WRITING ON HYBRIDITY: RE-EXERTING OWNERSHIP THROUGH DANCE WRITING IN MALAYSIA

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Preliminary Comments

Homi Bhaba argues that the space of hybridity offers the most profound challenge to colonialism when the post-colonial world valorizes mixing of spaces for ambiguity rather than for authenticity or truth (1994, p. 113). Clearing spaces for multiple voices that may have been previously silenced by dominant ideologies entails destabilizing hegemonic thinking creating spaces for the subaltern to speak and produce alternatives to dominant discourse. As a multiracial country created by the voices of multicultural polity, one of Malaysia’s spaces of hybridity could be observed in its performing arts, dance being the subject of this investigation. Writing on dance hybridity in Malaysia is about accepting the plural nature of post-colonial Malaysia, which does not simply refer to the period after the British colonialism but of different relationships concerning power and control or production of knowledge within its plural society mitigating neo-colonial hegemony. Hybridity in Malaysian dance is rhizomic and as a post-colonial turn, dance writing in Malaysia cannot eliminate the need to analyze the liminality of hybridity as a paradigm of post-colonial anxiety that is contestable and malleable.

Part One: Reflecting Ethnicity and the Notion of Indigenous Modernity

Homi Bhaba’s argument that colonial hybridity produces ambivalent cultural form could well be extended into a critique of cultural imperialism in post-colonial dance culture in Malaysia. Cultural imperialism in post-colonial Malaysia, which is hegemonic and ambivalent, is attributed to the dilemmas of developing a national identity to navigate multiculturalism in the social and cultural reconstructions of its citizenry in spite of their seemingly contrasting dichotomies to find middle grounds to breed social-cultural-religious tolerance, dialogues and discourses in the arts and culture. Numerous karmatic framing of a “national culture” have created binary opposition between hegemonic majority represented by the “indigenous” population and the subaltern communities with diasporic origin either from the ancient land of Hijaz in the southern end of the Arabic Peninsular, the sub-continents of India or from the south-eastern provinces of mainland China (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2008, p. 90). The formulation of a National Cultural Policy by the convenors of the National

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1 As a constituent of postcolonial theory, the term ‘subaltern’ refers to the perspectives of those from groups outside of the hegemonic power structure although current critical usage may refer to marginalized groups, the oppressed or discriminated.
Culture Congress in 1971 to steer the country and its people towards socially and culturally engineered programmes of national unity was drawn to determine the direction of the nation in achieving a national identity, a sense of belonging and self-esteem as a sovereign nation that was almost torn apart by highly polarised societies that had taken root in extremist political movements in the wake of the 1969 racial riots. Guided by three principles that the “national culture” must be based on the indigenous Malay culture, that it should accept suitable elements from other cultures, and that Islam is the moulding component of the national culture, the 1971 National Culture Policy (NCP) has become a monolithic behemoth for the far right that is packed with vague assumptions of naturalized myths of racial or cultural origin.

Over a period of more than thirty years, Malaysians have taken for granted that the National Culture Policy is a state-owned policy which governs aspects of performative and non-performative cultural expressions for the gaze of the state. Hence, anything outside of state functionaries and apparatus are deemed to be private and above all communal activities of a multicultural society. Attritions in the definitions of private and public performance, display, exhibition, spaces and any tangible form of representations continue to obtrude between the state and the subaltern communities contesting the statuesque of the NCP (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2008, p. 93).

This has led to the creation of the “indigenous majority” and the “indigenous minority” when “indigenous-ness” is an interpretation of the hegemonic majority rather than that of the people. Obviously it is fraught with all the problems of imperialism and asymmetrical relationships. It has failed to recognize the performativity of Malaysians that are keen on hybridity as an expression of indigenous modernity, which ironically is sought by the state to expel memories of one hundred and thirty years of divide and rule by British colonialism.

Paradoxically, the aim of creating post-colonial indigenous modernity in a nation-state that seeks to join the fraternity of advance economy of the first world through ambiguous national cultural policy, beneficial as it appears, gives rise to a new form of colonization disempowering the subaltern (Sarkar, 2002). With the rise of hegemonic nation-state, certain cultural groups have been privileged for the national imaginary, while others have not (Trimillos, 2011).

