist theorizes that women are generally being oppressed by men in the same way without much consideration of the circumstances that might cause such difference. However, in postcolonial feminism, women were also seen as being oppressed by the culture and society's expectations. Culture is both a function of and a source of identity and this explains the return to some form of cultural

traditionalism in postcolonial societies, often in the form of religious or national fundamentalism (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 88). Literary texts are part of a larger circulation of social energies, both products of and influences on a particular culture or ideology (Bennett & Royle 112). That is why the study of literatures such as the ones being studied in this paper does not only confine to the realms of fiction.

According to Bell Hooks (1) as cited in Rose (223), feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Feminism articulates on issues regarding women's welfare either it be due to the reason of discrimination or cultural practices on account towards the ideal just world. Consequently, gender oppression as acclaimed by the Western feminists has been reduced in importance to not a priority by the third world feminists in which the priority is focused on the oppression of the culture and the society and the colonization. The relegation of the notion regarding gender oppression is due to the challenging the ideology of the western feminists, in which supposition and acknowledgement by the western feminist theorizers have failed to include the importance of values and practices of other cultures into account. In one way or another, the rise of reinvent the long established meaning of feminist theory in literary works is on the verge of expansion and the indication of the acknowledgement of pluralities. Therefore, the presence of the colonial other imitating the white colonizer disrupts the authority of the colonizer's language, and [reveals] an inherent absurdity in the colonial enterprise, as stated by Smith in Bennett and Royle (212).

This eventually leads to the appearance of the 'third world women', especially in literary works in contrast to the definition of 'other' women by the western feminists as their burden, backward, and primitive. Literary texts were seen as an opportunity to offer a window upon a new world. The 'third world women' are suffering from the 'double colonization' in which the oppression is due to both the colonizers and the traditional norms of the culture and society. Therefore, third world women strive to eliminate the double standards they are experiencing, the exploitation and inequality among class and ethnic groups in specific historical periods (Gandhi 609). In the other hand, 'third world feminists' are closely knitted to the postcolonial feminism approach, in which it defines the effort in challenging the domination of the generalized theorizing of women as a whole on the account of disparity among women across cultures. It is the diversity in the third world women that creates the distinctive

attributes to the women individually. In the postcolonial era, after these countries have gained independence from the colonial powers, the women were affected with the double standards in terms of colonization and cultural demands. Therefore, women as an independent professional, then clearly feminists, in order to appropriate the strategy, will have to make literary criticism an integral part of feminist struggle (Humm 5).

In response to the general notion regarding women are all the same in terms of oppression by the men, more female writers are emerging to seek independence from the mainstream feminists. Hence, one of the effort in challenging the domination and generalization of western women upon the ‘marginalized’ women is done through writings, especially by postcolonial women writers. Women writing in the study of the non-mainstream writing, has been and continues to be an emphasis on the person of the author, an emphasis that is in some ways remarkably conventional and ‘conformist’ (Bennett & Royle 25). According to Said in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (7);

“The literary text, for example, is not simply located in a canonical line of books called ‘English Literature’, but is something which has connection with many other aspects of the world – political, social, cultural – all of which go to make up its worldliness.”

“However, [that] reality is a feature of textuality itself, of the text’s worldliness, and the issue is not much that of a dominant representation hiding the reality, but that of the struggle between different and contesting representations.”

So, the portrayal of women characters in postcolonial country novels are supposedly the representation and reflection of reality in fiction. English is a widely used language to convey the messages by writers to the readers. English is seen as a power tool to put forth the ideas and concepts through writing. Holland argues that readers use the literary work to symbolize and to replicate themselves as they interpret a function of identity in it (Bennett & Royle 13). Literary texts remind us of the extent to which ethical and juridical decisions are determined within a context of specific national and state identities (Bennett & Royle 211). Previous studies conducted in relation to literary works by postcolonial feminist critics were most about women from

the South Asian and African region and that the studies focused only on one region at a time. Limited studies were carried out in analysing literary works by women writers from across country.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The influence of feminist studies in literary works and fictions available has been profoundly marked by the rising of women voices from across country. These women found support and means to convey their experiences in the effort of contribution to provide insights to circumstances in which they are educated, acknowledged, and bounded with. It raises the portrayal of the treatment to women in works published, in relation to the gradual silent and discrete discrimination in maintenance to the status quo expectations by their respective social circle and the history of being colonized. This influence rises the questioning of generalizations of the feminist theory to women all over the globe. Hence, this leads to the statement of the problem in this study, in which the foci is on the implications of double colonization in main female characters portrayed in the postcolonial novels by female writers across countries.

