

## Who/What Is Asian?

### *A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism*

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#### **Drawing a Conceptual Map**

Whoever travels across Asia would soon notice that Asia cannot be categorized into a single homogeneous group. Cultural, religious, historical, economic, and sociopolitical contexts vary extremely from country to country. Asia is the largest of the earth's seven continents. Its people account for three-fifths of the world's population. Asia, therefore, cannot be defined as a monolithic entity. Furthermore, in this contemporary postindustrial world, cross-national and cross-cultural analyses are required in Asian countries in order to explain their own internal features and socioeconomic conditions. Asia can no longer have the same geographical contours and boundaries it had before.

Charting the ground for a discourse on Asian theology is thus not an easy task. First, there are the questions of definition: Who/What is Asian? Do Asians make up any kind of a constituency? On what basis? Can we assume that Asians' theological constructions are necessarily *Asian*? Second, there are questions about the context for exploring and formulating Asian theology: Which/Whose history do we draw on to chart this map of Asian theologians' engagement with the construction of Asian theology? Who has produced knowledge about Asians and their experiences, and from what space/location? What are the disciplinary parameters of this knowledge? What are the methods used to locate and chart Asians' experiences and contexts?

I do not assume that the current version of Asian theology and its articulation of what Asian is are the ultimate form of Asian theological discourse. Rather I consider theological construction in Asia to be an unfinished project, not only in the sense that it has yet to be fully implemented but in the deeper sense that its foundations, principles, resources, representations, and institutional devices leave much to be clarified, refined, and developed. Asian voices can and should be incorporated into this process.

### The Trap of Identity in Asian Theological Discourse

Theology has undergone major changes in the last four decades. The changes concern: what theology is; who does theology; the issues that theology considers; the cultural, political, and philosophical contexts of theology. Especially those who have been marginalized from the mainstream of theological construction—that is, women, African Americans, and those from the so-called Third World—have begun to raise fundamental questions that challenge theology. In contemporary theology, one of the changes could be called *discursive shifts*, which have fundamentally altered theological discourse in the ways in which theologians formulate their theological reflections. One of the discursive shifts is the rise of *postcolonial sensibility*, which paves the way for the emergence of Asian theology. The rise of postcolonial sensibility made Asian theologians examine how the superiority of the First World was constructed, including how Western Christianity supported such West-centrism through Christian beliefs and practices. Asian theological discourse is associated with the world process of decolonization after World War II.<sup>1</sup> A sense of anti-West-centrism is predominant in Asian theological discourse. Western systems of knowledge and representation have been related with the long history of the West's material and political subordination of the non-Western world, and theological construction is no exception.

Asian theology has been developed with the spirit of postcolonialism, undermining the prevalence of the Western-centeredness of traditional theological discourse. One of the powerful arguments of the first generation of Asian theologians is that traditional Western theology is limited because it falsely universalizes on the basis of limited perspectives, which are the perspectives of white, middle-class men of North America and Western Europe. They go on to argue that Asian resources and experiences have been left out, while Western

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<sup>1</sup>The "World War" itself is the very product of West-centrism. It is quite obvious that the so-called World Wars I and II were not in fact "world" wars, because, geographically speaking, the wars did not break out worldwide.

cultural and religious resources are positively employed in traditional theology. It is natural, therefore, for Asian theologians, at the primary stage of constructing their own theological discourse, to try to break the general assumption of the superiority of Western theology and culture. They harshly criticize Western theologians as being part of a Constantinian captivity of the faith and try to construct Asian theology on the basis of Asian culture and resources. In this process of formulating Asian theology, the issue of identity as Asian becomes urgent and significant.

As it is widely known, the contemporary postcolonial discourse emerged in 1978 with the release of Edward Said's book *Orientalism*,<sup>2</sup> which is regarded as the catalyst and reference for postcolonialism and as the founding text through which "the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for."<sup>3</sup> It elaborates a unique understanding of imperialism/colonialism as an epistemological and cultural attitude. According to Said, Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient"<sup>4</sup> and

a *distribution* of geographical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philosophical texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of "interest" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philosophical reconstruction, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world...<sup>5</sup>

The typical image of the Orient conceptualized by Orientalism is its strangeness, difference, exotic sensuousness, eccentricity, backwardness, silent indifference, feminine penetrability, uncivilized nature, and the like.<sup>6</sup> The image of the Orient tends to be static, frozen, fixed eternally; therefore, the possibility of transformation and development in the Orient are denied. Moreover, those frozen characteristics of the Orient sometimes are glorified, mystified, and idealized as the wisdom of the East, by both Western and Asian people. According to this Orientalist perspective, the West is the knowing agent, and Asia is the object to be known. At a deeper level, Orientalism is motivated by the West's desire to establish its own identity as the historical agent that created the

<sup>2</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 56.

