Foregrounding ideology in occidental discourse on Malaysia: intervention measures on re-reading images in texts

Noraini Md Yusofa*, Ruzy Suliza Hashima, Shahizah Ismail Hamdana & Tajul Arifin Muhamadb

aSchool of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
bFaculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Abstract

Travel writing in this region is a construct of a land that is imagined, owned and domesticated. A re-reading of Western representations of Malaya/Malaysia will disclose the ways colonialist discourse perpetuates and sustains colonialist ideology. Many students encounter problems reading and discerning the ideology operating in the discourse. An intervention is thus needed to facilitate students’ reading and interpretation of the issues raised by Western perspectives on Malaya/Malaysia. This paper examines the intervention measures undertaken to enable students to become critical readers by introducing Spivak’s concept of Worlding, Foucault’s notions of power and knowledge as well as Bhabha’s ambiguity.

Keywords: Action research; discourse; ideology; Malaya/Malaysia; power

1. Introduction

Students who major in the Postcolonial Literature in English program at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, has the option to take as elective a course entitled Occidental Perspectives on Malaysia. This post-graduate level course enables students to delve into selected colonialist texts/discourses on Malaysia from a Malaysian standpoint. In fourteen weeks, students participate in a seminar to “comment on and interpret the corpus that could come from a cross-section of genres (fiction, autobiography, poetry, drama, historical, journalistic and travel writings), from different mediums of verbal communication (print, electronic media, theatre etc.) and from any period of history whether colonial or post-colonial, as long as the discourse perpetuates and sustains colonial ideology” (Buku Panduan, 2011: 157). The assessments comprise two oral presentations, an individual essay, and a folio project – one in which the students work in pairs. At the end of the course, students should achieve the following learning outcomes: comment on issues embedded in colonialist texts/discourse on Malaysia, apply relevant theories in their critical analysis of colonialist texts/discourse, present...
and write essays to reflect their ability in analyzing colonialist texts/discourse from a local perspective, and interpret issues imbedded in texts/discourse that perpetuate colonial ideology.

Central to this course is the concept of ideology. Students need to understand the concept and be able to disclose the ideology that is operating during the time the text/discourse is produced. Ideology is first defined by Marx, a mid-19th Century German philosopher in the Industrialization period, as “the ruling ideas of the ruling class” (Rivkin, 1998: 237). He sees prevailing ideas in a culture tend to be those that legitimize the shape of that society as well as reinforce the ruling elite’s hegemony. Ideology, thus, reflects a “dynamic social practice, constantly in process, constantly reproducing itself”, and as subjects-in-ideology, people’s sense of the world, themselves, identity and their sense of relation to other people as well as to society were constituted through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), like media and education (cited by Fiske in Rivkin, 1998: 238). Today, ideology is accepted as the processes in which culture is signified and the personal is formed through the practices of self-discipline or modes of self-identification. Ideology gets produced in literature through the act of writing. Prior to that, it is insubstantial, a system of “illusory” social beliefs; writing provides it with shape and contour, and now transformed, the text ‘hollows’ the ideology, separating its fictional version from its original (Macherey cited in Jefferson, 1982: 180).

To achieve the learning outcomes, students are introduced, as part of the readings for the course, to European travel writing. As colonialist discourse, it is a corpus that contains a huge body of “knowledge about the rest of the world” and the ‘imaginative geographies” that are constantly produced and circulated, is “crucial to the discursive formation [and continuation] of the [colonialist] empire’ (Smethurst, 2009:1). In the 18th and 19th centuries, Malaya and Borneo became the subject of study by the Western travelers to the region. Travel writing, especially on colonized space, is a form of construct that writes “about a place about another place in the mind, a space of imagination a particular kind of utopia, the utopia of the distant world brought near, a strange world owned and domesticated” (Ashcroft, 2009:231). Hence, a re-reading of the ways the West has represented Malaya/Malaysia in their texts will disclose the ways colonialist discourse perpetuates and sustains colonialist ideology in its narrative. However, many students encounter problems reading the texts and discerning the ideology operating in the discourse of power and knowledge about the colonized land and its people. An intervention is therefore needed to facilitate the students’ reading and interpretation of the issues raised by Western perspectives on Malaya/Malaysia.

