

WHEN POSTCOLONIALISM IS INSUFFICIENT: RECONFIGURING THE LITERATURES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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1. Introduction

Let me begin with a declaration that comes in the form of a confession: I am a postcolonial theorist by training; a training that has allowed me to explore the radical potentialities that such an area of inquiry affords. That said however, I have become somewhat ambivalent about postcolonialism. And this ambivalence emerges and has to do with the limits of postcolonialism in trying to map the literatures of Southeast Asia. More specifically, this ambivalence emerges precisely because of the hegemony of English (as language of production and dissemination) that underscores postcolonialism and its relationship to Southeast Asian literatures. While postcolonialism has been particularly useful to, and for, Southeast Asian literatures, it has also been particularly stifling. This is the argument I wish to chart before moving onto a call for conceptualising Southeast Asian literatures underpinned by the notion of border crossing.

Rewor(l)dings: Contestations and Reconfigurations in the Literatures and Cultures of the Asia Pacific Region—brings to mind immediately a book, or more precisely the argument cast in the edited collection titled *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* which mobilizes the aesthetics of “reworlding” as way of thinking about the various literary traditions within the Indian diaspora that share certain common resonances engendered by historical connections, spiritual affinities, and racial memories. Individually the essays provide challenging insights into the particular experiences of the writers. Collectively, the book argues that at the core of diasporic writing is the haunting presence of India and the shared anguish of personal loss that

generate the aesthetics of ‘reworlding’. It is this that unifies and underlies this body of literature. The aesthetics of reworlding is employed to suggest that writers of the Indian diaspora collectively work to reinscribe India, to produce a variety of Indias; ‘Indias of the mind’ (10) as Rushdie writes in *Imaginary Homelands*. This aesthetic of reworlding marks the recuperation, the negotiation, the contestations, the retrieving, and most crucially, a rethinking of particular associations, connections that are already in place. I have begun with reference to this text and to its use of reworlding to emphasise the critical project of this gathering and this paper—to retrieve, negotiate and recuperate, and contest the worlding of the literature of Southeast Asia. And in the spirit of working through the aesthetic trajectory of reworlding I wish to revisit a specific connection through which the literature of Southeast Asia has been articulated. This is the association with postcolonialism. In other words I wish to critically reconsider the use of the discourse of postcolonialism to articulate and situate Southeast Asian literatures.

While the relationship between postcolonialism and Southeast Asian literatures has been intimate, there is an urgent need to interrogate the limits of thinking through postcolonialism in our engagement with literatures from this region. In other words, we must ask when (and whether) is postcolonialism insufficient? And as the title of my paper suggests, I wish to argue that postcolonialism does not provide a sufficient paradigm through which we might map and respond to Southeast Asian literatures. Taking this as my point of departure, the paper will go on to explore the limits of postcolonialism, specifically in relation to recent pronouncements of the end of postcolonialism, and connect this to the impact of postcolonialism on Southeast Asian literatures to make the argument that insofar as we maintain this unproblematic connection, we risk reducing the excesses of Southeast Asian literatures (in terms of linguistic heterogeneities, cultural complexities, and political contingencies) and participating in forestalling the project of decolonisation of literatures and cultures. Against this, I wish to suggest that we need to move away from asking what the most appropriate way of framing Southeast Asian literatures is and foster a politics of border crossing as central to thinking through the complexities and multiplicities that constitute Southeast Asian literatures.

