

DECOLONISING HISTORY: THE POST-MODERNIST CHALLENGE

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Introduction

The subject of this paper may be reminiscent of the debate in the 1960's relating to Europe-centric and Asian-centric or indigenous-centric approaches to history writing. That debate occurred during the great age of decolonization and the emergence of the new Asian nation-states in the 1950's. These states later constituted themselves at the 1955 Bandung Conference as the Third World.¹ Since the first modern histories of the so-called Third World countries were mostly written by European colonialists, the allotted task of the "nationalist" historians of this Third World, therefore, was to find or recover lost spaces, roles and meanings for their elites, masses and states in the nationalist histories they were writing. The aim was not to obliterate the European colonialist entirely from their historical accounts, but to portray all anti-imperialist struggles as steps leading towards a sovereign national state.

In 1961, however, a new project to decolonize European

¹The term "Third World" represents a radical alternative to the hegemonic capitalist-socialist power blocks of the post-war era. The literary theorist Robert Young comments, "The inadequateness of the term, however, in so far as it offers a univocal description of an extremely heterogenous section of the world, also means that a suitable alternative general category cannot by definition be produced." See Robert Young, White Mythologies: Writing History and the West, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, pp.11-12. For Young's discussion of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's views of "Third World Woman," ibid., pp.170-173.

thought and the forms of its history through a critique of European humanism had been initiated by the Algerian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his book The Wretched of the Earth. In the post-colonial scene of writing history today, the 1960's debate seems to be still relevant in so far as it stresses an autonomous' nationalist historiography. However, it has been overtaken by Fanon's project, which is aimed at a more conscious autonomous 'purging' or repositioning² of colonialist or Western ethno-centric legacies within the nationalist historiography. Robert Young sees the "Decolonisation of History" project in the same light as the "deconstruction of the West":³

In addition to the rewriting of the history of non-European histories and cultures, analysis of colonialism therefore shifts the perspective of European history and culture so as to interrogate the fundamental structures and assumptions of Western knowledge. The legacy of colonialism is as much a problem for the West as it is for the scarred lands in the world beyond.

This paper intends to discuss some of the developments and problems in this new field of writing and its relationship to post-modernism. At the outset, let me state that I do not fully subscribe to post-modernism. However, I feel it is an important movement which needs to be understood as it is likely to have a

²For Europe, however, Robert Young prefers to see it as 'repositioning' rather than 'purging': "...it is not an issue of removing colonial thinking from European thought, of purging it, like today's dream of 'stamping out' racism. It is rather a question of repositioning European systems of knowledge so as to demonstrate the long history of their operation as the effect of their colonial other, a reversal encapsulated in Fanon's observation: 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World'." Young, White Mythologies, p.119.

³Young, White Mythologies, p.126.

great influence on the discipline of history in the near future.

Decolonising History

Post-colonial writers - among whom I include Edward Said, Ranajit Guha, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak - regard the work of Decolonization of History as an ongoing process which does not end merely with the attainment of independence by Third World countries. They believe the work has to go on, particularly in the realm of culture and knowledge, and within the meta-narratives of nationalism, colonialism, capitalism, and socialism, which are all concepts emanating from the West. The seduction of the West is so strong, that the building of a new national or social consciousness is difficult and requires a conscious effort. To do this, they suggest that the new nation-states in Asia, Africa and Latin America must try to find the analytical or discursive tools to counter Western cultural hegemony. "In many instances, however, the new states are still often ideologically in thrall to, and practical satellites of, their former colonial masters," says Edward Said,⁴ adding, "Above all, the great transformation of which Frantz Fanon spoke, that after liberation, nationalist consciousness must convert itself into a new social consciousness, has not often taken place." In fact, Fanon, writing about the pitfalls of national consciousness, warned the new national elites of the dangers of becoming parasitic agents of the West, as had happened to those

⁴See Edward W. Said in his Foreword to Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Selected Subaltern Studies, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p.ix.

in certain Latin American republics:⁵

The casinos of Havana and of Mexico, the beaches of Rio, the little Brazilian and Mexican girls, the half-breed thirteen-year olds, the ports of Acapulco and Copacabana - all these are the stigma of this depravation of the national middle class....the national middle class will have nothing better to do than to take on the role of manager for Western enterprise, and it will in practice set up its country as the brothel of Europe.

