

## ESSAYS

## Using Modern Asian Literature on Gender in Social Science Courses Reinforcing or Dismantling Stereotypes?

By Jana Everett

When I started teaching Asian and Indian politics and international Women's Studies, I searched for writing by Asian men and women to supplement social science texts. My goals were simple and naive: to share with my students some authentic Asian voices in order to enhance their abilities to empathize through the insights and richness of literature—both “canonical” fiction and more journalistic writing. Here I will focus on the literature I chose on women to illustrate a problem that I encountered and some of the steps toward a solution, which I believe other faculty might find helpful.

In the 1970s I used the collection, *Fragment from a Lost Diary and Other Stories: Women of Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, containing short stories and poetry by modern Asian male and female authors.<sup>1</sup> The stories chosen are divided into three sections, more or less representing women trapped by tradition, the conflict between old and new, and family and society. In the 1980s I used *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices from Manushi*, a collection of articles from the first five years of the Delhi feminist magazine.<sup>2</sup> Although the magazine represents an important perspective in the Indian urban feminist movement, most of the articles chronicle the oppression of poor, low caste rural women. During the 1990s I turned to a book, *Anandi Gopal*, originally written in Marathi, which tells the story of one of the first Indian women to study to become a doctor during the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> I chose this book in part because it offered a critique, not only of traditions which restricted women, but also of the destructive zeal of the modernizers. The next time I teach I plan to use *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*, translated, edited and introduced by Kalpana Bardhan.<sup>4</sup> In an excellent introduction, Bardhan provides a literary and historical context for stories by Rabindranath Thakur, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Hasan Azizul Huq, and Mahasweta Devi, important male and female Bengali writers of the last century.

One effect on many of my students of reading Asian literature was a reinforcement of the stereotypes they held about women in Asian societies: the evils of child marriage, patriarchal families, and female devaluation. To my horror, I was “producing” the downtrodden Third World woman, “otherness,” and essentialized traditions about which Chandra Mohanty and others had criticized Western feminists.<sup>5</sup> What my students were taking away from their encounter with Asian literature were thoughts such as “Thank God I'm an American,” and an unquestioning belief in modernization. While they felt compassion and

anger over oppressive situations, they neither noticed the specificities of the cultural contexts nor the resourcefulness of the particular characters, and they tended to impose blanket solutions—introduce Western education, pass equal rights legislation, change individual attitudes—based on their own experience.

I tried to subvert these effects with mixed success, explaining how authors such as Lu Xun, Pramoedya Ananta Toer and *Manushi* writers today are reformers politicizing gender issues as part of wider movements for social change. I introduced James Scott's ideas about everyday acts of resistance as *Weapons of the Weak*.<sup>6</sup> By providing more contexts about the specific setting of the authors and their goals and offering alternative ways to interpret the actions of the characters, I made some headway. Nevertheless, stereotypes stayed with some of the students. Was the only way out to forego Asian literature altogether and have them read instead novels such as *When We Were Orphans* to illustrate the “cluelessness” of Westerners in Asia?<sup>7</sup> But then we would be just studying ourselves.

These experiences led me to reflect on the social location of my students: most were majoring in the social sciences; often they were first-generation college students with limited exposure to other cultures. I remembered the discomfort of my fourteen-year-old daughter when she accompanied me to India for the first time and her relief in finding young people who went to clubs and discos, something that at her age was merely an aspiration and not a practice. To help my students become more critically self-aware of the worldview they used when encountering Asian literature, we read works that deconstructed concepts of “progress” and “development.” Arturo Escobar, for example, analyzes the “development discourse” that structures much of what citizens in the West understand about the “rest”.<sup>8</sup>

The coherence of effects that the development discourse achieved is the key to its success as a hegemonic form of representation: the construction of the poor and underdeveloped as universal, preconstituted subjects, based on the privilege of the representers; . . . Development assumes a teleology to the extent that it proposes that the “natives” will sooner or later be reformed; at the same time, however, it reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the Third World as different and inferior, as having a limited humanity in relation to the accomplished European.

