Asian Feminist Theology

I. Introduction

In the field of theological studies, feminist theologies emerging from Asia—the so-called Asian Feminist Theologies—seem to be controversial even in name, because the term, “feminist,” connotes their as having been promoted by middle-class European and American women (Kwok Pui-lan, 2005:7). Unlike female theologians from other parts of the world who name their theologies differently from (white) feminist Theology—womanist theology (by African-American women), mujerista theology (by Hispanic women in the United States)—etc., women theologians from Asia do not categorize their theologies in any way other than Asian feminist theology. It is more appropriate to say they are unable to rather than ‘do-not,’ because there is no language or concept in common they can share when standing in multiracial, multilingual, multicultural, and multi-religious contexts.

Asian feminist theology arose in reaction to liberation theologies in various regions, and began to be fostered in response to political and economic predicaments caused by the interference of North American and European institutions and corporations under the name of “progress,” when Asian countries began to achieve independence after World War II. In the beginning, Asian feminist theology grew out of the broad linkage of the term, “the third world,” manifesting the essential quality of justice against formidable oppression.
While the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), founded in Dar-es Salaam, Tanzania in 1976, was consciously aware of questions of race and culture, third-world women challenged and resisted the lack of attention to gender in third-world theologies by male theologians who longed for women to be where they should be. After a sustained struggle, third-world women’s efforts finally resulted in the Women’s Commission within EATWOT in 1983, in response to the foundational question, “What does doing feminist theology in our own context mean?” In the initial struggles by Asian women as well as by womanists, noteworthy was their double differentiation from both western feminist theology and the male liberation theology of their respective countries. They articulated their deep concern stating, “neither Third world men nor First world women can determine the Third world women’s agenda.” (Virginia Fabella 1993: 35). With support from the Women’s Commission of EATWOT, regional and international gatherings began to be held to organize Asian women theologians’ networks. They began to develop a sense of their own identities as female theologians, and published their thoughts and concerns worldwide.

Since its emergence in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Asian feminist theology has developed dramatically. This essay probes the diverse foci, contents, and methodologies that have been involved in the development of Asian feminist theology, with each of the three categories discussing three different stages of content and focus. Indian (South Asian) feminist theology, however, is excluded from this research because it has developed on a different trajectory, particularly working broadly toward ecofeminism.
II. The First Stage: We are Asian!

Since the feminist theological consciousness first emerged in Asia, it has remained important to make clear the differences in Asian women’s perspectives regarding their personal histories and sufferings. In this regard, the storytelling of struggles and oppressions, that is, bearing testimony to the historic realities of women in the Third World has been preferred as a crucial methodology for Asian feminist theology, which has remained less concerned with abstract theologizing/theorizing. Thus, on the one hand, Asian feminist theologians have kept their focus on maintaining clear differences in Asian women’s identity; on the other, they have continued to assert their unity as Third World women in terms of their common struggles with poverty.

Also notable is the Asian feminist theologians’ commitment to Christianity. They represent themselves as exclusively Christian, and their theology is Christocentric. Certain Asian feminist essays begin with confessions of faith, e.g. “Jesus Christ means everything to me” (“The Christ-Event from the Viewpoint of African Women” by Therese Souga (Cameroun) in With Passion and Compassion 1988: 22). Overall, the theological reflections of Asian women, as found in this first stage, are more descriptive rather than analytical, more reflective than theoretical, and, generally speaking, are based on storytelling with intentionality.

In the ground-breaking first book focusing on Asian feminist theology, Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman’s Theology, Marianne Katoppo, an Indonesian theologian, articulates her experiences of the entanglement of three
constrictive elements—being Asian, Christian, and a woman—in constructing her identity, which she directly expresses in the form of, “I am,” “I am an Asian,” “I am a Christian,” “I am a woman” (Marianne Katoppo 1980: 1-6). The experience of being the other as a Christian woman in a society in which Islam is predominant is the impetus of doing the kind of theology inscribed in her book. Being fully aware of ‘otherness’ in women, Katoppo reflects on the reality of Indonesian women as slaves and sex objects. She finds the ideal of liberated Asian women in Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was the first fully liberated human being while giving her life for God (ch. 2).