Following in the path of Fanon, Edward Said in his Orientalism, first published in 1978, analysed the politics of Western ethnocentrism, showing how Western writers fabricated a complex set of representations which became the "Orient" and provided the basis for its subsequent appropriation. In the 1980's the new historiographical project of the Subaltern Studies group under Ranajit Guha also attempted to "decolonise" Indian historiography by interrogating the idiom, source materials and the perceptions underlying much of Indian and colonial history. By "reading against the grain" (a deconstructionist expression), the Subaltern Studies group set out "to rewrite the history of colonial India from the distinct and separate point of the masses, using unconventional or neglected sources in popular memory, oral discourse, [and] previously unexamined colonial administrative documents."⁶ Their members are engaged in debates in 'history as critique', in history as a problem of method, and in questioning the hegemony of imperialist knowledge. However, their work differs from the rest of Indian historiography in

⁵Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, [Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre], Grove Press, New York, 1966, p.125.

⁶See Said's Foreword to Selected Subaltern Studies, p.vi.

that they reject the appropriation by Indian national elites of "a substantial degree of cultural and political autonomy" in the diverse historical struggles of the Indian subaltern classes, especially the peasantry, who "owed only a limited debt to the liberal idiom of politics that the elite Indian nationalist had learnt from the British."⁷

Nevertheless, it was Fanon's work The Wretched of the Earth which actually marked that fundamental shift and cultural crisis currently characterized as post-modernism.⁸ Since Said, Bhabha, Spivak and the Subaltern Studies group are similarly involved in the critique of imperialist knowledge, which Fanon had started, they may be included among those who have joined in the post-colonial debates to "decolonise" history and to "deconstruct" the West.

Post-modernism

Although there are many definitions given to the term "post-modern" or "post-modernism", I think for the purpose of emphasising the importance of the "deconstruction" of historical texts, that used by the French literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard is the most appropriate. Lyotard uses it in the sense of

⁷See Dipesh Chakrabarty's insightful essay, "History as Critique and Critique(s) of History," in Economic and Political Weekly (India), 14 September 1991. I am indebted to my former colleague at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Dr R. Suntharalingam, for drawing my attention to this essay.

⁸Young, White Mythologies, p.119.

a critique of meta-narratives:⁹ "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives." Lyotard here uses a concept from or related to "deconstructionist" theory to construct his idea of post-modernism as breaking away from earlier modern or modernist canons.¹⁰ However, one of the earliest users of the term post-modern, the historian Arnold Toynbee in several volumes of his A Study of History, between 1939 and 1954, had used it to refer to a "post-Modern age" of the West - that is, to a particular condition. He identified this age as marked not only by the rise of the middle class and the industrial urban working class in the West, but by both the rise of other nations and their middle classes and proletariats and a

⁹Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature, Vol.10, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. xxiv, Introduction.

¹⁰Deconstructionists have often been seen to have avoided giving clear definitions of "Deconstruction". This term, however, is often associated with the name of Jacques Derrida, a major figure in contemporary French thought, who has perfected its use to an art. The elusive Derrida is reported to have described his work as "the deconstruction of philosophy by examining in the most faithful, rigorous way the 'structured genealogy' of all of philosophy's concepts; and to do so in order to determine what issues the history of philosophy has hidden, forbidden or repressed." See Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p.x, translator's introduction. However, Christopher Norris in his book The Deconstructive Turn presents Deconstruction as a move which both 'overturns' assumptions of 'classical philosophy', such as the claim (as Norris puts it) that philosophy has 'access to truths which literature can only obscure and pervert its dissimulating play with language and fiction'. Norris gives another definition of it as being merely a textual activity aimed at questioning the 'authorial point of view'. For a useful discussion of deconstruction and Norris's views, see Margaret Rose, The post-modern and the post-industrial, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp.40-41.