2. Intimate Relationships

One of the most enduring and intimate relationships literatures from Southeast Asia have maintained is with the domain of postcolonial studies, or more precisely postcolonial critique. There are numerous material examples of this from across the region which we can point to. The list, as we know, is quite long, and so I will keep to a few select examples. The Skoob Pacifica Series announced this relationship with two significant volumes and several other books: Volume One—*Southeast Asia Writes Back* which takes up the title of Aschroft and company's much acclaimed (and later criticised) *Empire Writes Back*—“is an attempt to illustrate, evaluate, identify and understand the cultural mediation of South-East Asian Post-colonial literature in English of various forms” (Ong 1). This is quite a path-breaking moment insofar as it not only laid out the complex smorgasbord that is postcolonial literatures from Southeast Asia, but more crucially functioned as a manifesto for the future of new writing. The second anthology—*The Pen is Mightier than the Sword*—focuses on writings in the 1990s from Malaysia and Singapore to demonstrate how these new voices are turning their gaze outwards, often transgressing normative bounds to critically address issues such as religion, homosexuality, the role of women in Asia and the spiritual cost of new materialism. To this list one must also add *Complicities: Connections and Divisions*. While not overtly declaring itself as coming out of a postcolonial lens, the editors nevertheless write through the spectre of postcolonialism. By this I mean that the analytical frame which is employed to constitute the twenty-seven essays, draws from and is informed by the critical trajectories that make up the field of postcolonial studies. Another text which deserves mention is Lily Rose Tope's (*Un)Framing Southeast Asia*, a key contribution that articulates the complexities of nationalism within three nations in Southeast Asia and draws attention to the multifaceted and multifarious workings of nationalism in both the colonial and postcolonial contexts of these nations through an exploration of the categories or concepts of nation, nationalism and national identity. More recently, David Lim's *The Infinite Longing for Home* in which appeared the work of K. S. Maniam is interrogated through the latter's problematization of home, belonging and subjectivity. Lim's approach, while drawing from a range of critical theories (Lacan and Mouffe, Zizek and Lacan), is nevertheless addressing these issues

from a postcolonial perspective emphasising heterogeneity, open-endedness, and irreducibilities of identity, subjectivity, home and belonging. My own contribution on K. S. Maniam—read through an intimate relationship with postcolonialism—which appeared in *Writing Asia* is part of this corpus that shores up the intimate and productive relationship between postcolonialism and Southeast Asian literatures.

In addition to these works, which affirm the intimate relationship between postcolonial studies and Southeast Asian literatures, there is also the literary texts themselves, which foreground the relationship. In other words, the novels themselves articulate this intimate relationship through the themes, textual strategies, and issues that they confront. I am thinking here of the Malaysian author Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky* which explores the complexities of identities in a multicultural Malaysia; the appropriation of English in K. S. Maniam's *The Cord* as a textual and political intervention; the poems of the Filipino poet Jose Gallardo such as 'Johnny at Chandu' and 'Bangungut ('Nightmare') which return to the theme of cultural alienation of a colonised people and intervenes into this by the use of a modified literary form, the use of uncouth language, a reversion to folk elements, and the use of code-mixing technique. All of these provide the terrain for asserting a local sense of colonial and postcolonial ethnicity and subjectivity beyond colonial constructions. We can add to this second body of work the Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Perburuan (The Fugitive)* and *Ditepi Kali Bekasi (On the Banks of the Bekasi River)* amongst others. In his first book entitled *Pramoedya Postcolonially*, Razif Bahari draws from the works of key postcolonial theorists, to demonstrate the ways in which Pramoedya's novels intervenes into the discourses of race, ethnicity, belonging, home and culture—terrains that animate the postcolonial field. Into this mix we can add the literary contributions of the following authors: the poet Virgilio S. Almario, as well as that of his counterpart in Filipino poetry in English, Gémino H. Abad whose work has been cast within the critical ambit of postcolonial studies by J. Neil Garcia in his book *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics*.

Quite clearly the list of literary works and those that engage with postcolonial studies is long, and my listing of them is by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate that the relationship between Southeast Asian literatures and postcolonial studies is quite intimate. And this intimacy

has been highly productive. This alliance led to the take up of Southeast Asian literatures in University departments across the world, the setting up of research centers and collectivities exploring Southeast Asian literatures, and of course the proliferation of literatures from this region. The productivity of the alliance can also be seen in the contributions these literatures have made to the postcolonial canon. After all, when we return to *Empire Writes Back*, the political, social, and cultural interventions that are proposed emerge out of a reading of particular postcolonial literary texts. K.S. Maniam's *The Cord* for instance does receive some special attention here. At the same time, the relationship has also, in large part, resituated Southeast Asian literature in the sense that it can no longer be simply marked in terms of a geographical region or a cultural community. Rather it must be seen as part of larger critical collectivity that challenges and disrupts established ideological and social formations, disciplinary boundaries and intellectual commitments. In other words, the intimate relationship with postcolonial studies recasts the intensities of Southeast Asian literatures. Let me quickly add that I am not suggesting that without this relationship Southeast Asian literatures (the ones I have alluded to earlier) are not critically invested with challenging both colonial and postcolonial configurations of subjectivity, identity, belonging and community. They are, without doubt. What I am suggesting is that the forging of a productive relationship with postcolonial critique has opened the possibility of formulating a critical trajectory that is highly interventionist, questioning and most crucially politically oriented and committed to writing and speaking out against injustices—social, political, cultural, economic and so on. The works of Lee Kok Liang, Pira Sudham, Basanti Karmakar, Shanon Ahmad, and Llyod Fernando, amongst others testify to this. At the same time, as Wong Yoon Wah in *Post-colonial Chinese Literatures in Singapore and Malaysia* argues, the relationship with post-colonialism means that “we can no longer look upon Chinese language Singaporean literature as a ‘marginal literature’ or an ‘offshoot of Chinese literature’” (5). In other words, the relationship with postcolonialism has re-centered Chinese literature in Singapore and Malaysia, giving it a much more ‘valid’ status within the literary world. For Wong therefore, postcolonialism has done precisely what it has set itself up to do: and this is the task of reconfiguring, reworlding Chinese literatures in Singapore and Malaysia from the margins to the centre.