For Katoppo, appropriately understanding God is significant because that task is closely connected to liberating women. She envisions God in feminine images (ch. 4), which are mirrored in several “case studies” of women and the conditions they encounter (ch. 3). In this theological reflection on God, however, she seems to simply add feminine traits, such as nurturing and compassion, of the traditional male God based on essentialist conceptions of gender. The unintended implication emerges from this position: that there are feminine aspects in the male God.

The same inclination is found in the book With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology, which is an anthology of papers from the first Intercontinental Conference of Women Theologians of the Third World in 1986, after the founding of the Women’s Commission within EATWOT (Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye 1988: ix-x). In this book, the term ‘Third World’ is used as a “supra-geographic term” which is marked by issues of “quality of life,” poverty,
and oppression and used to theologize dominant politico-economic powers of North (vii-viii). In this regard, ‘Third World women’ in this book include African, Asian, and Latin American women. Most inspired by the effort to contextualize theology, the book postulates shared experiences by Third World women of struggles caused by collective realities of the history of centuries of rooted colonialism and missionary paternalism. This common experience of struggle functions not only as the sharpest difference of Third World women from western women, but also as the ground for their unity which is employed as their most crucial methodology.

In this book, the necessity to describe the female divine image, especially as Mother is also asserted, but it complements and balances the image as Father, thus resulting in adding the expression of the feminine facets of the divine who is traditionally viewed as male, rather than to articulate the fullness of divine power exposed in a female image. Christology is also seen as central to the essays as these theologians desire to re-appropriate faith in Jesus Christ within their realities of struggle and suffering. The authors reinterpret Jesus Christ as a figure of passion, standing with women who seek self-affirmation and dignity. Just as Katoppo represents herself as a Christian in the theological reflection, authors in the book assert their work as “theologizing in the light of our Christian faith” (xi).

Inheriting our Mother’s Gardens discloses the methodological features of feminist theology in its first stage from the perspectives of women theologians, from various parts of the world, including Kwok Pui-Lan (Hong Kong), Katie Cannon (USA), Hyun Kyung Chung (Korea), Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz (Cuban), and others who emphasized the significance of storytelling in their reflections of their respective
struggles. Each reflective essay is unified with the others by the pervasive image of the “Garden”—a profound repository of the inheritance(s) and oppressed lives of their mothers and grandmothers. The experiences of the Garden as ambiguous and complex are a plentiful source of inspiration for feminist theology. Being aware of the fact that women's voices have been silenced in patriarchal societies, giving voice to the personal stories of mothers or grandmothers, itself, becomes essential in doing theology. Thus, each essay includes a letter in the author's mother's tongue at the end of each essay.

III. The Second Stage: We have authority!

Asian feminist theologians in the first stage focused on constructing their own identities in terms of their experiences of oppression generated by neo-colonial powers. In the second stage, Asian feminist theologians focused on the relationship of their experiences to their own traditions while keeping the same methodological emphasis on women's lived experiences and the necessity of unity that the first stage had sought. Such awareness surfaced at the first Asian Women's Consultation on Interfaith Dialogue in 1989.

During this period, Asian feminist theologians contemplated their experiences and contexts of cultural and social plurality in Asia by critically investigating their indigenous cultures and religions with a feminist consciousness. They paid attention to the double face of Christianity and own their traditions when closely probing their cultural and religious plurality and its relationship to Christianity. That is, on the one hand, they were aware of patriarchy in their
indigenous cultures and religions that had been reinforced by Christianity, which provided emancipatory implications in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, they were aware of the power that their own traditions generate in their inner beings, giving them pride in their own traditions.