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2 The precarious but assumed perception of national unity was ultimately tested in the 1969 race riots, which subsequently lead to the formulation of a National Cultural Policy by the convenors of the National Culture Congress in 1971 to steer the country and its people towards a socially and culturally engineered programmes of national unity. The policy was drawn to determine the direction of the nation in achieving a national identity, a sense of belonging and self-esteem as a sovereign nation that was almost torn apart by highly polarised societies that had taken roots in extremist political movements (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2008, p. 91).
Part Two: Writing the Race

To this effect, dance writings from the 1960s to the 2000s remained divided on ethnic grounds rather than shared collectively as a pluralist nation-state. The national imaginary of dance in Malaysia is of the indigenous majority, parlaying diachronic narratives of history and traditions as a national imaginary of high culture, heritage and traditions (D’Cruz, 1979; Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2000, 1993, 1986; Mohd Ghouse Nasaruddin, 1979; Sheppard, 1983, 1970, 1967; Siti Zainon, 1983). Dance writings of the indigenous minority were periphery and never privileged for mainstream consumption. They were not only written in the vernacular but were mostly on the dance cultures of the diaspora, romanticizing mother-land from the far shores of a surrogate nation-state. It is arboreal rather than rhizomic. This has continued unabated into the 21st century. Examples could be lifted from dance writings from any particular community in Malaysia in spite of its limitations and rarity. Amongst the Malaysian-Chinese community, writings on dance are not as numerous as those written for the indigenous majority in English or Malay. Most of dance writings in Chinese for Malaysian-Chinese are found in blogs, magazines and newspaper columns. Chiong Keat Aun, a DJ for the AiFM (Chinese Radio Channel of RTM), for example wrote many things on Malaysian Chinese songs, poems and clan issues in Hokkien and Teochiew. Although he does not write on dance exclusively, his writings in Chinese have touched on dance and dance movements of the Chinese community. Mentor Publishing Sdn. Bhd. has produced several books on Chinese performing arts written by Xu Wan Jun, Fu Cheng De and Anthony Meh, some with forewords by Ou Jianping, the renowned Chinese dance critic from the China National Academy of Arts. Such writings are focused on contemporary Malaysian-Chinese dance companies such as Dua Space Dance Theater, Batu Dance Company and the music-movement ensemble of Hands Percussion. It has become quite apparent that writings on Malaysian-Chinese dances have become more sophisticated and intellectually challenging since 2000 when Ou Jianping came to Malaysia to mentor nascent Malaysian-Chinese dance writers. An example to be lauded is the writing by Anthony Meh (2009) with a foreword by Ou Jianping consisting of fifty articles written for the Malaysian-Chinese newspaper, Sin Chew Jit Poh on wide ranging issues of Chinese dance from the Malaysian-Chinese Contemporary Dance, Chinese dances, reviews and critics on a few contemporary dance performances, write-ups on Lin Hwai Ming and Helen Lai, on renowned Chinese dance companies such as Cloud Gate and Hong Kong CCDC, local collaborations between Malaysian-Chinese dancers with the Indian based Temple of Fine Arts in Kuala Lumpur and issues on dance festivals. Although most of the articles were written with passionate and emotive perspectives that idealize the dance world and gave tremendous insights into the activities and standpoints of Malaysian-Chinese dance world, these writings are beyond the grasp and comprehension of other communities in Malaysia as it remains periphery and marginalized outside the domain of indigenous majority’s access. Conversely, dance writings from Hong Kong and Taiwan remain popular with
the Malaysian-Chinese readers, which are brought home by Malaysian Chinese dance enthusiasts through friends living in Hong Kong or Taiwan.

Likewise, references and writings on Indian dance published in India in the English language are read by a minority of Malaysian-Indians while writings on Indian dance in Malaysia by Malaysian-Indians are rare. At one point Malaysians were able to enjoy dance writings in the Hansa magazine published by the Temple of Fine Arts in Kuala Lumpur before it was terminated in 1997. Occasionally one would read reports of Indian classical dance performances ranging from Bharatnatyam debut on-stage performances (arengetram) by young and newly accomplished dancers after years of training or rare Odissi performances by dancers from established studios such as Sutra Dance Theatre and the Temple of Fine Arts in the local English newspapers. Reviews in other languages are extremely rare. It is quite obvious that the occasional writings on Indian dance in Malaysia are more often written in the English language rather than vernacular Tamil or Malayalam, hence indicating two probabilities; Malaysian-Indians who read dance writing are English educated urban based communities while Malaysian-Indians in general are not receptive to reading dance literature in the vernacular languages. Perhaps there is indeed a dearth of Indian vernacular writings on dance in Malaysia because of the social-cultural divide that is endemic to the Malaysian-Indian community. Augmented with the void of inter-cultural dance writing in other languages in Malaysia, writings on Malaysian-Indian dance performances has remained obscure or at best a novelty.