3. Limits of Postcolonialism

The relationship I have established and argued is a productive one works on the presupposition that postcolonialism remains an effective discourse through which we may comprehend and map Southeast Asian literatures and cultures. How is this presupposition suspect, particularly for thinking through the heterogeneity that is Southeast Asian literatures? Put another way, what might we say of this relationship when postcolonialism itself, which has been seen as interventionist, is arguably also limiting and constricting?

We know that there is quite a range of criticisms launched on postcolonialism—the Marxist or materialist one (Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus) for instance which sees postcolonialism as a purely textualist or culturalist project; others such as Aijaz Ahmad and Neil Lazarus again who are critical of postcolonialism because it engages in theoretical ecstasy; and some others such as Arif Dirlik who argue that postcolonialism needs to take on-board a degree of self-reflexivity or internal critique so that the task of “doing postcolonial studies [compels one] to look to the condition and practice of that doing, to consider the relationship of the intellectual activity of an institution to the lives and conditions it seeks to understand, and to deliberate upon the means by which that understanding can best be communicated” (Featherstone 14). From the range of commentaries critical of postcolonialism, I wish to focus on Makarand Paranjape’s criticisms that emerge specifically in the published piece ‘Coping with Post-Colonialism’ and the conference paper “The End of Postcolonialism”. Here is that part of Paranjape’s argument that is useful to reconsidering this relationship and thinking through the consequences for Southeast Asian literatures. Paranjape’s own focus is the relationship between postcolonialism and Indian literature. Beginning with a survey of the field of postcolonial studies, Paranjape makes the following observations:

Firstly that over the course of its development and shifts, “post-colonialism has come to represent a certain smorgasbord of different theoretical perspectives, attitudes, and styles, besides signifying a huge academic industry whose centers are primarily in the West or in countries of advanced capital” (*‘The End’*). And over the course of these transitions and mutations—from political theory to literary criticism—the field itself is ‘bereft of the degree of self-reflexivity that one normally would expect in such a migration’ (*‘The End’*). Against this absence of critical reflection that he finds, one that echoes Dirlik’s criticism,

Paranjape charts out the first kind of critical reflection that we must take on board, and this has to do with making a distinction between “the discourse of post-coloniality and the condition of post-coloniality” (*‘The End’*).

Postcoloniality as a discourse can be framed as such, in Foucault’s terms. And that is as systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. In other words, discourse participates in emphasizing specific truths and maintain the relationships of power in them. Postcoloniality as discourse for Paranjape thus refers to the very process of constructing subjects and the worlds of which they speak. In that sense, when we employ postcolonialism as a discourse to articulate specific literatures, such as Southeast Asian literatures in the name of shoring up the force of such literatures, we also simultaneously consign these literatures to being constructed or being spoken for. This is the ambivalence of the relationship between Southeast Asian literatures and postcolonialism that we must be cognizant of, one that Wong Yoon Wah does not entertain, and which, in my view, results in an unfettered and uncritical relationship with postcolonialism. We can think of this contradiction that Paranjape raises through Derrida’s (1981) take up of the notion of the pharmakon, in that the relationship with postcolonialism is at once a cure—as it opens up radical possibilities and potentialities as the works I have cited earlier demonstrate—and a poison—as it closes down the very possibilities and potentialities of Southeast Asian literatures in the very act of constructing these literatures through the optic of postcolonialism. Put another way, in the very attempt at forming a relationship with postcolonialism to demonstrate the cultural, political, and literary interventions of these texts we, as those who are interested in thinking through Southeast Asian literatures, nevertheless see to its muting, to the closing down of the potentialities of these literatures in their own right. This double bind that we find ourselves entangled in is one that we must attempt to disentangle ourselves from.