In the essay, “The Emergence of Asian Feminist Consciousness of Culture and Theology,” Chinese theologian, Kwok Pui-lan, insists that religious, cultural, and linguistic pluralism makes Asian feminist theology distinguished in the Third World. She points out the importance of examining, from women’s perspective, the relationship between Christianity and Asian cultural and religious traditions, while also being aware of different influences on women and men (92). Kwok critically probes a history of the missionary movement and exposes the ambivalent effects of Christianity on Asian women. On the one hand, Christianity inspired Asian women to recognize patriarchal traditions within Asian societies and culture; on the other hand, it used patriarchal traditions to justify the cultural imperialism of the missionaries where western female missionaries dominated Asian women (93-6). While analyzing patriarchal traditions in Asian society, Kwok emphasized the need for Asian feminist theologians to re-examine, using a feminist consciousness, their own traditions that had been labeled as dangerous by Christianity and as patriarchal by the indigenous male elite and then to develop their own theology from the power of women's religious experiences embedded in their re-interpreted heritage.

Korean theologian, Hyun Kyung Chung, is another theologian who developed a “feminist liberation-orientated theological consciousness” with an awareness of the relationship between women’s own experiences and contexts of cultural and
social plurality in Asia (Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology 1990: 8). In this text, she explores distinctive manifestations of Asian women’s liberation theology in three categories—Christology, Mariology and spirituality—by examining “our culture” and “our tradition” which are often blindly protected against colonial cultures as seen from male nationalists’ perspectives.

As Chung describes poverty as a reality of “Asianness” under neo-colonialism, poor women and their lives are taken as the most significant texts, and their experiences viewed as profound foundations for the methodologies by which Asian feminist theology undertakes its work. Chung labels the methodology han-pu-ri—which involves the kut ceremony to release Han, the accumulated anger caused by experiences of injustice and oppression. Han-pu-ri, the methodology of Korean feminist theology embraces three aspects: the process of listening to women’s stories of oppression, the process of analyzing the social, cultural, and religious structures that cause women’s oppression, and the process of engaging in theological reflections on such experience (‘Han-pu-ri: Doing Theology from Korean Women’s Perspective” 135-146).

Chung’s description of Asian feminist theology exposes the methodological emphasis; Asian feminist theology is a “cry, a plea and an invocation” to God “not written with a pen,” but rather, “inscribed on the hearts” of Asian women (99-100). Conscious of the multicultural, multi-religious context on which Asian feminist theology is standing, Chung asserts that Asian feminist theology always needs to risk the “survival-liberation centered syncretism” through interreligious dialogue to move from “doctrinally pure Christianity” (113). In this respect, precise is the
critique of Chung of the Christocentrism of previous Asian feminist theologians that prohibits them from being transformed into truly Asian Christianity by the liberating insights of the indigenous religious cultures alive among the poor women. Even though being aware of cultural and religious plurality and fostering practives to examine the variations of wisdom embedded in it, Chung emphasizes solidarity in revolutionary praxis.

In its second stage, Asian feminist theology played an important role in incarnating and embodying Christian theology into local women’s context while critically re-reading their patriarchal religious traditions and disclosing significant symbols, images, and stories in their diverse traditions of shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In this stage, Asian feminist theologians asserted their own authority and right to analyze and evaluate their experiences and heritages, moving beyond depending on outside authorities by which their traditions and cultures are criticized as pagan or degraded as inferior.

IV. The Third Stage: We are who we are!

There is a huge transition and development in the third stage that occurs in the twilight years of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first century. Diverse studies focusing on a specific topic in traditional theological categories begin to appear in book length publications, even though Christology is still preferred, e.g. Grace Ji-Sun Kim, The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women’s Christology, 2002; Hee An Choi, Korean Women and God: Experiencing God in a Multi-religious Colonial Context, 2005; Wonhee Anne Joh. Heart of the Cross: A
Postcolonial Christology, 2006; and Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, The Jesus of Asian Women: Women From The Margins, 2006). Unlike in the two previous stages, in which feminist theologians identify themselves primarily as Asian, in this stage, theologians, who specifically locate themselves as Asian American, appear (e.g. Rita Nakashima Brock, Anne Joh, and Grace Ji-Sun Kim).