variety of other cultural and social developments as well as the sciences. He also referred to a "post-Christian age", in which other religions, cults and secular movements would displace Christianity from centre stage in the civilisation of the West.¹¹

It is a 40-year quantum leap from Toynbee's period to a fast-changing world today, but the "decentering" of Western culture which Toynbee had perceived is already taking place but at a faster pace. In his The Postmodern Condition Lyotard holds that in this post-industrial and post-modern age, science will maintain and strengthen its preminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the Western nation-states. This in turn will cause the gap between the developed and developing countries to grow wider every day.¹² Lyotard goes on to note that the nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformations, adding, "The computerization of societies leads to the transformation of knowledge." In the production and use of knowledge "as informational commodity indispensable to productive power",¹³ the West is ahead of the rest of the world. Yet, all is not well with Western society.

Post-modernist critics describe both "modernism" and "post-

¹¹Rose, The post-modern and the post-industrial, pp.9-20.

¹²Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, p.5.

¹³Lyotard, op.cit., p.5. "It is conceivable," he adds, "that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials."

modernism" as having been incapable so far of providing the values needed for contemporary society. Seen in this light, post-modernism is both a condition in itself (say, from 1914 onwards, as identified by Toynbee and others) and a reaction or critique against itself ("as a techno-scientific society which is also aligned in some respects with the meta-narratives of capitalism, and, hence in need of some post-modernist criticism").¹⁴ In post-modernist criticisms the textual strategy of "Deconstruction" as developed by Derrida is frequently employed.

Deconstructionist Post-Modernism As A Critique

Ironically, although deconstructionist post-modernism began in the West, it now represents a new, subversive way of thinking, a movement, a discourse to decenter the West, to "deconstruct" it - from within and outside the West. As post-modernist attacks on modernity and Western culture occur increasingly from various directions, in the arts and architecture to international politics and world trade, it clearly marks the loss of centrality of Western culture. A critic of post-modernism, the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb describes the subversive nature of post-modernism as follows:¹⁵

Post-modernism is, avowedly and intentionally, far more radical than either Marxism or the new "isms"...all of which are implicitly committed to the Enlightenment principles of reason, truth, justice, morality, reality. Post-modernism repudiates both the values and the rhetoric of the

¹⁴Rose, The post-modern and the post-industrial, p.174.

¹⁵See Gertrude Himmelfarb's critique of post-modernism, "Telling it as you like it: Post-modernist history and the flight from fact," in Times Literary Supplement, 10 October 1992.

Enlightenment. In rejecting the "discipline" of knowledge and rationality, post-modernism also rejects the "discipline" of society and authority. And in denying any reality apart from language, it aims to subvert the structure of society together with the structure of language. There is nothing concealed in the agenda; it is the explicit, insistent theme of Foucault and Derrida and only slightly less insistent, but no less explicit, in the work of Hayden White.

Worse still, there are post-modernists who believe in the death of history in the West.¹⁶ The post-modern First World-"late-capitalist, consumerist, fast-moving" - is now said to be a place without 'history': "societies [of the West] on the fast forward mode cannot any longer be studied.... for even the evidence, the memory of change, is destroyed in the process."¹⁷ There is a close connection between post-modernism and the currently-fashionable protest ideologies of the academic world-anti-racism, anti-sexism, environmentalism, leading to the creation of new courses at universities for race studies, feminist studies, gay studies, and so on. It is no accident that

¹⁶This is, however, different from Francis Fukuyama's post-Hegelian view of the 'End of History' in the post-Marxist and post-Cold War era. See his The End of History and The Last Man, Penguin, London, 1992. The 'death of history', in fact, refers to a particular social attitude, which was noticeable in the 1930's. Toynbee in his post-war volumes of A Study of History had already criticised those who had taken the end of their own period to be the end of history as such. This criticism was directed against both the 'complacent' view that a period was as good as could be (Toynbee quotes Sellar and Yeatman's ironic 1066 and All That of 1930: 'History is now at end: this History is therefore final') and the 'antithetical' view that things were so bad that nothing new could arise. See Rose, The post-modern and the post-industrial, p.11, for this background of post-modernism.