This paper examines the intervention measures undertaken to enable students to become more critical readers; this is part of an on-going action research that aims to achieve the following objectives:

a. Identify the problems encountered by students when reading and analyzing Western discourses on Malaya/Malaysia;

b. Delineate patterns of issues and concerns in Western representations on Malaya/Malaysia;

c. Train students to select and apply relevant concepts in critical analysis theories in the interpretation of these discourses as a form of intervention for the problems areas; and

d. Produce students who are critical readers that can resist the discourse of power and knowledge.

2. Innovation: Plan of Action

O’Brien (1998) proposes an action research model that presents a cycle: identifying the problem, considering the alternative methods of teaching, selecting the necessary steps of action, analyzing consequences of the intervention plan and specifying the learning. Having identified that our students encounter problems in reading and discerning the ideology operating in texts/discourse, we undertook an alternative method to help them overcome the handicap. We proposed to overcome students’ inhibitions in reading texts by using a film as an alternative text. This is because film images are constructed visual representations, and Mitchell (1992) claims visual representations of the ‘Orient’ creates and displays “Orientalist reality”.

Students are introduced to a film directed by Guy Jenkin and produced in 2003, The Sleeping Dictionary. Set in 1936, a young British colonial officer, John Truscott (Hugh Dancy), arrives in Sarawak, to work in the Iban society. A young girl born out of wedlock to an Iban mother and a British father, Selima (Jessica Alba), is assigned to be his ‘sleeping dictionary’, namely to live and sleep with him and teach him the language and habits of the locals. Due to this close proximity, the two ultimately fall in love with each other in a forbidden romance. This film becomes a text for the students to analyze and a point of entry for an in-class discussion on colonial ideology as well as the Western representation of Malaya and its inhabitants.
Students were given the film early in the semester and instructed to view it prior to the two weeks assigned for class discussion. To train students to become critical readers, the following steps of action are then undertaken:

a. Strategies to resist hegemonic discourses are introduced, namely Spivak’s (1999) concept of Worlding, Foucault’s (1972) notions of power and knowledge and Bhabha’s binary opposition and ambiguity

b. A folio on the film is compiled to examine the:
   i) construction and representation of the ‘native’ and the land;
   ii) perpetuation and sustaining of colonial ideology; and
   iii) conforming to or contradiction of the genre of travel writing via film

3. Findings and Results

As a consequence of the intervention plan, namely using The Sleeping Dictionary as a point of entry to the study of colonial ideology, students succeed in examining Western constructions and representations of Malaya and its inhabitants via the images and the dialogues. The following questions were raised during class discussion on the film:

1. How are the ‘natives’ represented in the movie? Why are they represented in such a manner?
2. What are the conditions that control the construction and representation of the ‘natives’?
3. Are the ‘natives’ given a voice or agency? If yes, what do they speak of? If not, who speaks for them? What is said about them?
4. How is the protagonist’s account of the place, people and time? Does he have authority to make judgments on the place and people?
5. What are the concerns of the protagonist?
6. In what ways are the descriptions of the protagonist a ‘re-invention’ and ‘re-creation’ of the land and people?

The learning takes place when students contemplated these questions and began discussing answers by raising issues based on the images and dialogue. Mirzoeff (1998: 474) addresses the concept of visual colonialism, which range from maps, photographs, paintings, and films to indigenous arts and crafts; “collectively, the visual culture of colonialism had a significant role to play in explaining, defining, and justifying colonial order”. Thus, using the images in the film, students observed the ways colonialism works in maintaining social order in Sarawak. The society in the film blatantly exhibited the hierarchy of British administrators and subjects, tribal leaders, Iban men and women as well as the hybrid offspring.