Postcoloniality as discourse for Paranjape also refers to a process of institutionalisation: the institutionalisation of Southeast Asian literatures within academic disciplines, namely either under the banner of Commonwealth or Postcolonial Literatures as the larger constitution of which Southeast Asian literatures are but a part of. The course that I teach at the University of Otago, *Postcolonial Literature*, is a brilliant material example of such institutionalisation. The course itself seeks to do two things: introduce students to postcolonial

criticism and to postcolonial literatures. For the introduction to the former we have them purchase a reader with a good helping of key postcolonial theories. For the latter—postcolonial literature—the students are expected to read Coetzee's *Foe*, Fugard's *Statements*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Kincaid's *Lucy*, and Maniam's *In a Far Country* and *Haunting the Tiger*. I myself am responsible for *Midnight's Children* and Maniam's two novels. And one of the curious and troubling things I find in teaching these two novels (exemplary of different diasporic experiences and hence different relationships to home, belonging and culture), is that the very point about difference, that Maniam's articulation of a postcolonial imaginary does not fit with the more general postcolonial experience that one finds with *Midnight's Children*, gets lost. That is to say the very differences in the diasporic experiences and the postcolonial conditions between Maniam and Rushdie are flattened out. In Maniam's *In a Far Country* and *Haunting the Tiger* living is about living in the present, in the space of the "here" and "now," as epitomised by Rajan—a representative of the Singaporean and Malaysian-Indian today—who has made the choice of living in a fixed space awaiting the materialisation of the promise of nationalism without a sense of responsibility to the inheritances of the Indian diaspora (Devadas). Unfortunately, this point of/ on difference is often missed, often overlooked in favour of constructing a general theory of postcolonialism by the students when asked to compare Maniam and Rushdie's novels. The lack of attention to difference, I suggest, is because of the constitution of Maniam's work within such a course, and not perhaps in a course more aptly titled Southeast Asian Literatures. In other words, the institutionalisation of Maniam under the banner of postcolonial literatures contributes to the flattening out of differences.

Contrastingly, postcoloniality as condition for Paranjape writing in 'Coping with Post-colonialism' refers to 'real' postcoloniality, that is, the "lives, experiences, and subjectivities ... of millions of those who are more postcolonial, or should I say, more colonized, than us" (45). Their subjectivities, Paranjape continues, "have escaped the notice not just of those who have an institutionalized interest in postcolonialism, but those of us who are supposed to live cheek by jowl with them" (45). Such a charge requires clarification. Paranjape is not saying that postcolonialism does not concern itself with the lives of the colonized in the contemporary world. Rather what Paranjape is saying is that the lack of differentiation between postcolonialism as discourse

and condition commits the crime of silencing the lives of the oppressed. His cue for such a position emerges from a disdain with the take up of Orientalism, which he points out, “was about privileged people in the West discussing people elsewhere” (“The End”). It is this same trap that postcolonialism as discourse falls into, except that “what made this less obvious was that these privileged people were often brown, not white, and from areas that were formerly colonized” (“The End”). As he succinctly puts it, ‘there were really no post-colonials in the discourse of post-colonialism’ (“The End”). Paradoxically therefore, ‘the prerequisite for entrance into the discourse of post-colonialism was an exit from the condition of post-coloniality’ (“The End”).

Given this scenario, Paranjape suggests that postcolonialism remains insufficient to articulate the heterogeneity and complexities that is Indian literature. And to redress this, he suggests that in the Indian context, “we are better off with Indian studies than with post-colonial studies when it comes to studying ourselves” (“The End”). The turn to Indian studies, which draws from both theological and religious concepts found in Hinduism and which was later politicised by Gandhi as part of the Independence struggle, mobilises concepts such as *atma bodh* (self knowledge), *shatru bodh* (knowledge of your adversary), *svadhyaya* (self study) and *paradhyaya* (study of others) as forms of “cultural inquiries which will be the bedrock of lasting *svaraj* or self-rule” (“The End”). Without going into the details of each of these concepts here, which are extensively discussed by Paranjape, the turn to Indian studies that he advances through such conceptual categories seeks to do two things: first to shore up the limits of postcolonialism for framing Indian literature; second, and more crucially, it seeks to shore up ‘a new kind of Indian studies’, one that is not pegged to postcolonialism as a discourse.