¹⁷See Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay, "History as Critique and Critique(s) of History," op.cit.

so many post-modernist historians are feminists, who wish to overturn traditional history, subvert it and rewrite it from a consciously' feminist stance. Feminist history aims at undermining traditional history which is regarded as an instrument of patriachal power, but the discipline of history itself has also come under attack. Hayden White, the leading post-modernist philosopher of history, in his Metahistory¹⁸ rejects the long-held notion among historians that there is a truth and a reality accessible to the historian, and regards history as something akin to a fictional or literary creation of the historian. Thus, post-modernists keep looking for new intellectual bases for radicalism, given the troubles of liberalism and socialism in the world today. Perhaps the theorist Ihab Hassan's list of 'contrasts' between Modernism and Post-Modernism will make clearer the characteristics of Post-modernism:¹⁹

MODERNISM	POSTMODERNISM
Urbanism	The City and also the Global village,...leading either to more or less destruction, anarchy.
Technologism	Runaway technology, New Art forms, Boundless dispersal by media, The computer as substitute consciousness or as an extension of consciousness?
Dehumanization	Antielitism, antiauthoritarianism. Diffusion of the ego. Participation. Art becomes communal, optional, anarchic. At the same time, Irony becomes radical, self-

¹⁸See Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973.

¹⁹Rose, The post-modern and the post-industrial, pp.44-45.

consuming play, entropy of meaning.
 Also comedy of the absurd, black humour, insane
 parody and slapstick, Camp. Negation.
 Abstraction taken to the limit and coming back
 as New Concreteness...
 Primitivism Away from the mythic, toward the existential.
 Erotic Beyond censorship.

 Antinomianism Counter Cultures.
 Beyond alienation from the whole culture,
 acceptance of discreteness and discontinuity.
 Evolution of radical empiricism in art as in
 politics or morality.
 Experimentalism Counter Western 'ways' or metaphysics.
 Open, discontinuous, improvisational,
 indeterminate...increasing self-
 reflexiveness, intermedia, the fusion of forms,
 the confusion of realms.
 Against interpretation (Sontag).

Post-colonial writing: Some methodological problems

It is necessary to discuss briefly a few works of post-
 colonial writers to see how successful their methodologies have
 been in "decolonising" History. Reference has been made to
 Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth. In sounding the trumpet call
 for the rejection of "that same Europe" and all its values which
 colluded with European colonialism to "dehumanize the native",
 Fanon undertook a critique of European humanism and showed that
 violence was intrinsic to Western culture and not accidental to
 it. Likewise, he asserted, "Decolonisation which sets out to
 change the order of the world is, obviously, a programme of
 complete disorder."²⁰ Fanon's attacks on Europe for its 'anti-
 humanism' generated much controversy and hostility, but had the
 effect of decentering and displacing the norms of Western
 knowledge.

²⁰Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, p.29.

Of the Post-colonial writers who have come after Fanon and continued the task of "decolonising History" and "deconstructing the West", I have the greatest affinity with Edward Said and Ranajit Guha than with the other two post-colonial writers, Homi Bhabha and Spivak. The methodologies of all four writers do have problems, but Bhabha's and Spivak's skills and methods are somewhat complex and metaphysical. Like Derrida, their deconstructionist texts are rather difficult and elusive, though both are brilliant in their use of language. Homi Bhabha, like Fanon, has also employed psychoanalysis to examine the minds of the colonizer and the colonised as well as colonial discourse. Bhabha's concern, says Robert Young, is "to demonstrate the ambivalence in colonial and colonizing subjects by articulating the inner dissension within a colonial discourse structured according to the conflictual economy of the psyche."²¹ On the other hand, Spivak is an astute deconstructionist post-modernist whose interests range from deconstruction, feminism, psychoanalysis, critiques of colonialism and practices of pedagogy. She is also the translator of Derrida's work, Of Grammatology, and seems to be at her best in disconstructionist critique of contemporary forms of Western imperialism. She is very supportive of the Subaltern Studies group of historians. However, Ranajit Guha's approach to historical writing falls very much within the Marxist "history from below" school, to which I have subscribed for a long time. I have also recently adopted

²¹Robert Young, White Mythologies, pp.141-145.