By gaining understanding from the works by female writers from across country, especially from postcolonial countries, it is hoped that the understanding is able to offer and provide further insight regarding women with the issues of being trapped by their culture and its practices. Besides that, the inclusion of consideration that historical events play an important part in the portrayal of the development of the women is relevant in determining the depiction of women in the novels.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to find out the portrayal of women in the novels by the respective authors from across country mentioned before. There are three main aspects that would be the main focus of the study. The foci are:

- (i) To find the placement of women following the standards of her culture in the society she lives in as portrayed in the novels.
- (ii) To discover the strength to rise in the roles they play in the novel despite the bounds of the culture, breaking the norms.
- (iii) To look into the depth of influence of double colonization of the Western ideology into and the culture of the nation or tribe itself mentioned in the novels as in effect of postcolonial feminism.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study is hoped to bring insights into the messages the novels are trying to convey to the world. The understanding of these women's effort as portrayed in the novels, representing their respective cultures across the country, in the effort of gaining individual freedom from its typical cultural constraints but still preserving certain practices that are viewed essential to her culture. This is in concordance to the limited studies in relation to the portrayal of women in literary works from across country. Furthermore, it is hoped that the respective authors' works would be appreciated and viewed in another viewpoint in which their works are voicing out the issues that one tends to overlook as the immersion of patriarchy is still very much deeply rooted in the so-called contemporary mindsets. This study will help readers to understand the evidence of Western ideology and transformation having impact on women from various cultures worldwide, especially on the issue of gender equality. The influence of Western ideology into the essentialism of the culture that distinguishes its practices that contributes to the diversity of different culture is something that needs to be paid attention too.

This paper determines to show that culture is something that one holds unto for the identification of one race. However, colonization seeps through the traditional practices, thus making some of the practices are being questioned in terms of the welfare of the women. Hence, the understanding that the women entrapped with the cultural practices is the reason they try the gain freedom from the patriarchy

preferences of their culture and not solely from the oppression on men alone. Besides that, the aim of the study will help to increase the understanding of the portrayal of women in novels from across country, emphasizing on the differences one experiences through a continuum of space and distance. Thus, the study will aim to acknowledge the diversity of life experiences as these women from across countries are rendered. It is hoped that the results of the study will be able to contribute to bridge the knowledge gap regarding the analysis of literary works and its representations.

1.5 Operational Definitions of Terms

1.5.1 Definition of Postcolonial

Postcolonial theory concerns with what ‘occur[s] or exist[s] after the end of colonial rule’ as mentioned in Bennett and Royle (205). In other words, a postcolonial state is inseparable from its previous colonial influence. On some accounts, postcolonialism represents a set of conceptual tools which enable the experience of colonial domination to be understood in new and diverse ways (Darby 217). Postcolonial theories concerns are mainly focusing on the circumstances that people underwent during the colonization years that affect their lives from then to the present. The theory mainly revolves round the literatures and works that are constructed and published from and in relation to these postcolonial countries. Ashcroft et al. stated that postcolonial theory deals with the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on present literatures (1). As stated by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, they argued that the term ‘postcolonial’ should be seen as covering ‘all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day’ (Bennett & Royle 205). Literary narratives are attentive to the particularities of time and place. Hence, postcolonial literatures often seeks to attempt to constitute a primary source for challenging the ethnocentrism, charged with self-interest, which persuades many established knowledge formations (Darby 216).

“Postcolonial theory is concerned with a range of cultural engagements: the impact of imperial languages upon colonized

societies; the effects of European ‘master – discourses’ such as history and philosophy; the nature and consequences of colonial education and the links between Western knowledge and colonial power. In particular, it is concerned with the responses of the colonized: the struggle to control self-representation, through the appropriation of dominant languages, discourses and forms of narrative; the struggle over the representations of place, history, race and ethnicity; and the struggle to present a local reality to a global audience. Although it has been heavily oriented towards literary theory, since it was prompted by the flourishing of literatures written by colonized peoples in colonial languages (particularly English), it is becoming widely used in historical, political and sociological analyses as its relevance to these disciplines grows.”

(Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 15)

The operational definition term of postcolonial here defined the postcolonial in this paper as the focus is on the portrayal of women in novels written by postcolonial female authors.

1.5.2 Definition of Placement of Women

Women stereotypes depend to a considerable extent on a conceptual opposition: man versus woman, in which like other binary oppositions, it involves a hierarchy (Bennett & Royle 141). Women are expected to attend to domestic matters in comparison to the expectations of men. It is the norms of the societal circle that middle-class women were typically did not enter paid employment and they were held account for the upbringing the younger generations. For women who are less fortunate, especially working class women, this often remained an ideal, as economic necessity compelled them to seek employment outside the home. The occupations that were available to them were, however, lower in prestige and pay than those available to men. Bennett and Royle mentioned that all literary texts can be thought about in terms of how they represent gender differences and how far they may be said to reinforce or

question gender-role stereotypes (142). Fundamentally, one of the main concerns of women roles in the society are in relation to the maintenance of the human race is reproduction. Marital laws, in particular have served to ensure that for women citizenship in the nation state is mediated by the marriage relation, so that a woman's political relation to the nation is submerged in, and subordinated to, her social relation to a man through marriage (McClintock 261). That is why women are often viewed as subordinates to men in terms of leadership both in politically and culturally and socially.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The scope of the study will be done based on novels from postcolonial countries; Nigeria, India, Malaysia, and Singapore. In the other hand, this paper tries to study the representation of women in a particular country or region in fictional novels. Thus, the study's focus will be based on two main aspects which are; (i) effects of colonial power unto women, and (ii) constraints of the culture and its society on women roles. Therefore, the study aims to see female representations in the selected novels. However, the depiction of women characters is only limited to the main characters in the limited novels studied.