Escobar provides the tools to enable students to begin to grasp that the manner in which they see, for example, an Asian peasant is socially constructed, and that “they [the peasants] all look alike” in part because of the instrumental conceptual frameworks that comprise mainstream orientations in the West, which in turn derive from the global political economy and the legacies of colonialism.

Deconstructing our own assumptions is the first step toward a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of Asian literature in a college social science class, but it only gets us so far. The next step is practicing this new self-reflectiveness on Asian material. A recent article by Leela Fernandes gives us some strategies for doing this.<sup>9</sup> She reviews recent scholarly strategies of literary criticism and explores the complex, contradictory readings in the autobiography and film versions of the life of Phoolan Devi, a legendary lower-caste, female *dacoit*, who in the 1970s and early 80s, in the Uttar Pradesh countryside, led a gang noted for robbing upper-caste landlords, giving to poor landless villagers, and meting out rough justice for violence against women. *The Bandit Queen*, Shekar Kapur's 1994 film (financed by British public television's Channel IV) helped to secure her amnesty and folk-hero status and eventual election as a Member of the Indian Parliament. Fernandes foregrounds the problems of representation through a comparison of the book and movie versions of Phoolan Devi's life:

Particular narratives in the testimonial, *I, Phoolan Devi* disrupt binaries such as modern versus traditional or oppressor versus victim that the film reinforces. For example, scenes in the testimonial contextualize Phoolan Devi's resistance in relation to her mother's actions and in relation to Phoolan Devi's own vision of social justice. This contextualization interrupts the process of commodification and consumption of Phoolan Devi's life as an individualized resistance set against a singularly oppressive culture. Phoolan Devi's own words in the book, "I was born with my mother's anger" (1996, 11), for instance, move the reader away from an individualized vision of Phoolan Devi's rebellion and compel the reader to view the rebellion in relation to her mother's struggles with and critical consciousness of the socioeconomic hierarchies in her everyday rural life. Such forms of rebellion provide a contrast to the film's presentation of social oppression as a static feature of Indian culture.<sup>10</sup>

Fernandes reminds us that both book and movie were "collaborative multinational production(s)" and that in our globalized, multicultural world, the commodification of difference risks essentializing cultures and misrepresenting various forms of hegemony and resistance. The Fernandes article offers instructors a perspective to challenge students to increase their awareness of the hegemonic Western constructs that underlie how they make sense of Asian literature and to begin to read in a different way. Fernandes shows how much new forms of literary criticism indict realist representations of "Asian voices." Like my students, I am challenged to avoid stereotypes of tradition, e.g., upper-caste oppression and patriarchy, and explore multiple, contested Asian narratives that test our understanding both of Asians and ourselves. ■

## NOTES

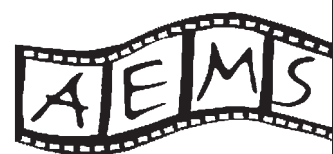
1. Edited by Naomi Katz and Nancy Milton. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.
2. Edited by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita. London: Zed Books, 1984.
3. By S. J. Joshi and translated by Asha Damle. Calcutta: Stree, 1992.
4. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
5. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
6. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
7. Kazuo Ishiguro. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.
8. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 53–4.
9. Reading 'India's Bandit Queen': A Trans/national Feminist Perspective on the Discrepancies of Representation." *Sins* 25(3), 1999, pp. 123–52. Unfortunately, the book, *I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen* (London: Little Brown, 1996), is out of print.
10. Fernandes, p. 144.

JANA EVERETT is a Professor of Political Science and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado at Denver.

## Asian Educational Media Service

<http://www.aems.uiuc.edu>

*Bookmark our  
Web site for free  
advice on finding  
and selecting the  
audio-visual materials  
you need on the  
cultures of Asia!*



- Search our online database
- Read a review
- Write a review
- Download teacher's guides
- Sign up for our free newsletter
- View images from Asia
- Post a message
- Request information
- Make a suggestion
- Check out our many helpful links!

**Asian Educational Media Service** • Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies • University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign • 230 International Studies Building • 910 South Fifth Street • Champaign, IL 61820

Toll Free Telephone: 1-888-828-AEMS (2376) or 217-265-0642  
E-mail: [aems@uiuc.edu](mailto:aems@uiuc.edu) • Fax: 217-265-0641