<sup>4</sup>Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 206-7.

modern spirit and civilization. To establish this identity, the West needed Asia as the Other. Asia must be the negative background against which the West presents its own positive figure. In other words, Orientalism is an epistemological device for guaranteeing Western hegemony over Asia. Although Said's critique is mainly concerned with the Western perception of the Islamic world in the Middle and Near East, it is relevant to Asia in general. The Hegelian perception of Asian ahistorical stagnancy still remains true in various discourses on Asia.<sup>7</sup>

The critique of Western epistemic hegemony by Asian theologians aims to undermine the Orientalist dogma. In this process, Asian theologians claim Asian superiority and deny universal validity of Western culture and knowledge. For them, Asia, as the Orientalists see it, is *essentially* different from the West. Asserting Asian cultural uniqueness, based on the old dualism of Asia as the Orient and European and American countries as the Occident, becomes the core of Asian theological discourse. Reclaiming our own *Asianness* is Asian theologians' tasks, along with "theological responsibility with fellow Asians,"<sup>8</sup> and "we are all under the power of the culture into which we are born. Our cultural heritage makes us what we are. Our views on life and the world are formed under the direct and indirect influence of our cultural tradition."<sup>9</sup> In this claim, there is a strong *we-they* binarism of we-Asian and they-Western, and it does not accurately reflect how different and diverse the Asian cultures are. As the West as a homogeneous whole exists only in imagination, Asia as a homogeneous whole exists only in the imagination. When one dichotomizes Asia-West into we-they contrasts, one then essentializes the resultant other.

It should be further noted that this dualist assumption itself is the product of the Western intellectual imperialist construct referred to as Orientalism, the product of West-centrism that Asian theologians themselves criticize. When Asian theologians reject traditional theology as being specifically Western and culturally inadequate to the Asian context, they ironically ascribe the same homogeneous cultural essence to Asia that Orientalists utilize to contrast Asia with the West's self-portrait. They change the evaluative connotation of this essence from negative to positive but retain its cognitive content unchanged. For an Asian identity they look to the stereotype that Orientalists imposed on

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975). In his notorious foreword for the chapter on China, Hegel places China and India outside the scope of world history on the grounds that these countries experience no dialectical change whatever but merely repetition of the same pattern.

<sup>8</sup>Choan-Seng Song, "Freedom of Christian Theology for Asian Cultures: Celebrating the Inauguration of the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia," *Asian Journal of Theology* 1, no. 3 (1989): 87.

<sup>9</sup>Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 6.

Asia to establish a superior Western identity. In favor of a kind of unity as *Asian* against the West, Asian theologians themselves tend to erase the diversity and complexity of Asian peoples and cultures and to overlook the very fact that the West is as heterogeneous and hybrid as Asia.

As a result, Asian theologians unwittingly adopt and internalize the Orientalist view of monolithic Asia that they criticize, and at the same time create Occidentalism in the same manner, though this Occidentalism does not have the hegemonic power over the West as Orientalism does over Asia.<sup>10</sup> This is ironic yet understandable. It is the same mechanism found in practices of social discrimination. When the discriminatory stereotype is deeply held, the groups who are discriminated against are induced to convert it into a basis for self-esteem. This occurs not so much because, given the persistence of such a stereotype, it is strategically easier to turn it to their own advantage rather than destroy it, as because the conversion strategy promises to heal a people's wounded self-respect more powerfully than does the strategy of destroying the stereotype. As "the once-colonized others' insisting on taking their place as historical subjects," they begin to expose the hidden voices of their own in terms of *essential* difference from the colonizer on the basis of culture, ethnicity, race, or gender. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains this with the expression, "strategic choices of essentialism."<sup>11</sup>

### The Trap of Essentialized Identity

The strategy that Spivak has described is, in a way, a natural response for those discriminated against who want to disassociate themselves from the presumption of cultural inferiority that the practice of discrimination has imposed on them. They positively affirm their Asian identity, because to detach their identity from being Asian in order to prove their equal status with the Western would make them accomplices to the presumption of inferiority. To the deep-seated Orientalist prejudice, the Asian theologians' attempt to increase their self-esteem offers an analogous response: *Asia is beautiful*. This rhetoric has a healing effect on people's self-esteem. Their legitimate claim to equal respect with the West turns into an ironic affirmation of the imposed Asian identity.