It is notable that most Asian feminist theology in this stage engages in the conversation with diverse theories including postcolonial theory, poststructuralist theory, psychoanalysis, and political feminist hermeneutics, seeking interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies. While Asian feminist theology in the second stage theologically reflects violence and oppression of women in their own patriarchal cultures by critical probing their own context, Asian American feminist theologian, Rita Nakashima Brock in her collaborative work with Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, Casting Stone: Prostitution and Liberation In Asia and The United States, looks at the oppression of Asian women in colonial and neo-colonial contexts, focusing on the sex industry resulting from the entanglement of patriarchal Asian cultures with colonial/neo-colonial histories. Conscious of the fact that the prostitute—who is at the core of the sex industry—is not a participant in private transaction but a marker of “massive symptom of deeper societal problems,” (8) Brock and Thistlethwaite investigate central issues that stimulate the growth of the sex industry such as economics, culture, international politics, race, and law in interdisciplinary approaches. They interrogate religious paradigms in Asian religions, especially Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity, and find that the construction of hypermasculinity within these religions causes distorted attitudes
toward the female body and sexuality; from feminist perspectives, these become the factors that legitimate the structure of sexual exploitation of women.

In this book, psychological analysis, in particular, is an important methodological foundation for divulging psychological elements in exploiters such as pimps and psychological trauma embedded in prostitutes, yet carrying different results from the West. The limitations of western feminist psychologists, which are usually based on a narrow, personal, private understanding of the individual is evident when Brock and Thistlethwaite examine the particular contexts of Asia through constant conversations with Asian women; in these, the self is always within social relationships, and prostitutes do not result, necessarily, from abusive or violent home circumstances (often the western approach) but from poverty and misfortune by exploited by pimps (ch. 5, 6). While remaining keenly aware of the complexities of sexual exploitation intersecting race, class, gender, and sexual preference in Asia, Brock and Thistlethwaite contemplate prostitution from the perspective of intercultural, interreligious, feminist theology in order to liberate Asian women’s exploited bodies (ch. 8,9).

Even as Asian feminist theology in the third stage is involved with diverse theories, postcolonial theory, in particular, has been a significant methodological foundation because Asian feminist theologians are conscious of current theological contexts of the complexities of race, culture, ethnicity, and sexuality in a globalized world marked by transnational and pan-ethnic experiences. Kwok Pui-lan’s study, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, is an important addition to this field, interfacing between feminist and postcolonial studies. Seeking to generate an
epistemological shift for Asian feminist theology in the complicate space of globalization, Kwok employs the concept of hybridization—a popular postcolonial concept—in her book in order to deconstruct monotheistic, imperialistic, and androcentric western theology and western feminist theology which universalize *white* women’s experiences. Although conscious of the significant contribution of poststructuralist theories in destabilizing essentialism, especially in terms of the notion of the “subject,” Kwok is less intrigued by them because there is a lack of concern in them regarding the interrogation of racial prejudice. By seriously examining postcolonial theories, Kwok wants to stand with “strategic essentialism” rooted in Gayatri Spivak’s critique of the Marxist “Subaltern Studies collective” to foster “Asianness” as a subalternized group at a certain stage of their political struggle (ch. 2).

Just as postcolonial theories have been used as a crucial lens through which forms of cultural imperialisms can be analyzed, Kwok asserts a postcolonial theology of religious differences beyond the three old labels present in interfaith dialogue—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism based on Western imperialist constructions of the other. That is, when the issue is shifted from religious diversity grounded in the “liberal paradigm of religious pluralism” to “religious difference as it is constructed and produced in concrete situations, often with significant power differentials” (205), Christianity, automatically assumed as the superior expression of faith for centuries, is destabilized. Bringing together gender, colonialism, and Christianity through an interdisciplinary approach, Kwok discloses the marginalization of Asian women materially and spiritually as they exploited in a
contemporary globalized setting, and then challenges fundamental western theological assumptions.

