

SELECTED ASIAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

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As an educator involved in women's studies and an advocate of gender-fair education, I feel duty-bound to support the National Centennial Commission-Women Sector's call for women to take back history so that history books that narrate mostly men's history will be read as such and thereby pose the challenge to all, women in particular, to read as women in search of a memory of themselves as men's 'other', or better still, to take up the pen and write herstory.

In this paper I will subject to a feminist analysis the publications on Asian history which have been used as textbooks by Philippine secondary schools for the purpose of alerting us to the reality of sexual-textual politics. These are:

1. DECS. 1989. *Kabihasnang Asyano*. Serye ng SEDP Pilipinas: Kagawaran ng Edukasyon, Kultura at Isports.
2. Latourette, Kenneth Scott. 1967. *A Short History of the Fareast*. Philippines: Ken Inc.
3. Leogardo, Felicitas. 1988. *History of Asian Nations*. Manila: Sto. Niño Catholic House.
4. Pearth, B.R. 1970. *An Introduction to the History of Southeast Asia*. Hongkong: Sheck Wah Tong Printing Press.

Textbooks as Gendered and Gendering Tools

Textbooks are one of the more potent tools for transmitting gender values. The fact that they are prescribed by school authorities as required reading canonize them as sources of reliable and must-have information. This truth seems to have been lost to those who have chosen the aforementioned textbooks

on Asian history despite the international and national recognition of the clamor of women worldwide to be recognized as men's equal partners in nation building as can be seen in United Nations documents like CEDAW, the Forward Looking Strategies, and the more recent 1995 Beijing Platform of Action, and, in the case of the Philippines, the enactment of laws which includes the Nation Building Act. In fact, it comes as no surprise to me if women teachers who used/use the textbooks are not even aware of how these books subvert international and national policy on the 'Woman Question'. After all, patriarchy is as old as the mountains, and the ideology that produces and reproduces it has taken roots so deep in men as well as women's psyches that to expect its uprooting in a relatively short time with written documents is indeed being overly optimistic.

Gendering of textbooks may be explicit or implicit. It is explicit when they openly show the gender divide: Women, being feminine, are located in the private sphere which is perceived as the place where history does not take place because the events that occur here are not 'historic' and 'heroic'. In this place women are shown in relationship with men as wives and daughters, mothers to men's children, and workers in charge of household chores. Men on the other hand, being masculine, are located in the public sphere which is perceived to be the arena for history making inasmuch as it is here where events perceived to be 'historic' and 'heroic' occur. In this place men are shown as heads of families and dynasties, high government officials, generals of armies, defenders of freedom and national sovereignty, captains of industry, religious leaders, great artists, and the like. This practice of singling out men as though they can single-handedly perform their so called 'great deeds' without the support and contributions of the many women and men behind them is responsible for what Albina Peczon Fernandez satirizes thus:

Judging from what is written in history books, one would be led to conclude that:

1. Women must have wombs a hundred times bigger than their body size such that they can beget thousands of male children with one or two females only which would explain the scarcity of females and the overwhelming presence of males in recorded history;
2. Women do nothing but watch while men single-handedly make history as conquering heroes, national liberators, victorious generals, benevolent monarchs, wise law-givers, and some such;
3. Some women, on a few occasions, assist men in history-making as when they sew a flag made out of their skirts which the men raise over a conquered territory or when they use their feminine charms on the enemy to ferret out military or state secrets; and
4. A few women, on rare occasions, make history somehow, and that is because they are not truly women in the first place, but men in women's bodies (Fernandez 1996:1).

Because of the marginalization of the private sphere, where women are located, all the textbooks under scrutiny have a very limited appreciation of the role of women in history and nation building. The few women who are discussed as history makers are made out to be so, not because of their personal attributes and achievements but because of their connection to men. Thus Corazon Aquino and Sirimavo Bandaranaike are discussed as having managed to become the President of the Republic of the Philippines and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Sri Lanka, respectively, not because of anything else but because they are, like their sisters living in patriarchal societies, men's extension. These two made it to history books only because they were made to replace their respective husbands who were assassinated in the course of the power play in their respective country's national politics.

All throughout the narration of Asian history by all textbooks, it is made clear that men, not women, are the movers of history.

Implicitly, the textbooks construct gender. There is a hidden voice in the text or subtext which is not openly articulated (Saigol 1999) but is far from impotent. This operates at a level which the writers may not even be aware of, but which comes into fore as one subjects the text to sexual/textual analysis. For example, the significant events in Asian History are subtly described in a manner which dichotomizes characteristics into gender categories. Thus in the binary opposition open/enclosed, light/dark, good/bad, brave/timid, powerful/powerless, characteristics on the left are made to mean the masculine while those on the right, the feminine. In this light, not only persons but also time and space become gendered. Due to the perception of its being more developed in economic, political, social, and cultural terms, the West as space becomes masculine while the East, feminine. The meeting of the two is made to sound like the meeting of Rich Boy and Poor Girl. In the ensuing relationship, it is made to appear that the latter stands to gain from the former, and just like the relation between man and woman, the colonial relation between the West and the East has its own ups and downs.