Edward Said's approach in a critique of British colonial historiography on "Malay feudalism".²²

Let me briefly share my experience and some of my problems in doing (a) an analysis of colonial discourse of the type attempted by Edward Said on precolonial "Malay feudalism" and (b) writing about social banditry from the perspective of "history from below". In his Orientalism, Said shows how Western writers created the Orient as an object of knowledge and how as an academic discipline, Orientalism became implicated in colonial domination, and enabled exploitation and anti-humanist oppression to occur. Said interrogates the Orientalist discourse found in a series of Western writings on the Middle East, from literary to political and military accounts, revealing how Western ethnocentric prejudices predominate and criticises its historicism and the political effects of its Eurocentric universalism. However, although Said intends to subvert Orientalism and even attempts to dissolve it, his approach is problematic because he has entered into the discourse and repeated the structures that he has criticised. He claims for himself the privileged role of the critic, the outsider, who is not trapped by the totalizing system of Orientalism. In his very perceptive critique of Said's analysis of colonial discourse, Robert Young comments:²³

Said's inability to provide any alternative forms of

²²See my forthcoming article, "Feudalism in Pre-colonial Malaya: The Past As A Colonial Discourse" in Journal of Southeast Asian Studies.

²³Young, White Mythologies, pp.128-129.

knowledge, or a theoretical model for such knowledge, results from his unwillingness to pursue this problem of methodology in any rigorous way. But if he does not pursue it, it pursues him: despite his opposition to totalization, once again the critic becomes entrammelled in his own writing. The theoretical difficulties which emerge in Orientalism are highly instructive for any attempt at the decolonization of European thought.

I have benefitted greatly from Robert Young's criticisms of Said's methodology, and have thus used Said's critical apparatus only in a limited way. Although conscious of the problems, I have used the deconstructionist method to interrogate the colonial historiography on "Malay feudalism" and attempted to show it as a Western invention, or object of knowledge, (like what Said has done to Orientalism), in order to understand a pre-colonial non-Western society. But I have stopped short of trying to subvert this invention. This is because unlike Said, I have not rejected the created object of knowledge, "Malay feudalism". It is not that I have not found an alternative object or form of knowledge to replace "Malay feudalism" for the precolonial Malay society, such as using Michael Adas's concept of the "contest state",²⁴ or the "patrimonial state", or some such terms, but that I still consider the term useful - even from a Marxist, or nationalist perspective. I have also regarded the colonial representation as merely one of several representations of reality, based on the evidence which the colonial historians have presented.

²⁴See Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol.23, 2 (1981), pp.217-247.

Here I think I have run foul of the theory of "decolonising History". Because the term "Malay feudalism" has been used by colonial officials like Maxwell, Clifford and others, any such discourse on Malay feudalism must therefore be dismissed as a "colonial" or Western discourse and thus not worthy of study. Even a Marxist or nationalist perspective may be said to operate within Western systems of knowledge, and therefore does not quite sufficiently "deconstruct" the West, as they are themselves Western systems. What I wish to highlight here is that the theory of "Decolonising History" demands or exerts an equally totalising system on those who wish to practise it, but the question is can a non-Western intellectual who "operates" within Western systems of thought ever fully escape or free himself from Western culture?

I think not, for even the originality of the Subaltern Studies group of Ranajit Guha and other Third World non-Western intellectuals who attempt to "decolonise" History and "deconstruct" the West can be questioned: "Isn't a non-western intellectual operating with 'western' procedures of knowledge by definition a producer of derivative, second-hand ideas?" mischevously asks Dipesh Chakrabarty, himself a member of the group. Dipesh, however, uses Edward Said to speak on behalf of the group's work. Said insists that what these intellectuals achieve by their work is nothing short of a radical transformation of these procedures themselves. Said argues they are writing the colony back into the empire, and goes on to

state:²⁵

I want to argue that their work is, on its merits, only apparently dependent (some would say parasitic) on a mainstream discourse like history, political science, economics, or cultural criticism, and that it is in fact original and creative work, whose result has been the transformation of the very terrain of the disciplines.

