

The politics of representations in multicultural women's discourse in Australia

Reni Winata, author

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Abstrak

Since antiquity, representation (henceforth: RPT) has been a fundamental concept in aesthetics and semiotics. It has also been a crucial concept in political theory, forming the basics of representational theories of sovereignty, legislative authority and relations of individuals to the state (Lenthriccia, 1990, 11-13).

In contemporary theories of RPT, both definitions have intersected. Relationship between language & politics is crucial to much contemporary works on RPT. Recent criticism also focuses on the links between texts and power. All RPTs have, either explicitly or implicitly, a political content. (Childers, 1995: 260-261).

RPT has also been an issue of importance for post colonialists and feminists. RPT is an area of contestation between the dominant and the dominated (Ascroft, 1995: 85-87). Hall (1990: 222-237) problematises the concept and relates it to (cultural) identity and speaking position. According to Hall. (cultural) identity is a process, always constituted within RPT, which in turn, produced from a particular speaking position-a particular time and place. van Toorn (1995:1-12) distinguishes two kinds of speaking-position, those are fixed unitary-speaking position and postmodern speaking-position.

RPT is a relevant issue in a multicultural and a settlers' community like Australia. The fact that Australia has over a hundred ethnic groups as its population and that since 1973, multiculturalism has been launched to manage migrants' population, does not automatically increase the participation of non-Anglo-Celtic (women) immigrants in political, economic or even in social and cultural arenas. Non-Anglo-Celtic women (henceforth: NAC women) immigrants are still doubly-marginalized. They are invisible and hardly represented in the dominant Anglo-Celtic discourse. They are marginalized in the dominant women's anthologies or also in their own ethnic's (male's) anthologies. When represented, they are -represented stereotypically as the Other, problem, victim or as a threat. And yet, they had contributed quite significantly in the development of (public) services and in manufacturing industry. They also have their own share in promoting Australia as a multicultural society through their cuisine, costume, dancing and other cultural artifacts.

However, since the 1970s, the situation has changed gradually with the increasing quantity and quality of multicultural women writers articulating their own (migrant) experiences. In this study, I use the term 'multicultural women-texts' for all kinds of cultural expressions produce } by the NAC women. those are writers or cultural producers coming from outside British, Irish and indigenous backgrounds. The term `multicultural texts' has more positive connotation than migrants' atau ethnic (minority) writings. The term 'ethnic' or 'migrant' is problematic as it has always been associated with socio-historical writings which has

no cultural capital and thus, classified as popular or marginal writings. Sneja Gunew is highly critical and suggests that the term should be deconstructed. Therefore, this study uses the term 'multicultural women-texts'.

This study on "the politics of representations in multicultural women's discourse in Australia" is therefore based on the following reasons: (i) study about RPT has not initiated in Indonesia and yet, it is an important topic which has gained currency in Australia, (ii) the study on gender and ethnicity is relevant for our national context as Indonesia is multi-ethnic and is still in the process of developing gender-awareness across sectors.

The questions formulated in my study are: (i) how are the stereotypic-RPTs on NAG women immigrants constructed through the dominant texts, popular novel *They're a Weird Mob* (henceforth: TWM), images from *Immigrants in Focus* (henceforth: IMF) and from *For Love or Money* (henceforth: FLM), Pauline Hanson's *Maiden Speech* (henceforth: PI-I) and through the multicultural women-texts, confession *Give Me Strength* (henceforth: GMS) and film *Silver-City* (henceforth: SC), (ii) how both experimental and transgressive multicultural women-texts *Oh Lucky Country* (henceforth: OLC) and *Red Roses* (henceforth: RR) re-construct alternative RPT which in turn, interrogate the previous stereotypic RPT of NAC women immigrants, constructed through the above six texts.

Therefore, the purposes of the study are (i) to identify and to formulate the stereotypic RPTs of NAC women immigrants through the dominant Anglo-Celtic texts, TWM, IMF, FLM, PH and through multicultural women-texts, GMS and SC, (ii) to elaborate how transgressive multicultural women-texts, OLC and RR deconstruct the stereotypic RPT of NAC women and thus, re-construct the alternative RPT of an independent, assertive and sexually-liberated persona in OLC and of a feminin and cosmopolitan persona in RR.

The fact that multicultural women-texts is still considered as marginal and the fact that this study uses different kinds of cultural products-popular novel, parliamentary speech, images, confession, film and highly experimental novels, it inevitably makes Cultural Studies (henceforth: CS) as the most-appropriate approach. Because (i) CS does not distinguish high culture from low culture, (ii) CS has developed interests in marginal groups; women, ethnic-minorities, black and so forth (During:1994, 2-20), which fits in with the topic of the study, (iii) CS regards all texts or discourses as politically and ideologically, rather than aesthetically, positioned (Storey, 1996:2) and hence, it would be instrumental for exposing the hegemonic practices of the Anglo-Celtic, discourse and consequently, for empowering the multicultural women-texts.