Wonhee Anne Joh’s book, *Heart of The Cross*, also contributes to the conversation not only with postcolonial theory but also with other theories such as, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and liberationist feminist hermeneutics. In this book, Joh investigates the specific theological category, Christology, by drawing on her Asian/Korean American experience. Unlike other Asian women theologians who identify themselves as Asian, Joh draws on her multiple positionalities as Korean/American which means living on the boundaries of multiple contexts in which one’s identity, as split identity, is fluid, shifting, and engaged in constant negotiation. Borrowing Homi Bhabha’s language she examines her hybrid identity and “in-betweenness” in terms of identity politics and comes to an “interstitial life” or an “interstitial space” which is the ground on which she begins to construct a postcolonial Christology in a non-dichotomous framework of relationality and justice that privilege neither the oppressed nor the oppressors. Joh’s view of the Cross, standing on “interstitial space,” is embodied in the Korean term, *jeong*, a form of “sticky love” as way of living into deep relationality and *han*, a woundedness, both of which reflect two different sides of the same heart, not an oppositional conceptual dyad.

Joh transfers the notion of “abjection”—established by feminist psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva—in terms of the horror and the power of the abject, into her discourse of postcolonial Christology, making it especially productive in terms of the “double-gesture” of the cross—the horror of *han*, and the power of
That signifies the paradoxical ambiguity of the cross. That is, drawing on postcolonial theories and feminist psychoanalysis, the Christology of Jeong signifies the interstice between Jesus and God, the Cross and the resurrection, sin and salvation, the oppressed and oppressor, love and hate, self and other, while also retrieving subversive, transformative power present within solidarity and relatioality.

As is revealed in the argument of Kwok and Joh, “Asianness” surfaces as a contesting issue in the third stage when Asian feminist theologians deploy the poststructuralist and postcolonial challenges regarding the concept of the subject. In the first and second stages, Asianness was represented through the figure of poor women, and was used as a general and important icon by Asian feminist theologians in order to emphasize their difference from the West. However, in the book, *The Poor Women*, Wong Wai Ching, a Chinese theologian, critically contributes to the rhetoric of “the poor women” in Asian feminist theology by using a feminist postcolonial critique of the construction of women’s identity in the postcolonial Asian context. She traces the discourse of the indigenous identity construction, especially the ideological construction of women’s identity based on a “material/spiritual distinction” within nationalist politics and agendas. How women’s identity is constructed through two opposite narratives—as victims of imperialism and all ensuing social and political problems in Asia, and as the heroine fighting for national purity—is revealed when Wong deploys, as a hermeneutic lens, Kadiatu Kanneh and Partha Chatterjee’s critique of national/istic identity in the third world.
Wong argues that a similar plot is found in the discourse of Asian feminist theologians, especially Kwok and Chung when they represent Asian women as the poor women who are victims of oppression but heroines fighting for freedom and emancipation. In Wong’s perspective, they do emphasize differences, but such differences share the “single roof of a poor and oppressed Asia” in which multiplicity is conceived as a category distinguishing it from the presumed homogeneous west. Paying attention to Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s critique of construction of Third World women in terms of “a singular monolithic subject in contrast to First World feminists” (“Under Western Eyes: Feminist Women and the Politics of Feminism,” 1991: 51-80), Wong articulates the limitation of the monolithic representation of Asian women in the figure of “the poor women” who are involved in the narratives of suffering and liberation; this figure represents Asian women as a uniform group and oversimplifies or romanticizes Asian women's experiences. Wong asserts the necessity of an alternative theological formulation in Asian feminist theological discourse that goes beyond the Asian-versus-western dichotomy.

A critique of the construction of an essentialized subject in Asian feminist theological discourse is more vigorous with Nam Soon Kang, Korean feminist theologian. Drawing on postcolonial theorists, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Trinh Minh-Ha, in her essay, “Who/What is Asian?: A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” Kang challenges not only essentialized subjects limited in the frame of a “strong we-they binarism” which, for her, also involves self-orientalizing, but also the tendency of feminist theology’s objectification of Asian women. She is wary of formulating an
unitary, monolithic Asian women’s identity, especially when established in terms of difference from the West; this kind of identity construction ignores the complexity among Asian women’s issues, and reiterates the dualist assumption of the “we-they” which, in itself, is the product of the Western intellectual imperialist discourse. Deeply conscious of the dilemma of “speaking as,” Kang asserts that the development of the hybridity of Asianness involves the shift of questioning from the “what” question, i.e. what is Asian? from the “who” question, who is Asian?