Although understandable and effective, this inverse use of the imposed Asian identity is wrong and dangerous, for Asian identity can easily turn into a tyrannical imposition of the proper ways of being Asian

<sup>10</sup>For more discussion on Occidentalism, see Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," in *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 11–13.

and of the proper image of Asia. Moreover, it represses the recognition of Asia's internal diversity and potential for endogenous transformation, and tempts one to discourage and even to oppress and dismiss Asian demands for emancipatory movements—for example, women's liberation movements—on the grounds of their “foreign” origin. This politics of essentialized/nativist identity in Asian theological discourse then reinforces specifically the Orientalist prejudice that Asian culture is inadequate for a universal theological discourse, and, generally, cultural/geographical essentialism: “Asians are only Asians” just as “women are only women.” The epistemic hegemony critique enables us to get out of this trap of Asian identity by dissolving the very Orientalist dualism internalized in Asian theological discourse. This critique undermines the assumption of a monolithic Asian cultural essence. The polarizing drive of Orientalist dualism traps the West as well as Asia in a distorted perception of self-identity. The critique of epistemic hegemony enables us to direct both Asia and the West away from the cage of their deceptively polarized identities.

Asian theologians characterize Asia by its overwhelming poverty and multifaceted religiosity. According to Aloysius Pieris, poverty constitutes a common denominator shared with the rest of the so-called Third World, and multifaceted religiosity refers to the specific character of Asia.<sup>12</sup> Following this argument, one's own identity as Asian requires being poor, and some Asian people cannot be regarded as Asian if they are not extremely poor. C. S. Song even argues that the poor Asia is “the Asia betrayed by the prosperous Hong Kong, the orderly Singapore, the industrialized Japan, and by pseudo-democracy in most Asian countries.”<sup>13</sup> Although poverty and poor people can be found everywhere in the world, even in the so-called First World, the reality of poverty in Asia is more striking. More than three-quarters of the world's poor live in Asia. Moreover, poverty is normally very closely interwoven with the religiosity of the people. Being Asian is, according to Asian theologians, related with living in poverty and multifaceted religiosity. The Asian church must be, therefore, “humble enough to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian *religiosity* and bold enough to be crucified on the cross of Asian *poverty*...our desperate search for the Asian face of Christ can find fulfillment only if we participate in Asia's own search for it in the unfathomable abyss where religion and poverty seem to have the same common source: God.”<sup>14</sup> Poor Asia is in this respect fundamentally different from the wealthy West, and furthermore, the source of the

<sup>12</sup>Aloysius Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines,” in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980).

<sup>13</sup>Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 8.

<sup>14</sup>Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation,” 93–94.

poverty of Asia is God. Theology, according to Asian theologians, must arise from the Asian poor, and "a truly liberating theology must ultimately be the work of the Asian poor."<sup>15</sup>

Although this kind of monolithic understanding of Asia by Asian theologians is very appealing and carries its partial truth, this tends to suppress the diversity among people of different social/cultural strata within Asian countries, as if Asians were class-less, gender-less, state-less, race-less. The degree and experience of poverty vary extremely, and the notion of "being poor" is itself a very relative and complex one. So the question, "Who are Asians?" is very complicated and elusive. Asian identity cannot be comprehended by such a grand concept as "poverty." It is obvious that the process of finding one's identity, whether it be personal, national, regional, or universal, is an ongoing process and cannot be fixed by grand concepts such as poverty or multifaceted religiosity. Formulating Asian identity only as difference from that of the West ignores the complexity among Asian people's issues and the overlapping dimensions with Western ones. The root causes of various forms of oppression are blurred. It is not enough to formulate a concrete strategy to debunk and to bring a concrete transformation of the particular time and context.