As noted in the previous section, ideology in discourse is a central issue. Meanwhile, the concept of discourse in Postcolonialism is influenced by Michel Foucault’s (1972) ideas on ‘power’ and ‘discourse’. As social language that is created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, discourse expresses a particular way of understanding human experience and draws attention to the role of language as a vehicle of ideology. There is then a dynamic, unstable interplay among discourses in which overlapping and competition with one another take place. These exchanges of power are always negotiated in any number of ways at any given point in time. Using these concepts, students studied the nuances in language used by the British to describe the Iban. The British perception of the Iban was conditioned by the ideology that is prevalent in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Students’ comprehension of the concept of ideology is facilitated when they understood the perspective from which the British characters in the film view the world around them. What concerns affected the British? What was the protagonist’s stand on the prevailing issues surrounding him at that time? Did those factors affect his attitude towards the Sarawak ‘natives’? If they did then in what way did they influence his representation of the ‘natives’? Answers to these questions led students to delineate patterns of the issues and concerns in Western representations on Malaya. The film showed them that the conditions and concerns of the time in which the film is set shaped the way the British characters viewed themselves, the Others and the world around them. This should lead to the awareness that any text produced was a cultural artefact of the time and space in which the producer lived in.

Relevant concepts in critical analysis theories are also applied in the students’ interpretation of the film. As it is set in the 1930’s, Sarawak was then a British Protectorate. Colonialism was at its peak, and Western colonizers and
travellers arrived in the region; some began writing about the place and people they encountered. Basnett claims travel writers “move from descriptive mode to statements of certainty with the confidence of the traveler who knows he is in a position of authority vis-à-vis his subjects” their discourse “have pretensions towards faithfulness, insisting that we believe their accounts simply because they have been there and we have not” (1993). This authority bears Western prejudices, stereotypes and negative perceptions of other cultures. The British officers in the film, especially the main protagonist, are viewed as travellers to Sarawak; they too claim the authority to speak for their Iban subjects. Just as Pratt (1992) asserts that travel writing is autobiographical narrative, the film protagonist too narrates the story of his travel and life in Sarawak.

Students also disclosed the ways the British eroticize the land and the people, transforming them into the focus of their own sexual fantasies; the concept of “the human sleeping dictionary” attests to this. From the perspective of the British, the human dictionary is de-humanized and objectified. The discourse, which includes depictions of landscape, food and accommodation, is imbued with the British perception of himself/herself, the Others & the world around him/her. The students are fascinated by instances when the British appear to fear the Iban and yet are attracted to them. Bhabha’s (1994) concepts on binary opposition and ambiguity are utilized by the students to study this phenomenon with regards to Henry Bullard, the senior officer, and his sleeping dictionary, an Iban woman. Bullard reveals his ambiguity towards the ‘natives’ where, on one hand, he denigrates them and on the other, he is also sexually attracted to their women. Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Shahizah Ismail Hamdan assert that previous studies of women in Malaysia “show that Malay women are marginalized, weak and easily manipulated” (2010: 71); this film discloses the manipulation of the indigenous women. In the movie, Bullard’s relationship with his sleeping dictionary results in the birth of Selema. The way the West views the East is disclosed in this representation of the past in Malaya; as claimed by Riyad Manqoush, Noraini Md Yusof and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2011: 57), “the different employment of history reveals contestations of worldviews which are symptomatic of the ideological clashes between the East and West.” By emphasizing on this aspect, we ensure that students become aware of the ideological differences when they examine Western depiction of Malaya.

By viewing the film, students saw the worlding of Sarawak the term is borrowed from Spivak (1999). Worlding is “the creation of a fiction, of the object represented by colonialism and his human representatives the colonizer writes himself/herself into the colonized space the resulting narrative has the white man/woman at its centre” (Siti Nuraishah Ahmad, Shanthini Pillai and Noraini Md Yusof, 2011: 23). The presence of the British in Sarawak, amidst the Ibans and the tropical jungle, is unconditionally accepted by film viewers unless instructed to do otherwise. The students questioned the British presence and agenda in the region. Learning takes place when students began identifying the colonial ideology that was operating in the narrative of the film.

4. Conclusion

The discussion addresses the intervention measures undertaken to enable students to become more critical readers. When students face difficulties to comprehend Western discourses on Malays/Malaysia, alternative strategies are the solution. This paper discusses the use of a film as an alternative text; the images and dialogue help students to delineate patterns of issues and concerns in Western representations on Malaya/Malaysia. They are also trained to select and apply relevant concepts in critical analysis theories in the interpretation of these discourses as a form of intervention for the problems areas. Their introduction to Spivak’s concept of Worlding, Foucault’s notions of power and knowledge as well as Bhabha’s binary opposition and ambiguity helps the students with a framework for their reading. The use of these concepts also trained the students to resist the hegemonic discourses encountered in all genres.

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References