Taking my cue from Paranjape’s suggestions, I wish to similarly affirm the urgent need to rethink the intimate relationship that we have with postcolonialism, particularly to articulate Southeast Asian literatures and champion a view of Southeast Asian literatures and cultures that is now held hostage to postcolonialism as a discourse. Such a rethinking allows us to discover a new way of studying Southeast Asian literatures because postcolonialism as a rubric for studying Southeast Asian literatures is inadequate. For one, much of postcolonialism deals with literatures in the English language. If we look at the plethora of Southeast Asian literatures in languages other than English, then the fabric of postcolonialism will be ripped apart because it simply does not have

the width or length to cover all these literatures. To rephrase Paranjape, just as you cannot put an elephant in a burlap sack, you cannot put the diversity and plurality of Southeast Asian literatures into this holdall called postcolonialism. If Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian literatures and cultures, in all its linguistic and creative plurality and vitality enters postcolonialism, postcolonialism will crack at its seams and come apart. On the other hand, postcolonialism, in its current form (as a discourse) will never accommodate much more than the English fraction of the Southeast Asian reality and is therefore not good enough for our larger purposes. This is why it seems to me that we need a different way of studying Southeast Asian literatures and cultures. This way must not just be multilingual but also translingual, and committed to boundary or border crossing.

4. Border Crossing / Crossing Borders

If, as I have suggested through Paranjape that postcolonialism remains insufficient for our purposes, then the question which must be asked and which I will conclude this paper with is this: what conceptual category or paradigm might we use to situate and speak about the heterogeneities that is Southeast Asian literatures? In fact, can we articulate one specific paradigm to constitute the linguistic heterogeneities, cultural complexities and political contingencies that underscore Southeast Asian literatures? Quite clearly we cannot affirm one singular paradigm precisely because any attempt to do so will confront the very same problems that postcolonialism as a paradigm for conceptualising Southeast Asian literatures confronts. And this has to do with the closing down of multiplicities. Briefly, I wish to conclude by suggesting that rather than debating about which paradigm is useful as an alternative it would be much more productive if we take up the notion of border crossing as a central imperative, commitment, and analytical frame for speaking about Southeast Asian literatures.

In that sense, mobilising paradigms such as national literatures and regional literatures would not suffice. As Luisa Mallari has argued in the context of the novel in Malaysia and the Philippines, while the use of national literature as a paradigm to constitute works emerging from these nations was productive, particularly during the period of anti-colonial and decolonisation, such a paradigm of national literature remains highly problematic. This is because the paradigm of national literatures is highly ambivalent (who can claim to belong in

this space? What language is representative of this paradigm within the different nations? What is the function of a novel, poem, prose within this paradigm?). More crucially, the paradigm itself does not facilitate cross border or cross-national discussions precisely because the idea of national literatures secures its borders within an identifiable linguistic, cultural and political trajectory. If national literature as a paradigm is insufficient, what then of the paradigm called regional literatures? Can such a larger paradigm, one that is cognisant of the heterogeneities and differences within Southeast Asian literatures be much more appropriate? While the idea of regional literatures might seem to circumvent the concerns with national literature as a paradigm, it is still as Rey Chow convincingly shows, in her essay on the teaching of Asian literatures in universities in the United States, locked into an areas studies sensibility. That is to say, an attempt at thinking through Southeast Asian literatures through the optic of regional literature continues to maintain Southeast Asian literatures as area studies. And the role of area studies, Chow continues, is to segregate the study of non-European cultures into administratively expedient programs. Put differently, regional literatures as a paradigm that finds resource from area studies falls into the trap of conceiving literatures from these areas as sites for the production of contemporary versions of Orientalism. By privileging the region (in all its complexities and heterogeneities) when we speak of regional literatures or the nation when we speak of national literature as a paradigm, as the elementary unit of analysis, area studies conceives ‘areas’ as if they were the natural—or at least, historically necessary—formations for the containment of differences within and between cultures.