In most Asian theological discourse, there has been a strong tendency to posit an essential *Asianness*, which is entirely different from *Westernness*, that all Asians have and share in common despite the racial, class, gender, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences among Asians: *anonymous collectivity*. This tendency carries *the mark of the plural*,<sup>16</sup> obscures the heterogeneity of Asians, and eventually cuts off examination of the significance of such heterogeneity for the contemporary construction of Asian theology. All Asians look alike in most Asian theological discourses. In Asian women's theological discourse, for example, Asian women have been presented as pure victims or liberating figures who transcend all the pain and suffering with an amazing liberating power. The typical images of Asian women portrayed in writings by Asian feminist theologians are those of victims from starvation, rape, and poverty who then are glorified as being able to liberate themselves with heroic power: "Asian women share the domestic, economic, political, and religious oppression that their sisters all over the world suffer...Asian women have also been raped, tortured, imprisoned, and killed for their political beliefs...Asian women are struggling against, and in the process of the struggle they are giving birth to a spirituality that is particularly *woman's* and specifically *Asian*."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>"Final Statement," in Virginia Fabella, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980), 157. This book is an outcome of the Asian Theological Conference, January 7-20, 1979, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka.

<sup>16</sup>Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 85.

<sup>17</sup>Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 78-79 (italics added).

Asian women's theology has emerged from Asian women's cries and screams, from the extreme suffering in their everyday lives. They have shouted from pain when their own and their children's bodies collapsed from starvation, rape, and battering...Asian women's theology is very "Third World" because their reality is marked by poverty and oppression...Asian women's theology is "very Asian"...Asian women's theology is also "very women"...Asian women are oppressed economically, socially, politically, religiously, and culturally in specific ways just because they are women.<sup>18</sup>

Here, I would like to raise some fundamental questions: What is "very women" and "very Asian"? Who are "Asian women" anyway? Do Asian women make up any kind of constituency? If so, on what basis? Who defines Asian women as an entity? Just as Western women cannot be defined as an entity, Asian women also cannot be defined as a unitary group. If Asian is continuously portrayed as an entity, Asian theology as theological discourse and movement will lose its accountability to the concrete transformation by under/mis-representing the tremendously diverse reality of Asian people.

In the primary stage of liberation from Western theological imperialism and of its own theological formulations, asserting Asian as an entity and *essentialized identity* as Asian is impossible to avoid. If the notion of *Asianness* becomes fixed, however, Asian identity will be more and more constraining rather than liberating. Those images of Asian women as "*minjung* of the *minjung*," or "poor among the poor," cannot embrace the diversity of Asian women because there are those women who are not *minjung*, *dalit*, or poor and those who are, for instance, politicians, professors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, businesswomen, upper-middle-class women, or affluent housewives. There are large numbers of people who do not fit into these romanticized-oppressed images in Asia. There is no "Asian women's experience in general," including the experiences of oppression and liberation, but only historically circumscribed experiences in particular times and spaces, which are differently shaped by social class, race, education, individual difference, religion, culture, and so forth. It is difficult for Koreans, for example, to understand multiracial countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia, because racial and cultural homogeneity has been central to Korean nationalism. It is also not easy for Koreans to understand the long history of other Asian countries. For example, Pakistan and Korea, or China and India, or New Zealand and Sri Lanka have hardly anything in common. In this context, it is either arrogant or ignorant to define Asian as a single entity and as having one face. The reification of Asian women

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<sup>18</sup>Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1990), 22-24.

as “slaves of slaves,” “minjung of the minjung,”<sup>19</sup> or “poor among the poor” is an essentialization of the nature of Asian women. Asian women are constituted unilaterally as victims and are denied any historical cultural specificity.

I am not overlooking the fact that casting Asian as a singular entity can encourage potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries in Asian countries. There is, however, a great danger in projecting Asian as an entity and in postulating Asian women only as victims, for such designations cannot sufficiently present a dynamic, historically specific view of the oppression and struggles of Asians of different times and contexts. Asia as a singular entity is actually an “imaginative geography.”<sup>20</sup>

### The Trap of Neo-Orientalism

In her article “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty analyzes the issue of *representation* of Third World women, who have been objectified by First World feminists. She shows how Western feminism has created “Third World” women as a single category, thereby producing the “discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World.”<sup>21</sup> Third World women are regarded as *different* from Western women and seem to exist as a “coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial location.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, this “homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group” produces “the image of an average third world woman.”<sup>23</sup> Their context, in fact, does not matter because they are all alike. They are welcome only when they present themselves as different from Western women.