1.7 Chapter Review

This chapter deals with the background of the study regarding postcolonial countries, the feminists' movement and its relation to literary works. It also describes the aims of the research which is to be carried out as proposed in this paper. This study is hoped to bring further insights on works by female authors from across postcolonial country. Definition of the operational terms is also included to provide relevant knowledge of the concept centralised in this paper. Related operational terms touched upon in this chapter is the term postcolonial and the placement of women in accordance to literature. Issues illustrated in the selected novels will be looked into based on the postcolonial feminism approach, which will be further discussed in-depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Preview

This chapter of the study deals with the detailed definition of postcolonial feminism approach, the portrayal of women in general, and the previous studies done in relation to this study. The detailed definition of the approach used in the study's focus is done to provide a more solid conception of the postcolonial feminism point of view. Several works were cited to establish the fundamental meaning of the theory chosen. Previous studies were also included to show the emerging interests in this field and also the impact that these studies have on studies done today.

2.1 Postcolonial

Postcolonial criticism stresses on the relationship of literature to its historical period, especially in terms of the postcolonial era. Postcolonial literary theory emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of postcolonial writing (Ashcroft et. al. 6). It is undeniable that there are many countries around the world that have been colonized by the great imperial powers.

“The relationship between Africa and Asia and the West was largely the province of imperial history, except that at a certain stage in the story – around decolonization – international relations took over. During this time, literature maintained a

marginal presence through studies of imperial and Commonwealth fiction.”

(Darby 9)

The emergence of literary writers from postcolonial countries is on the increment. In other words, although much literature may be applicable to many places and times, much of it also directly reflects the intellectual and social worlds of the authors (Roberts 266). On occasions the Third World commitment to rewriting the received amount of Europe has led to the canonization of revisionist theory (Darby 20). For example, the case of autobiography is instructive because of the considerable and increasing reliance on the genre in African studies and race relations, and, on a rather different basis, in international relations (Darby 22). Whereas the dominant tradition of English literature disparaged writing that was overtly political, there was much more recognition in Afro-Asian thought that politics could not be dissociated from literature (Darby 27).

Postcolonial countries face the effects of colonization and deals with the issues that emerges across the time. Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* exemplifies the effects of British colonization on India, during and after the era. As this study focuses on postcolonial countries being colonized by the British Empire before, therefore the criticism here refers to the industrial dominance of Britain and the political economy of its colonial possessions. The spread of the colonizers’ influence does not only affect on the political and economic factors only, but also affecting the social order by introducing new ideologies such as modernity, consumerism, and Christianity (Darby 15). Following that, the colonizers are inducing acceptance of new practices into the countries they are colonizing.

“Colonial powers brought with them daunting philosophical, theological, naval and mercantile traditions they used to justify occupation and control. Separating public from private, particular from universal, human from divine, family from state, and male from female realms of experience and action forms a crucial aspect of these traditions.”

(Goswami 1)

Postcolonial studies have reacted to the viewpoint that subsequently involved itself with the issue of gender, questioning to what extent this affects the lives of colonial subjects who also happen to be female, in which nowadays investigation whether gender or colonial oppression is the more significant political factor in women's lives are done (Caslin 1). Colonial and postcolonial situation has imposed special responsibilities on the postcolonial countries novelists. Therefore, colonization eventually seeps the education systems and the gradual immersion of viewpoint into seeing women as an individual on their own as their justification of control has been challenged by the 'colonized' women.

2.2 Feminism

Feminism is defined by Bell Hooks in Rose as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (223). Feminism is also described as an ideology focusing on equality of sexes. Mainstream feminists often depicts men as the main cause of the oppression either by exploitation, discrimination and sexually. According to Ragumantha and Thomas (1999), feminism also concerns with the notion that women are powerless, exploited in one way or another, and have a subordinate position in the societal sphere. The leading concept of the main feminism theorists is to challenge the inequity imposed by men - the matrix of domination. The matrix of domination here often refers to the superiority and the empowerment of men over the women as their subordinates.

According to Dube (223), adaptation of Western values in becoming 'civilized' has alleged women from colonial and postcolonial countries to be secondary citizens culturally and economically. Feminism rises, as declared by Bell Hooks, in response to the need to begin from the perspective of poor and working-class women; focuses that their issues should be central for all women in which welfare is probably the most important economic issue for women (Rose 224). Feminists tend to apply intolerance of blanket terms to postcolonialism and subsequently been highly critical of postcolonialists' tendencies to construct a single category of the colonized, thus ignoring the important issue of gender difference (Caslin 1).