The examples cited above demonstrate deep divide in Malaysian dance writing caressed by social-cultural estrangement polarizing dance writings into enclaves of ethnicities within the cosmogony of the indigenous minority. While remaining subaltern to the indigenous majority, the lack of public access into the dance cultures of the indigenous minority exacerbated by monolithic lingua franca of national preference, digressively segregate multi-cultural dance cultures within the sequestered enclaves of inconsequence apathy. Through the lack of accessible dance writings, dance ownership of the indigenous minority remains ghettoized and remote.

But have post-colonial Malaysian dance traditions and its performative experiments remained remotely insulated and sequestered within the boundaries of ethnicities? Although it is arguable that colonial hybridity have produced ambivalent cultural form (Homi Bhaba, 1994, pp. 226-227) as observed in many of Malaysian dance traditions ranging from folk to social dances of the Malays, Peranakan, Eurasians, Chinese, Indians, and amongst the indigenous communities in East Malaysia, Malaysian forefathers had to tread the webs of colonial policy of divide and rule with great uncertainty.

Such ambivalences, however, continue to exist in post-colonial Malaysia when dance artists, performers and dance makers flirt contingently with cross-cultural performative hybrids while resisting the binary opposition of racial and cultural group from being a homogeneous polarized political consciousness. This to a great extent has affected dance writings in spite of the ironies that Malaysian dances that are now labelled as “traditional”, “old”, “archaic” or even “rustic” permeated into post-
colonial performative dialogic as hybrids. The highly acclaimed and profoundly respected court dances of *Asyik* in Kelantan and *Joget Gamelan* in Pahang and Trengganu are hybrids of Indic-Thai-Malay or Indic-Javanese-Malay origins but denied of its epistemology discourse for fear of losing its national imaginary as remnants of an indigenous majority’s high culture. Ambivalence of its pre-Islamic past was best smouldered by denying its margins of hybridity before moments of panic reveal borderline experiences disfranchising the invented monolith. Similar examples could be traced from almost all of Malaysian dance traditions either belonging to the indigenous majority or indigenous minority. Dance writings have been forced to accommodate such ambivalences through the synchronic processes of writing on imagined national entity that are at best arbitrary signs of dance. The emphasis on the imaginary or mythical nature of dance in Malaysian society suggest a prolonging of an *imagined community*, following Benedict Anderson’s suggestion, of arbitrariness of the signs of dance that has become a process of signification rather than the progress of narratives that are truly diachronically subjected to post-colonial and post-modern analysis (Anderson, 2006). Such imagined signs of significations that temporalize the temporal interactive dialogics of multicultural awareness in dance writings breed essentialism and racism in the readings of dance in Malaysia. Such temporality emanates from the place of *meanwhile* rather than from the place of permanency that is definitive of its ownership of hybrid dance cultures. Malaysian dance writers and critics should be released from writing temporal imaginary dance culture of the indigenous majority without forgoing the concept of polyphony as a key component of hybridity that challenges essentialism and racism based on naturalized myths of racial or cultural origin to the emergence of hybridity as a protagonist for dance writing.

**Part Three: Hybridity, Rhizomic Writing and Ownership**

To Gilles Deleuze³ and Félix Guattari,⁴ rhizome is a philosophical concept that describes theory and research, allowing multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in representation and interpretation of date as opposed to an arborescent conception of knowledge, which works with dualist categories and binary choices. A rhizome works with trans-species connections, while an arborescent model works with vertical and linear connections. As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organizational structure of the root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines while rhizomes establish connections between semiotics and

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³ Gilles Deleuze (18 January 1925 – 4 November 1995) was a French philosopher who wrote influentially on philosophy, literature, film, and art from the early 1960s until his death. His most popular works were the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), both co-written with Félix Guattari.

⁴ Pierre-Félix Guattari (April 30, 1930 – August 29, 1992) was a French militant, an institutional psychotherapist, philosopher, and semiotician who is best known for his intellectual collaborations with Gilles Deleuze.
circumstances relative to the arts and presents history and cultures as a map rather than narratives of history and culture.