<sup>19</sup>Letty Russell, “Minjung Theology in Women’s Prospective,” in *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective*, ed. Jung Young Lee (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), 83. In fact, the category of women is much broader than that of *minjung*. Defining Korean women as “*minjung* among *minjung*” is minimizing the range of Korean women’s issues because of its limited categories. While *minjung* are those who are marginalized/oppressed primarily on the basis of their socioeconomic status, this is not necessarily due to patriarchal institutions and social values. Women in every social stratum, from the lower class to upper-middle class, from the factory workers even to the First Lady, have suffered from patriarchy in different forms and intensity. It is overgeneralizing if one identifies the upper-middle-class women as *minjung* only because they are biologically female, for this can blur the root causes of oppression of both *minjung* and women as well. Moreover, the category of *minjung* is not static, whereas that of women is. This is so because while the *minjung* can transcend their *minjung*-ness by achieving better socioeconomic resources in their lives, women cannot change their being women no matter what.

<sup>20</sup>See Said, *Orientalism*, 49–72.

<sup>21</sup>Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Lourdes Torres (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 54.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

Now, i am not only given the permission to open up and talk, i am also encouraged to express my difference. My audience expects and demands it; otherwise people would feel as if they have been cheated: We did not come to hear a Third World member speak about the First (?) World, We came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us *what we can't have* and to divert us from the monotony of sameness...the Third World representative the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks is the *unspoiled* African, Asian, or Native American, who remains more preoccupied with her/his image of the real native—the *truly different*—than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change.<sup>24</sup>

Asians are expected to speak and to write only *as Asian*. Otherwise, they are not *authentic* enough. Then, Asians have to try to generalize themselves, to make themselves representative, to distance themselves from the Western. So, in fact, “for the person who does the ‘speaking as’ something, it is a problem of distancing from one’s self” but “the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone ‘speaking as’ something or the other...*there* one encounters a problem. When *they* want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenization.”<sup>25</sup>

When they want to *cover* the non-Western theological discourse in their work, homogenizing and tokenizing and ghettoizing are part of the process. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for instance, *covers* Asian feminist theology in her book *Women and Redemption*.<sup>26</sup> When one reads through the content of her book, s/he could easily find a kind of inconsistency in each chapter. Comparing chapters 6, 7, and 8, for example, one can see how Ruether tries to avoid the trap of generalization when she introduces feminist theologies in the West by mentioning various individual feminist theologians in chapters 6 and 7, even though there still remains the question of what the disciplinary parameters of this selection are and what the standards used to select these representative figures are in feminist theological discourse in the West. Biographical narratives about those feminist theologians show that they are individuals, not a group of people. But in chapter 8, there is a methodological inconsistency. The

<sup>24</sup>T. Minh-Ha Trinh, *Woman Native Other* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 88.

<sup>25</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Question of Multi-culturalism,” in *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 60.

<sup>26</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1998).

names of individual theologians disappear from the content of the book, and instead, Ruether deals with vast regions within one chapter by employing a grand categorization: Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Because she does not have knowledge of the vernacular languages of each region, she must, of course, be unable to access the various resources written in those languages. Overgeneralization, oversimplification, and homogenization become a method of representation, and the diversity, complexity, and historicity of the feminist theological discourse of those regions are suppressed. Spivak's critique of Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*,<sup>27</sup> a book based on a short trip to China, helps us to see the critique by contemporary Western feminism of modern androcentric humanism. However, its insistence on the heterogeneity of women is lost when Western feminist theology faces the non-Western. By *covering* Asia, Africa, and Latin America in her book through the *average women's issue* of the non-Western regions, Ruether is not only practicing a discursive hegemonic power but also tokenizing and therefore ghettoizing non-Western feminist theological discourse.

Even though I acknowledge the informative value of her writings on feminist theology(ies) in non-Western regions, a couple of particular figures or meetings from such a vast region cannot and should not be treated, I believe, as representative voices. Such an approach produces the idea that women in non-Western regions are just a group, and the analysis of specific historical, cultural, societal, and personal differences within/among such women becomes impossible. The variety of disciplines and standpoints and methodologies for doing feminist theologies within a region and among feminist theologians of the region are also ignored. In this way, they are frozen and fixed into a certain image of *victimization* and *oppression*, and their historical specificity is fundamentally denied. They are *native, indigenous, exotic, non-state, non-class*. This homogenizing of non-Western feminist theological discourse is an act of *othering* the women in Africa, Latin America, and Asia: They are somehow *others*, different from Western feminist theologians.

