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Postcoloniality and ethnography: negotiating gender, ethnicity and power

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Abstract

This paper draws on black and postcolonial feminist theory in problematizing the interplay of difference and power within the identity practices of Malaysian women. I examine strategic essentialism and cultural difference in ways of being Malay-Muslim, Chinese and Indian women. I highlight the ways in which ethnic and gender politics privileges and marginalizes ways of being and knowing within contemporary postcolonial Malaysia. This paper raises important issues of doing research on multiple identities in challenging and changing globalized ethnic and gendered spaces of education and work.

Keywords:

postcolonial feminism

difference

power

strategic essentialism

gender

ethnicity

Malaysia

Notes

1. I am a Malaysian-Indian woman living and working in Australia since 2003. I have had personal and professional experiences within the Malaysian schooling and university sectors.
2. The affirmative action policy was implemented after independence to eliminate poverty and the identification of economic function with particular ethnic groups that resulted from the British colonial rule (Andaya and Andaya [2001](#)). There were more Chinese and some Indians in the higher economic classes compared to the ethnic majority Malay-Muslims after independence in 1957. Through this state social engineering policy, a new generation of Malay-Muslim middle class, professionals, capitalists and entrepreneurs was created. However, 40 years on from the implementation of this policy has resulted in the intensification of the widening of the intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic inequality gap (Maznah 2006). Malaysian Indians, poor Malays and the marginalized indigenous groups are now seen as the growing underclass in Malaysia.
3. Kiasu is a Chinese dialect term meaning 'afraid to lose'. In Joseph ([2006](#)), I discuss this identity strategy of Chinese young women in further detail. The 'kiasu' Chinese young women is one who is a top achiever, competitive, selfish, always wanting to win and afraid to lose.
4. The research approach of ethnographic longitudinality (Weis [2004](#)) and postcolonial feminism provide me with the methodological tools to understand 'how global and national formations and relational interactions seep through the lives, identities and communities of youth and adults, ultimately refracting back on the larger social formations that give rise to them to begin with' (Weis [2004](#), 190). Weis ([2004](#)) aptly captures my point here in the research approach of ethnographic longitudinality where 'using data collected at two points in time to trace the continuities and discontinuities of identity, relations, and material lives, enables us to see the 'field of forces' through which structural advances and structural assaults shape how individuals and groups live and narrate their everyday social practices' (190).

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