Once the essentialized subject is challenged and hybrid subjects are advocated, in her essay “Toward a Cosmopolitan Theology: Constructing Public Theology from the Future” Kang asks about radical solidarity in multiplicity and about moving toward a radical neighborly love inspired by Spivak’s call for “planetary love.” It is embodied in her constructive work on the theory of Cosmopolitanism, while she engages with the discourse of diverse contemporary philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, etc. Kang finally turns toward constructing cosmopolitan theology, which is theology of “trans-identity, “trans-religious solidarity,” and thus “boundary-transcending solidarity.” What she really emphasizes here through trans-identity politics is the internal multiplicity of identity.

In the first stage of feminist Asian theology, constructing “Asianness” as a collective identity for Asian women as different from that of Western women was the most significant agenda in the context of decolonization of Asia after the Second World War. Retaining awareness of these prior liberation contexts, most Asian feminist theologians in the third stage formulate their theological reflections with
postcolonial sensitivity. As a concept, however, “Asianness” becomes intensely contested when Asian feminist theologians are involved in poststructuralist critiques of identity politics and postcolonial critiques of the politics of representation. For these theologians, no matter whether they stand on the side of strategic essentialism or anti-essentialism, the concept of hybridity is a constructive alternative to conventional concepts of identities, which are fixed and frozen.

‘Differences’ are no longer a tool for discerning them from the West; rather, it becomes a central concept to situate Asian women within. They are also aware of the impact of intersections of diversity in socially and culturally constructed categories—sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality and religiosity—in shaping the lives and experiences of women, rather than deploying gender as the primary axis of power.

Facing the dilemma around “speaking as,” which Kang raises is still substantial enough to be deliberated upon in further Asian feminist theological discourse, but any such conversation much have strong recognitions of intersectionality. Sharpened by third-stage theologians, awareness of differences within Asian women is the core of such discourse. In this respect, the analysis of the European theorist, Rosi Braidotti is very helpful regarding the notion of difference that is at the core for the feminist nomadic philosophy of subject; in her book, Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory, Braidotti seeks, through the concept of the “nomadic subject,” an intensive, multiple subject, but always presented amidst the interconnections. Braidotti especially attempts to conceive of identity as a “site of difference” that is complex and situated, and
politically empowered, and affirm a new collectivity drawing on the recognition of irreducible differences or “politics of location,” but she also wants to avoid relativism and rethink the unity of the subject. Along with Braidotti’s work, Asian feminist theology can deepen their discourse on identity politics and the dilemma of “speaking as” Asian women while being aware of that the “subject women is not a monolithic essence, defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference” (Nomadic Subject: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory 1994: 25).

Mohanty’s sensitivity in terms of the intersection of race and power provides critical insight that helps challenge the tendencies of western theology’s objectification of Asian women which distort the multiple agency of Third-world women. Third-World-ness is reshaped in shared history and experiences of struggle against colonial domination, not biology or geography when Mohanty, in the book, Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity, analyzes the simplified dichotomies of Western and Third world women in the context of the intensification of global capitalism. Especially, her strategy of focusing on the arena between the politics of difference and the challenge of solidarity based on politically constituted, contextualized organizing, formulated by recognition of internal differences among women will sharpen contesting questions of strategic essentialism for the political struggle in Asian feminist theological discourse.

The consciousness of fluid and negotiated boundaries functions as an important methodological tool for Asian feminist theology, especially in the
contemporary, globalized context. However, I would argue that Asian feminist theology needs political theological sensitivity when being as much aware of the fact that geographic or other structural borders that divide between insiders/citizens and outsider/aliens have deepened since 9/11 as the recognition of crossing borders. Furthermore, in order to contextualize Asian women's different religious traditions, comparative feminist studies are further needed in terms of the fact that those studies are relatively lacking in the Asian theological academy.
Bibliography