While *othered* objects—here, Asian/Latin American/African feminist theologians—do not have power as to whether they would include or exclude feminist theologians in the West, the *othering* subjects—here, feminist theologians in the West such as Ruether—have a discursive power to make a decision whether to include or exclude feminist theologians in non-Western regions. So we feminist theologians in Asia are sometimes included as women (on the grounds of the biological sameness) and other times excluded/segregated as Asian (on the grounds of the geographical/cultural difference). Asia is itself infinite layers, and

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<sup>27</sup>Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987); and Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).

its complexity and diversity can hardly be conveyed through such a monolithic description and analysis as in Ruether's book. Homogenizing Asian feminist theology is a kind of *epistemic violence* because Asian women are represented identically in feminist theological discourse *regardless* of their historicity and specific physicality. Ruether does not use terms such as "North American feminist theology" as she does for other parts of the world. If she were to use it, she would immediately get harsh critique from fellow feminist theologians for generalizing and homogenizing the extreme diversity of feminist theologies in North America.

We should therefore ask: *Who* is homogenizing, and *what* discursive connotation does it have? When the homogenization is practiced by those who have discursive hegemonic power, it is a form of neo-Orientalism, that is, it re-forms and it proliferates a geographical awareness through theological texts: "It not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control...what is a manifestly different world."<sup>28</sup> When *they* ask me to talk *as* an Asian woman, I know that it is both complimentary and complementary, leaving a serious lack behind to be filled. *They* make me feel I am special in the sense that I should/must be *different* from them. In the process of tokenizing, homogenizing, and eventually ghettoizing, the multiple *I*'s disappear. There remains only the *mark of the plural*—the collective identity.

Discursive hegemony is very subtle, much more pernicious than blatant discrimination and colonization. Claiming a collective identity is, in some respects, a necessary process for the once-discriminated to politicize themselves. But when it is *re-formed* by those who have discursive power, it becomes a hegemonic imposition of that power. Power, according to Foucault, constructs a "pastoral" regime through which it seeks to control its subjects by *re-forming* them, and the key instrument of power is "knowledge." Discourse, as in discourse *on* Asian feminist theology by Western feminist theologians like Ruether, "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth."<sup>29</sup> As Said contends, the regime of disciplinary power inscribed in Orientalism transforms the real East into a discursive Orient. When I read the chapter on Asian feminist theologies in *Women and Redemption* by Ruether, I felt that *the real me* had been *re-formed* into *the discursive me*—Asian/Korean women, the plural, lacking my physicality, historicity, and personality as an individual. In explaining what *Han* is, she says, "Han is not simply the experiences of individuals. It is collective and transmitted from generation to generation,"<sup>30</sup> citing from Korean *minjung* theology. In

<sup>28</sup>Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

<sup>29</sup>Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Peregrine, 1979), 194.

<sup>30</sup>Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 270.

this homogenized discourse on Asian feminist theology, I, as an Asian woman, hardly feel I am fairly/properly represented. She chooses what parts she wants to hear, and she chooses what she does with that material, and she then would think she has *covered* the issue. She does not seem to apply her critical analytical tool to this “universal” claim about the so-called Korean women’s experience in general by adopting the notion of *Han* with capital letter without any questioning as to whether this notion of Han is really as comprehensive as it is claimed.

I would say that the notion of Han and its description in relation to Korean women’s experience in general are romanticizing and essentializing Korean women’s experiences, as if historical change and dynamics did not matter for Korean women’s everyday lives. Even though I am well aware of Korean women’s experiences under the patriarchal system and institutions in Korea, I would not say that I am a “Han-ridden” person and that the Han in me has been transmitted from the previous generation to me, just on the ground of my being a Korean woman. As are other women in the world, Korean women are also divided according to their economic status, educational/religious background, marital status, and so forth. They are not merely pure victims—Han-ridden people. They can be both victims in one sense and victimizers in another. There is no such thing as Korean/Asian women’s Han in general, and furthermore, Korean women’s suffering or anger or sorrow cannot be transmitted from generation to generation because it is a historical product of one’s specific time and location. Claiming Han as Korean women’s collective experience is, in a way, a product of *fictive ethnicity*. It may sound very exotic and interesting for Westerners, but it does not convey/represent what the *real* Asian/Korean women of today are. It produces and reinforces the false assumptions that the meaning of gender identity and the experience of sexism are the same for all Korean/Asian women “as women” and that gender identity exists in isolation from class identity, sexual identity, religious identity, racial identity, and so forth. Even within a single society like Korea, not to mention Asia generally, the definitions, expectations, and experiences of what it means to be a woman vary tremendously. The experiences of sexism by female factory owners, for instance, cannot be the same as the experiences of female factory workers. Gender identity is deeply intermingled with other kinds of identities.