Assuming that there are stereotypic RPT on NAC women immigrants, this study is designed as the following:

(i) to identify and formulate the stereotypic RPT of NAC women through the dominant texts-TWM, Pt-I, IF - from which they are excluded and not represented and through FLM, in which they are represented as the Other, problem and victim. In short, they are either, silenced or represented stereotypically as a collective, anonymous, unskilled, domestic and proved to be victimised, in the dominant texts. Multicultural women-texts, GMS and SC, give them voices to 'speak up' in the first-person account about their own migrant-experience. ironically both texts (re) represent NAC women immigrants as the Other, problem, victim and

threat of their own (ethnic) patriarchy.

The NAC women are represented as being doubly marginalised/pressed. They are oppressed by their own patriarchy which positions them as dependent (mother, wife, daughter, fiancée) and caught up in the domestic-sphere (cooking, washing, sewing, child-rearing). They are also represented as controlled and conditioned by the institutions of womanhood (virginity, respectability, innocence), marriage and motherhood (reproduction, child-birth, child-rearing).

At the workplace, they are marginalized and work as domestic, seamstress, factory-worker, dress-maker, hairdresser. They are prone to be victimized and sexually abused as occurred to the leading character in SC. However, the NAC women in GMS and SC is finally represented as gaining material-success and stepping up the social-ladder and therefore, they express their gratitude for having migrated to Australia. The NAC woman in SC is even represented as having adopted the Australian way. In short, both texts reinforce the dominant Anglo-Celtic discourse.

(ii) to deconstruct the stereotypic RPT and to re-construct the alternative RPT of the NAC women immigrants in both experimental and transgressive multicultural women-texts, OLC and RR. This study uses two perspectives from CS- gender and ethnicity- to address the problems of stereotypic RPT and to empower the multicultural women-texts.

To deconstruct the stereotypic RPT and to re-construct the alternative RPT, this study uses the intersection between feminists' discourse on the body and sexual politics and the discourse on loving ethnicity, adapted from bell hooks' *Loving Blackness* (1992: 2-20) to politicize the private issues- womanhood, virginity, marriage, motherhood including the 'myth' about the passivity of female sexuality-in the public sphere in order to deconstruct the male-chauvinistic Anglo-Celtic discourse and to reconstruct the NAC women in OLC as an independent, assertive, radical, sexually-liberated persona. The NAC women are not domesticated but represented as leading a public life and rejecting the concept of womanhood, virginity, marriage and motherhood.

To deconstruct the stereotypic RPT in the previous texts and to reconstruct an alternative RPT on NAC women in RR, this study uses the feminists' discourse on female desire (Coward, 1984). This study examines how RR deconstructs the RPTs of NAC women as the Other, problem, victim, threat or as the authentic ethnic other (TWM, PH, 1F, FLM, GMS, SC) and also as a radical and sexually-liberated persona (OLC) in order to reconstruct the NAC woman subject as a feminine and cosmopolitan persona.

Using female desire, this study analyses that the NAC woman subject in RR uses consumer culture to sustain themselves- with cosmetics, perfume, fashion, food, exercises and other consumer-products of lifestyles- and to reconstruct a multiple identities- as a pilot, doctor, cabaret-singer, ballerina and so forth. The NAC woman moves in both private and public spheres and celebrates 'womanhood', 'motherhood', cooking, fashion and other activities previously condemned by feminists. The NAC woman subject is also not caught up in conflict with the dominant Anglo-Celtics.

Summarizing the findings, this study identifies a couple of points to be raised. First, RPT is an important concept which could be politicised for controlling/marginalizing or for empowering the represented object. Second, NAC women experiences are diverse, not unified. Third, 'gender and ethnicity' are instrumental for dismantling both the Anglo and non-Anglo-celtic patriarchy and hence, for promoting the diversity of women-experiences.

This study on gender and ethnicity is relevant for our national context as Indonesia is a multi-ethnic society which is in the process of developing gender-awareness across the board. Double-marginalization faced by the NAC women in Australia is parallel with the othering of ethnic-minority women in Indonesia from Arab, Chinese, Indo-Dutch descents and others). The mass rape of Indonesian-Chinese women in May 1998 and the sexual violence suffered by Acehnese women are all double-oppression against these ethnic-minority women.

Monitoring the current public debate on gender (perspective) in our national context, this study wants to share perceptions and conclusion. First, difference amongst women's constituencies is as important as difference between women and men. It is a primary challenge for Indonesian feminists to manage and to capitalize on the diversity of its constituencies so as not to repeat the hegemonic practices of Western feminism and patriarchy which had homogenized or eliminated the Other. Second, RPT of Indonesian women (and its constituencies) are important to be empowered. Intervention should be made to reconstruct a new alternative RPT of Indonesian women. However, it is crucial to have media with gender-awareness to promote the new empowering RPT of Indonesian women.