This is why while I share Paranjape’s critique of postcolonialism I do not share his enthusiasm for what he calls Indian Studies as a way of negotiating the limits of the relationship to postcolonialism. The framing of Indian literatures under the paradigm of Indian studies, while circumventing the limits imposed by postcolonialism, continues to be haunted by the very same concerns that animate discussions of national and regional literatures. That is to say, the championing of Indian Studies as an alternative framework to critically study the heterogeneity that is Indian literatures while useful insofar as it dislodges us from the unfettered relationship with postcolonialism, encounters the very same problems that Mallari and Chow point to. Inadvertently, the project of opening up Indian literatures that underpins Paranjape’s contributions performs a closing down operation. In other words, the affirmation of Indian Studies as

an alternative, which closes down how we might grasp the multiplicities that are Indian literatures, undoes the very imperative that drives Paranjape's criticism of postcolonial studies, to open how we might conceptualise the literatures of the subcontinent. And this is precisely why I do not wish to champion Southeast Asian Studies as a paradigm for conceiving and articulating the multiplicities and heterogeneities that underpin Southeast Asian literatures and cultures.

Given these limits, it is crucial we take up Dennis Haskell's argument where he shores up the importance of marking the literatures from this region in terms of multiplicities and specificities as each of the region's nations take up, through literatures, different issues, concerns and themes that reflect the particularities of each of the literatures emerging from the different nations that make up Southeast Asia. This emphasis on specificity and multiplicity calls on us to continually invent various ways and means of articulating Southeast Asian literatures without being held hostage to a specific paradigm such as postcolonialism. In other words, it becomes crucial that we seek to articulate Southeast Asian literatures in terms of multiplicities, in terms of differences, and in terms of contradictions without recourse to a paradigmatic form. This is crucial as a way of responding to the flattening out of differences that takes place because of postcolonialism's closing down; this is also crucial as a way of responding to the absence of literatures written in other languages besides English that takes place because of postcolonialism's (unacknowledged) insistence on literature written in English. Put differently, an emphasis on multiplicity and specificity responds to postcolonialism's colonizing impetus as Paranjape has astutely pointed out and fosters the urgency of the decolonization of literatures of Southeast Asia.

And underpinning such a decolonizing project is a firm commitment to crossing borders: national, regional, and linguistic and paradigmatic forms of conceptualizations (postcolonialism, Indian Studies, Southeast Asian Studies). This a commitment that calls on Southeast literatures and those who study them to engender strategies of speaking to each other across national and regional borders as a way of opening up potential and possible relationships and collaborations between and across each other. This project of speaking across borders (geographical, cultural, disciplinary) must be both multilingual

and translingual so that the borders imposed by the hegemony of English, or writing in English that is at the bedrock of thinking through Southeast Asian literatures through the lens of postcolonialism, is trespassed. The project of speaking across borders is also pertinent so that the boundaries imposed by categories such as national or regional literatures is challenged, opening the possibility of productive cross-cultural, cross-national, and cross-regional dialogues to take place. Harry Aveling, in response to my argument concerning the limits of postcolonialism for articulating Southeast Asian literatures, did suggest that perhaps a possible way of expressing the multiplicities and specificities of Southeast Asian literatures and cultures could be through the notion of comparative regional literatures. Such a proposition is highly useful as it entertains and anticipates the very border crossing exercise that I have argued must be central to articulating Southeast Asian literatures in that the notion of comparative literature does signal the centrality of dialogue and debate between and across the various literatures. In that sense, comparative literature as a framework advances communication across the national, cultural, ethnic, and geographical heterogeneities that makes up Southeast Asian literatures. That said, I remain cautious about the use of the term ‘regional’ in the analytical framework comparative regional literatures suggested given the attendant problems such a term conjures. In response to Aveling’s suggestion thus, I would like to propose that we refrain from attempting to find specific ways to define the literatures from these areas (as driven by postcolonialism, as from a particular area, as national and so on), but take up the notion of border crossing as a central imperative, commitment, and analytical frame for speaking about Southeast Asian literatures (Aveling captures this through the notion of comparative literature). Such a proposition enables new forms of connections and networks of alliances to be built both within and across the multiplicities of Southeast Asian literatures: networks, connections and alliances that are not premised on some paradigmatic form but are committed to working across the various borders that inhibit how we might constitute Southeast Asian literatures. Such a commitment, I argue, provides us with a much more complex, irreducible and productive means of articulating Southeast Asian literatures.

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