As “women” can never be univocally defined, “Asian” can never be univocally defined due to its cultural, political, economic, societal, and religious diversities. Asia is utterly hybrid/heterogeneous and never can be homogeneous. Either undervaluing/devaluing or overvaluing Asia is distorting the real Asia. Claiming one’s identity only *in differential*, claimed by either Asians themselves or by non-Asians, is essentializing the multiple/hybrid identities of Asia and the West through a binarism of

representations in the realm of stereotype, with the aim of fixating the sense of difference between Western and Asian parts of the world. Trinh Minh-Ha rightly points out that

difference as uniqueness or special identity is both limiting and deceiving. If identity refers to the whole pattern of sameness within a human life, the style of a continuing me that permeates all the changes undergone, then difference remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another...claiming a female/ethnic identity/difference is commonly tantamount to reviving a kind of naïve "male-tinted" romanticism.<sup>31</sup>

The dilemma of *speaking as* lies in the fact that when it is practiced by the marginalized themselves, it might have the effect of making their voices heard, but when it is strongly expected by the dominant people, hegemonic people, it becomes a process of generalizing, homogenizing, and tokenizing oneself. It becomes a process of distancing from oneself, for one has to make oneself a representative. When we Asian women are asked to present ourselves *as* Asian theologians, we are expected to fill our presentation with ancient folklore, rites, shamanistic symbols and rituals, dance, emotional *han*-ridden story-telling. Otherwise, *they* don't listen because it bores them. From fellow Asians we are also accused of being Westernized. We have to be born and continuously live only in the past.<sup>32</sup> However, "like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present moment," and we Asian theologians, whether by choice or by discursive force, are becoming more and more "the slave of the past"<sup>33</sup> in the name of indigenization, of self-identity, of multiculturalism, of celebrating/respecting difference. We are more and more frozen into the past because *we*—the East—are/must be different from *them*—the West.

It seems improper when non-Western women's stories become the means for Western feminist theologians, even well-meaning ones, to *cover* their own academic work, thus extending their academic authority to transnational contexts. The problem of representation deals with whether one can truly represent less-privileged others. As Spivak contends, the

<sup>31</sup>Trinh, *Woman Native Other*, 95–96.

<sup>32</sup>I frequently have been asked why I do not do *Korean/Asian* feminist theology but do just feminist theology when I teach or deliver a lecture. The major reason that I am asked such a question is the fact that I do not adopt the ancient folklore and traditional stories into my theological construction, but deal with the current issues that Korean women face. For those who ask such questions, the *real* Korean/Asian theology should have something to do with the past—the premodern era—not with the present—the twenty-first century. Surprisingly, for many people, either Korean/Asian or non-Asian, something *genuine/authentic* Korean/Asian is solely related with the *pure* past—the past that is not polluted by Western culture. But like it or not, there is no such unpolluted, unspoiled, pure past.

<sup>33</sup>Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 225.

authentic feelings of the subaltern once named will be misrepresented because of the multiple mediations of more powerful groups and institutions, both local and global. The privileged must unlearn one's privilege, "[so] that, not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency."<sup>34</sup>

### Toward a Hybrid Identity for Theological Construction in Asia

If we criticize Orientalism for its universalizing overtones, then the idea of Asia as a distinct historical entity is itself the other side of Orientalism. It is a bitter truth that today Asia does not stand *outside* the West. Even so-called *Asianness* is already implicated in the ubiquitous West. Orientalism and a particularism such as nativism are two sides of the same coin, and criticism of one cannot be made without criticism of the other. This leads to what Spivak calls a "new cultural alibi,"<sup>35</sup> by which some seek to avoid the pitfalls of the earlier Orientalism simply by particularizing their inquires as meticulously as possible by way of class, gender, race, nation, and geographical locale. One can see this in term constructions in English writings, such as *Han*, *Han-pu-ri*, or *minjung*. The use of Korean as a specifier signals a new kind of care and a new kind of attentiveness to the discursive imperatives of cultural pluralism. In the name of investigating "theological/cultural difference" from the West, these vernacular terms, such as "Korean" in English writings, easily become a method of differentiation that precisely blocks criticism from its critical task. A scholarly nativism that functions squarely within the Orientalist dynamic and that continues to imprison "other cultures" within entirely conventional disciplinary boundaries thus remains intact. It is very clear that a postcolonial position alone does not guarantee that we can or will convey the truth.