Now let me discuss an earlier work of mine which was subjected to a post-modernist critique. Among the reviews which I have read on my book, The Peasant Robbers of Kedah, 1900-1929: Historical and Folk Perceptions,²⁶ I have found the review by Reynaldo C. Ileto, a leading Filipino historian, most beneficial and stimulating.²⁷ My work on social banditry was based on oral, literary and archival sources (the last being colonial records). I thought I had achieved a nice balance of these sources, using one to control the other. However, Rey's main criticism, with his heavy emphasis on texts and sources, found it otherwise. He held that in trying to establish the truth of social banditry I had given primacy to the written official (colonial) records, whose biases I had checked and controlled by oral and literary accounts and by the historian-as-detective, instead of doing it

²⁵Edward Said, "Third World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture," Raritan, 9:3, Winter 1990, pp.27-50 cited by Dipesh Chakrabarty, ibid.

²⁶Published by Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur in 1988.

²⁷See his review in Asian Studies Review, Vol.16, No.2 (December 1992). Rey is the author of Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910, Ateneo de Manila University Press, Manila, 1979. In this much-acclaimed work Rey analyses standard documents as well as folk songs, poems and religious traditions to get at the thinking of Filipino masses.

the other way around which he preferred. Rey comments as follows:

Although Cheah admits that the 'official transcript' must be regarded as incomplete, those familiar with Edward Said's Orientalism and Ranajit Guha's analysis of "the prose of counterinsurgency", not to mention the flood of monographs on colonial discourse, will feel ill at ease with Cheah's reluctance to treat British colonial reports as literary representations. The popularity of Montaillou notwithstanding, LeRoy Ladurie himself has come under serious criticism for his unproblematised use of (official) inquisition records.

In addition, Rey says I had "relatively easy access" (which was not true) to oral accounts, myths, legends and literary works, and had viewed (again, not true) these local sources as not belonging to the domain of history but "to a somewhat inferior realm of perception, invention and literature." Consequently, I suffered from a "traditional" view of what constitutes "proper" history and documentation, and must be considered to have failed in "decolonising" history.

Let me just briefly answer these charges. Firstly, I find Rey's criticisms somewhat unfair to me. Although he has focussed on sources, he has not touched on the equally important question of representation and reality - a controversial issue among historians - with which I was more concerned and which is now a favourite target of deconstructionist post-modernists. To me, the abundance of oral evidence alone was not enough to prove that the rural outlaws actually existed. Once I had been asked by Tony Milner at a seminar I gave on the subject at the Australian National University in 1985 whether these outlaws were merely literary or oral inventions. I, therefore, had to fall back on the colonial records - the State Council minutes, the reward

notices for the capture of the outlaws, the police reports detailing the outlaws' activities - to prove their existence. Most of the oral accounts blurred the dates, and the details were either exaggerated or contradictory. The question presented itself to me as to what constituted realistic representation. Was I to write history, even if it is "traditional" history, or "fictional history"? In my Introduction, I had clearly stated I intended to write a social history. Here I wish to quote Himmelfarb's criticisms of Hayden White for supporting "fictional history":²⁸

It is only when history itself is 'problematized' and 'deconstructed', when events and persons are transformed into 'texts', when the past is deprived of any reality and history of any truth, that the distinction between history and fiction is elided and fictional history becomes a form of history rather than fiction. History itself, all of history, is then seen as existing in a continuum with fiction, as essentially fictional. Where the late Arnaldo Momigliano deplored the 'widespread tendency', as he saw it, to treat historiography as 'another genre of fiction', the post-modernist applauds this tendency. White's 'metahistory' has now been redefined as 'historiographic metafiction'.