The principles of rhizome are about connections, heterogeneity, multiplicity that is effectively treated as substantive, connecting to anything other than one, and signifying rupture that will start again and not amenable to any structural or generative model.

Attritions in the definitions of private and public performance, display, exhibition, spaces and any tangible form of representations continue to obtrude between the state and the subaltern communities contesting the statuesque of the national imaginary. Perhaps one of the most observed case is on the Chinese lion dance. Banned by the state from the time of the British colonial administration from being performed outside of Chinese lunar New Year for fear of antagonizing rivalries between different Chinese secret societies, the Chinese lion dance remained as a tradition which oscillates between being legal icons of the Chinese communities to illegal activities if performed without police approval. The state found it unnecessary to indulge in the polemics of a subaltern tradition that did not contribute to the realization of the NCP. As early as 1978, permission were sought by the Chinese lion dance groups to allow the traditional Cantonese Lion icons, which is usually referred to as either a Kwan Kung (Guan Gung) denoted by red costume, Lau Bei (Liu Bei) of mixed-colored costume or Cheong Fei (Zhang Fei) black Lion costume to perform in national day celebration. Denial of this request from the state did not prevent the Chinese lion dance companies to send repeated requests. In 1981 a request for an extended period beyond the fifteenth day of the Chinese New Year was made and in 1982 the Chinese lion dance troupes were allowed to perform without permits as long as it was done indoors. Hence, Chinese lion dance began to appear in shopping malls and indoor stadiums either to officiate on new business premises or participate in competitions. In May 1982, the Chinese lion dance association was able to persuade former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad to cancel the archaic rules of police permits and cautionary procedures for permission to perform in public spaces. That too was bounded by periodic approvals associated with festivities or official opening of new business premises. Only then, the Chinese lion dance became visible as a Malaysian entity when local and international lion dance competition were held biennially in Kuala Lumpur in 1990 before moving to the current venue in mountain casino-resort of Genting Highlands in 1994. Yet, Lion dance which is hugely popular in Malaysia is not a mainstream culture that accrued to the policies of the NCP. It is still a subaltern culture even though it is now performed by non-Chinese and Chinese performers. Most of the dance writings on Chinese lion dance are written in Chinese with snippets in the English language. None are substantially written in the national lingua franca except for the exotic gazes of the “other”.

Another excellent example worth citing is the case of Ramli Ibrahim, a renowned Indian classical dancer-choreographer-curator of Sutra Dance, a man of Malay-Muslim background whose devotion to the exquisite art of Bharatanatyam and Odissi dance and music is of world class. Ramli’s Sutra Dance Company is one of
Malaysia’s most dynamic classical Indian and contemporary dance companies that had stood the test of time since Ramli started out in 1983 after returning from Australia where he had carved a niche in Australian contemporary dance as well as classical Indian dance. Trained as a mechanical engineer in Australia, Ramli opted for a life of a performance artist, impresario and curator of the two Indian classical dances and contemporary choreographies through sheer hard work and complete dedication to his artistic passion. Unfortunately, in spite of being Malay, Ramli could not convince nor cajole the indigenous majority to accept his artistic forays as being part of the national imaginary portrait but instead he is seen as an anomaly who champions the indigenous minority. In spite of such abrasive response from the indigenous majority, Ramli continues to pursue his artistry through private funds and grants to showcase his works locally and abroad (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2008, p. 95).

While the national imaginary remains firm in the background and anchored by the state through its agencies, it remains mostly rhetorical to a new breed of Malaysian contemporary performers whose concerns are not only to create contemporary performances as an extension of their ethnic *slipperages* but also to deal with issues of inter-cultural dialogues to champion the diversities of culture and traditions in Multicultural Malaysia as commodities of Malaysian creative industry. Awareness towards diversity as discourses for new works in contemporary performances has continued to provide the avenue for many young artists to showcase their newest works, which are often inspired by the works of others from diverse cultural backgrounds contesting long held assumptions of indigenous hegemony and subaltern acquiescence to the assumed hegemony (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2008, p. 96).