Most recently associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, the term *hybridity* helps Asians to overcome the exoticism of cultural identity. Bhabha argues that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the "Third Space of enunciation."<sup>36</sup> Bhabha contends that:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory...may open the way to conceptualizing an *intemational* culture, based not on the

<sup>34</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Strategy, Identity, Writing," in *Postcolonial Critic*, 42.

<sup>35</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity," in *Remaking History*, ed. Phil Marian (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1989), 281.

<sup>36</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 37.

exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*.<sup>37</sup>

The Third Space is not a fixed space, but an indeterminate one, which occurs with cultural hybridity. All forms of culture are, according to Bhabha, continually in a process of hybridity, and hybridity is the third space that enables other positions to emerge. It seems very useful to employ Bhabha's notion of hybridity in Asian theologians' search for an identity as Asian because "[t]he process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation."<sup>38</sup> The monolithic categories of gender, class, race, or ethnicity are re-situated in terms of borderline-crossings and *in-between* spaces—the Third Space of hybridity. The Third Space as an extended concept of hybridity, and as "the chosen marginality," is a *space of resistance* in the postcolonial world and a strategy that will re-inscribe the past culture and other neighboring cultures. Much of Asian theological discourse has been about Asia as a "distinct" territory with a "distinct" history. This type of discourse is, I would argue, geographically deterministic and hence culturally essentialist.

We have moved into a new period of theological reflection. There are many methods and diverse programs for doing theology today. There also has been a drastic change in the Asian context, which is quite different from the past industrial age. We have entered the Internet age, in which geographical borders are blurred and the confluence of cultures is a daily reality. Discourses such as postcolonialism, postmodernism, and feminism, furthermore, begin to single out grand narrativity, a re-orientalizing tendency, and a patriarchal ethos within Asian theological discourse, and to present the importance of local narratives, postpatriarchy, and the hybridity of Asianness in Asian theological discourse. Postcolonialism and feminism are methodologically useful for creating conditions for crosscutting coalitions that challenge totalizing discourses in the name of culture, race, ethnicity, and nation in Asian theological construction. The new situation is cross-cultural, multiple, and hybrid. It pulls theologians in a new direction for constructing Asian theology that reflects the current situation. Exploring continuity and discontinuity between the new situation and the old means that articulating its implications for constructing Asian theological discourse will be very important for today. In this process, it should be noted that:

[A]ll cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>38</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 211.

<sup>39</sup>Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xxv.

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, and American are not more than starting points...Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental...but there seems no reason except fear and prejudices to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things.<sup>40</sup>

It is very clear today that whatever isolates itself petrifies, be it Asian theology or Western theology, and whatever petrifies dies. Orientalist dualism is disguised as an empirical generalization, but in fact, it is a transcendental scheme for interpreting data that justifies the observer in disregarding any counterexample as a meaningless anomaly and thus blinds one to internal diversity and dynamic potential. It is an epistemological device for guaranteeing Western hegemony over Asia. Although both Asians and Westerners are not free from the spell of Orientalism, as we have seen, Asians might be said to be generally in a better position to break it, because it is easier for the targets of a stereotype to destroy it than it is for its perpetrators. By breaking this spell of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism, Asian theologies can communicate that the West may no longer be complacent about its own record in constructing theology today.

We Asian theologians today face an inevitable question: Will Asian theology be recognizable in a global context if it does not talk about Asian *as* Asian, if it does not focus on *ethnic identity* in isolation from the other elements of identity, and if it does not try to describe the situation of "*Asians in general*"? Although this question is difficult to answer, we have to struggle regarding the definition of "Asian" and to grapple with the significance of differences/similarities among Asians and between Asia and the West. Asian theological discourse is constituted by and will thrive on such struggles. Through such grappling, Asian theology from a postcolonial perspective will create conditions for coalitions that challenge totalizing discourse in the name of culture, race, ethnicity, and nation. Postcolonial theological anthropology must reject the search for the unchanging, culturally essential core of Asians/Asianness. The hybrid self, decentering any foundational notion of Asian, can be a Christian ideal of losing oneself to find oneself. Then, in a postcolonial approach of Asian theology, the question, *What is the Asian?* yields to the question, *Who is the Asian?* Although the "what" question is the search for the

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 336.

unchanging, essential core of the Asian, the “who” question is the search for the ever-changing nature of the Asian as hybrid, decentered, multiple selves. This postcolonial theological anthropology will invite us to live in critical/radical openness to the cultural hybridity of our time and to have a constant sensitivity to the “other” in various forms, not reducing the “other” to the totality of the “same.”