Also embedded in the discourse on space is the personification of the Western colonizing power as masculine and the Asian colonized countries as feminine. The Western colonizing power, just like a man, naturally finds the East so seductive like a woman — full of mystery and so virginal in appearance that getting her as a possession becomes an obsession. The act of colonization is merely the exercise of a man's 'natural' superiority over woman.

The same gendering is seen in the discourse on time. 'Pre-colonial' period is made to assume the feminized side of the

binary. Thus a subtext informs that prior to colonization by a Western power, the colony was 'open' for it was up for grabs by other powerful states; 'dark' because it lacked the great ideas of western Enlightenment; 'chaotic' because of internecine wars fomented by differing ethnicity, religious beliefs, and political ideologies; and some such.

The patriarchal discourses appear in the following threads: masculine/feminine positioning, celebratory view of history, glorification of the military, relationship between the powerful state and submissive citizens.

Masculine/Feminine Positioning in Asian History

Gender positioning is prominent in Asian history. This can be gleaned from the manner in which democracy, eastern and western civilizations, and colonization are presented.

In Leogardo's book the triumph of democracy over communism is played up. The assertion is made that Asian nations finally attained their true independence by not embracing the communist ideology. Again, sexual/textual politics rears its ugly head. Leogardo gets caught in a discourse of time, where time is measured by the attainment of democracy. The time 'before' the attainment of democracy is made to assume the feminine in the binary. It is a span of time described as full of 'darkness', 'chaos', 'misery', and 'conflict'. The period of democracy, on the other hand, is made to assume masculine characteristics. It is made to appear that only when democracy was finally accepted that Asian nations were saved from economic and political turmoil and led toward a life full of 'light', 'happiness', and 'independence'.

Latourette also projects a discourse of space where the western portion of the earth is the male and the fareastern portion the female. Western and eastern civilizations are also

dichotomized by showing the culture and technology of the former as more advanced than that of the latter.

Conquest and subjugation of Asian countries also became male and female discourse. The colonizer, being the conqueror, liberator, and subjugator of virgin lands, is a male and an outsider who penetrates and establishes his leadership in the feminized Asian colony.

The Celebratory View of History

What is celebrated in the textbooks should make us ponder on the future of humankind. Invariably praised, either overtly or covertly, are males preoccupied with mastering the art of war. In the telling of these accounts, the youth is given role models like Kublai Khan, Emperor Akihito, Mao Zedong, Khomeini, Nehru, Sukarno, and others whose masculine-associated characteristics certainly negate the global aspiration for peace.

Glorification of the Military

All throughout, the narration of greatness of kingdoms that later on became nation-states is devoted to the military prowess of leaders. The description of strong Chinese leaders, Shoguns of Japan, Colonization of the West, World War II, and many more give subtle messages that leaders are males who are strong and can command a military. It would seem to point out that women leaders have no place in defending a country. They never had participation in defending their countries.

Military leaders are projected to have splendid success because the soldiers felt that they were fighting for a just cause (e.g., Pakistan). War is usually waged for a just cause. The disputes between countries are glorified with certain ideals to justify the existence of war. Fighting to defend their

motherland, mothers, and children are masculinist ideals which are founded on the imagery of protecting women. War therefore is a high form of male gallantry.

Powerful State and Submissive Citizens

The story of Asian countries, which deals with the ideologies of citizenship and the relationship between the state and the citizen, is also a gendered discourse. The citizen is presented as the passive, infantilized, and feminized 'other' of the patriarchal state. For instance, the chapter on "Political Systems of Asia" in *SEDP Series* subtly sends this gendered message. Government of countries and their respective heads represent the 'One' while citizens are the 'Other' and citizens of the government have to respect their leader just like a father in the family.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Saigol (1995) when she said:

Human beings are gendered emotionally, psychologically, and politically because most families are based on gendered relations of inferiority and superiority. The family is the first 'political unit'. It is a biosocial, political, emotional, and psychological space that is riddled with concerns of power. It produces gendered individuals, who, in turn, reproduces gendered families.

Gendered thinking, that is, notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' seems to become so infused with affect (negative and positive) for both men and women, and so deeply ingrained, that social and political entities take on gendered meanings for people consciously and unconsciously.

This consciousness is reinforced by the school system through the hidden curriculum embodied in textbooks. Since the school is the second agent of socialization and equally important in shaping the minds of individuals in their formative years, teachers have to take note of the gendering of

historical texts in the service of patriarchy. And, not to forget, to use the gender awareness for creating space for women's history or herstory.

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