Owing to the constraints of space, I shall now move on to touch briefly on the limited post-modernist impact in Malaysian literary and historical writings. Post-modernism has captured the imagination of more writers and scholars in the field of Malaysian literature than in Malaysian historiography. Many seminars have been held on pasca-modernisme ("post-modernism") by literary groups. I wish to report that an impressive deconstructionist post-modernist effort has been attempted on the

²⁸Himmelfarb, "Telling it as you like it."

Sejarah Melayu, [The Malay Annals] by the Malay literary theorist, Umar Junus. The Sejarah Melayu, written in the 17th century, of which 29 versions exist throughout the world, has been regarded as a literary-cum-historical work on the Melaka Sultanate both because of its literary style and historical content, reflecting much evidence of its grandeur. However, Umar Junus in his work of "deconstruction" regards it merely as a work of fiction, with its own world-view and mechanisms. He rejects it as a historical text.²⁹ When his book first appeared it was discussed with great excitement.

Within the field of Malaysian history, there is only one post-modernist who has been active in the "Decolonisation" of History. He is Tony Milner of the Australian National University. In his Kerajaan (1982),³⁰ he argued for the need to 'understand Malay political activity in Malay terms'. His study of Malay political culture is based on Malay literary and historical texts. Milner has deprecated any attempts to use Western models or sources to study pre-modern Malay communities, or even recent Malay history.³¹ Lately, in an article he has recommended deconstructionist post-modernist approaches for the study of

²⁹See Umar Junus, Sejarah Melayu: Menemukan Diri Kembali, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1984.

³⁰A.C. Milner, Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1982.

³¹See A.C. Milner, "Colonial Records History: British Malaya," Kajian Malaysia (Journal of Malaysian Studies), Vol. IV, No.2, (Dec.1986), pp. 1-18.

Malay biography,³² and attempted new forms of analysis of Malay politics in the prewar period of British Malaya.³³

Conclusion

It may be pertinent for Southeast Asianist historians to take note of what is happening in Black Africa, where the task of rewriting history has also taken the form of "decolonisation". In the columns of Afrika Zamani, the African historical review whose self-declared aim is to 'decolonise History', this programme does not mean simply correcting its European 'viewpoint'. African historian Oumar Kane suggests adopting the chronology of Hrbek who 'left the beaten track of western chronology and the Marxist plan of history, which completely failed to serve the evolution of African societies'. Hrbek proposes a chronology based upon the dynamic of African societies themselves. Commenting on this project in his review of this new African history, the historian Marc Ferro writes:³⁴

The originality of this outline lies....not only in its disassociation of African history from that of the Orient or Europe, but in its elimination from African history of all that might cast shadows over the present, stir up arguments, or endanger African unity and Africanism.... To anyone brought up on history from a European perspective, this outline cannot fail to be revealing, even if, at times, it

³²A.C. Milner, "Post-Modern Perspectives on Malay Biography," Kajian Malaysia, Vol.IX, No.2, December 1991, pp.24-38.

³³A.C. Milner, "Inventing Politics: The Case of Malaysia," Past and Present, No.132, August 1991, 104-129.

³⁴See his essay, "Decolonized history: Black Africa," in his collection of essays entitled, The Use and Abuse of History Or How the Past is taught, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1984, pp.14-27.

stresses, to excess, the state of Africa before Europe.

The "Decolonisation" of History project is likely to continue in the near future, despite having its own problems. The question it faces is not simply one of sources, but of the concepts and the questions which the historian puts to his materials. Increasingly it may take the form of deconstructionist post-modernist history, which is a new, exciting "worldly, wordy language game"³⁵ which historians can learn to play. In this sense, I agree with the historian Lawrence Stone that the "linguistic turn" in history has some great merits:³⁶

It has taught us to examine texts with far more care and caution than we did before, using new tools to disclose covert beneath overt messages, to decipher the meaning of subtle shifts of grammar and so on.

³⁵See the case for post-modernism by Keith Jenkins in his Re-thinking History, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p.56.

³⁶Lawrence Stone, "History and Post-Modernism," Past and Present, No.135, May 1992, pp. 189-194.