Historically, the processes of interfacing and acknowledging the confluence of diversities in creating, reconstructing and inventing intercultural contemporary performances as creative commodities in Malaysia began with the realisation of multiculturalism as a state apparatus to develop mutual tolerance to cultural diversities as an aftermath of the *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Nation) idealism, although claimed to be nebulous to the Malaysian constitution. Contemporary artists, performers, impresarios, curators and art lovers realise the importance of multiculturalism, interactive blending and fusions of cultural experiences that factors intercultural experiences as enabling multiculturalism and intercultural experiments to become the formula for Malaysia to develop and construct a possible Malaysian race or *Bangsa Malaysia*, an idealism that still permeates throughout newly re-invented performative traditions conjoining hegemony of state and subaltern realities (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2008, p. 96). The same ideology has metamorphosis in contemporary time into *One Malaysia*, an on-going program designed by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak to inculcate national unity and ethnic tolerance.

Not wanting to be subjected to narrow definitions of cultural practices, performance artists began to investigate intercultural dialogues by learning diverse forms of performativities either as participants or observers to overcome their own prejudices and *slipperages*. By sensitising their understanding towards the diverse “others”, contemporary Malaysian performers accumulate their awareness and
understanding of being polyglots, multi-ethnic, and multi-believers in a multicultural
nation in order to cope with cultural diversities while harnessing their own unique
traditions and heritage. Not wanting to carry post-colonial cultural baggage, 
Malaysian contemporary dancers, choreographers, musicians and composers are more
interested in the present state of intercultural experiences rather than indulging in re-
creating the past to idealise separate cultural identities, which is often confronted with
chasms of socio-religious divide (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2008, p. 97) as witnessed in
the lineal arboreal dance writings befitting the national imaginary of monolith high
dance culture.

In tandem with the multicultural-intercultural movements of Malaysian
drama, theatre and music, contemporary Malaysian dancers and choreographers of the
1990s have gone beyond the pioneering attempts of Ghouse Nasaruddin, Marion
D’Cruz, and Ramli Ibrahim in producing eclectic synthesis of modern pieces in the
1970s and the 1980s to post-modern choreographies in the 1990s and 2000s ranging
from minimalist-butoh based compositions of Lena Ang Swee Lin and Lee Swee
Keong to Umesh Shetty and the Temple of Fine Arts redefining fusionist Indian
classical repertoire, and contemporary Chinese dance choreographies by Mew Chang
Tsing (Rivergrass Dance Theatre), Wong Kit Yaw, Vincent Tan Lian Ho (Batu Dance
Theatre), Anthony Meh Kim Chuan and Aman Yap Choong Boon (Dua Space Dance
Theatre). Contemporary dance in Malaysia is about multiculturalism and intercultural
experience, unique in many ways due to the blending of composite experiences when
dance is not about a product but a process and experience. It is a crucible of hybrids
that are rhizomic, non-hierarchical, heterogeneous, and full of ruptures that are not
amenable to any generative models.

Conclusion

I am convinced that dance writing in Malaysia has to be grounded in an epistemology
of unity that is rhizomic and appreciative of deeply rooted and embedded cultural
significances. The nature of Malaysian identity in post-modern world is so transient
and chaotic that it is necessary to invent hyphenated titles to every person of the
indigenous minority in the form of Malaysian-Chinese, Malaysian-Indian, Malaysian-
Punjabi, Malaysian-Portuguese, Malaysian-Javanese, Malaysian-Malayalam but non
hyphenated for person of indigenous majority for example, Malay, Iban, Bidayuh,
Melanau, Dusun, Khadazan-Dusun and Peranakan. These hyphenated identities
reflect the inherent limits of the monolithic and essentialist categories constructed to
identify national imaginary of hegemonic nation-state affecting dance writings in a
state of stasis. Malaysian dance writers must be able to negotiate the spaces between
the states of stasis by writing about their inherited hybridity that is rhizomic, factual
and not imagined. This interstitial negotiation cannot be limited to socio-cultural
categories of ethnicity, indigenous majority, the subaltern minority or other social-
political categories that impede intercultural dialogics essential to the creation of a
veritable Malaysian nation. Allowing multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in representing and interpreting dance in Malaysia allowing trans-genre connections through recognized hybrids as a model of culture, rhizomic dance writings would be able to enter the inter spaces to negate bigotry and antiquated notions of imagined separation of dance cultures of the presumed indigenous majority and of the indigenous minority. Writing on hybridity and acknowledging the multidimensionality of dance histories in the multifarious nation-state would perhaps be a means of re-exerting ownership of dance cultures that are rhizomic and bountiful.

REFERENCES


