The Humanities in an Age of Neoliberal Disruption

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Abstract. The coronavirus pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on the social, economic, political, and technological landscape, leading to an unprecedented scale of disruption. As of altering our modes of working, living, communicating, and interacting with one another, Covid-19 has drastically unsettled our traditional sense-making of our world. It has also exacerbated structural inequalities and racial injustices. At the start of the outbreak, for example, social distancing measures adopted as governmental responses to the virus quickly became interpreted as "social othering" with the stigmatising, first of ethnic Chinese and Asian populations and then of migrant communities. In spite of the fact that it is clear that viruses respect neither class boundaries nor ethnicities, in societies that are racialised, the polarising vitriol associated with Covid-19 has revealed the extent to which perceived differences between peoples and groups can be subsequently easily exploited and played up to uphold the status quo. The coronavirus is indeed not the only phenomenon that has disrupted and destabilised our world. Ecological devastation, the waning of democracy and its institutions, the rise of neoliberal capitalism and its focus on profit rather than resilience and sustainability, escalating religious conflicts, wars, xenophobia and racism, and the continuing oppression of minority groups already signal a world in deep crisis. Therefore, in this time of fundamental and indiscriminate disruption and detachment – of crisis and contagion, transmissions and virality, lockdowns and border closures – of what worth is the humanities? Along with everybody focused on the need for medical expertise and scientific intervention and in a time that stresses the importance of economics and the other social sciences, has the humanities been rendered irrelevant and obsolete? Given this context, the conference organisers ask that we pay attention to the plight of women, youth, indigenous people, the disabled and other vulnerable and marginalised populations. Indeed, the fundamental question posed by the humanities is this — how can we coexist peacefully and celebrate each other's difference? In my lecture, I will put the case for how the critical thinking positions at the heart of humanities disciplines – literature, philosophy, narrative, and culture – have the ability to do what most other disciplines do not — the power to question foundational assumptions about our society and reframe our narratives.

Keywords: Humanities, Age of Neoliberal Disruption

1 Introduction

One of the first things we need to keep in mind is that postcolonialism is not a static or frozen field, but that it is constantly growing. Postcolonialism should also not be thought of as a single theory but as a field of study that borrows from various theoretical perspectives. The aspects that interest me and that I find important and useful about postcolonial studies may not be those aspects that interest other scholars of postcolonial studies. That is to say, postcolonialism is a wide and diverse field of critical study and thus it will be impossible for me

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or for anyone else to provide a comprehensive description of the field. What I will do and hope to do to the best of my ability over the next few pages, is to share some tentative thoughts about some of the ideas that are of interest and importance to me.

Despite of the fact that postcolonialism, which as a field of study began developing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, deals with the colonial experience, it goes beyond that. What gives postcolonialism its coherence as a field of study is that it questions power and places at its centre the struggles of those excluded from power structures. This involves the study of any kind of discrimination, exploitation, or oppression experienced by people who have been left out or kept out of the power equation. Postcolonialism is committed to examining the various forms of power relations, that is, to putting under scrutiny those power structures wherever they may exist, whether within the nation-state or on a global level.

Since it is power equations that keep intact the stability of dominant discourses, I see the primary responsibility of a postcolonial scholar as complicating, or 'disrupting' (to keep to the language of the conference), the simplistic and false narratives of colonialism, nationalism, and globalisation and as challenging normalised truths in hegemonic or dominant narratives.

My main aim is to argue that literature not an elite or abstract domain of expression that is denuded of political value and struggle, but an important "social fact" [1] and locus of agency with the potential to contest the mainstream assumptions of the nation-state itself. The central idea is that literary texts are cultural objects to be read and interpreted rather than inert objects with fixed meaning. In order to "read" a text is to examine the complexities of the interpretive process, namely, how meanings are constructed and how such meanings resist, contest, or negotiate the issues or ideas of the contexts of production and reception. In order to "do literature" is thus to look at social and cultural phenomena that shape our lives through the lens of literary thinking. This also means that the literary text relates to other discourses. Seeing literary texts as productions embedded in larger cultural and social contexts and discourses, and not as isolated texts, also demonstrates that literature is a complex, intertextual phenomenon and one signifying practice among others. This inherent intertextuality or "interdisciplinariness" of literature as a humanities discipline – that it draws from history, sociology, anthropology, or political economy – is a valuable thing, in that knowledge of the structures and relations of society from texts other than the purely literary will help to more effectively advance literature's cultural and political interventions. It is thus important for literary scholars to read outside the text.

As a postcolonial studies scholar of literary studies, I am thus also attentive in the role and function of the humanities in the rapidly changing twenty-first century world we inhabit, a world of intensifying ethnic clashes, religious conflicts, discrimination and exploitation, climate change and environmental destruction, social injustice, class and economic inequalities, and a global pandemic of a kind we have never before witnessed that has not only exposed but also reproduced power inequalities. At the start of the outbreak, for example, social distancing measures adopted as governmental responses to the virus quickly became interpreted as "social othering" with the stigmatising, first of ethnic Chinese and Asian populations and then of migrant communities. In spite of the fact that it is clear that viruses respect neither class boundaries nor ethnicities, in societies that are racialised, the polarising vitriol associated with Covid-19 has revealed the extent to which perceived differences between peoples and groups can be subsequently easily exploited and played up to uphold the status quo.

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sciences, has the humanities been rendered irrelevant and obsolete? I will return to this point shortly.

2 Discussion: Postcolonialism and the nation-state

One of the main goals of postcolonialism is to draw our attention to the workings of the nation-state. We must keep in mind that the dominant paradigm which structures our everyday cultural and political life and our relationship to other nations is that of the nation-state. It is worth noting that the paradigm of the nation-state is one that forces us to think in terms of a homogeneous culture or of a dominant "race" and culture. There are, in addition, other hierarchies of domination and subordination within the nation, including class, gender, and sexuality. When there are hierarchies, it means that there are certain groups of people who are excluded, who do not have the same rights as other groups within the nation. To put it simply, the nation-state privileges some groups of people over others. That is to say, the nation-state's representational systems call up a neat, tidy, and narrow-minded framing of the nation. Challenging the nation-state's simplified narratives and insular imagination – which mask its inequalities and injustices – is the project of postcolonial studies.

Scholars have viewed the rise of ethnic strife and conflicts as being a consequence of the nation-state abdicating its responsibility to hold and bring people together in an inclusive, binding form or discourse of national identity. In *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993), Partha Chatterjee [2] was critical of the "national idea" due to the fact that it sets up the idea of the nation's "fragments", "fragments" here is used as a metaphor to refer to marginal groups, the broken and excluded parts, the bits cast aside – the Dalits (the term for people who used to belong to the lowest caste in India, previously characterised as "untouchables"), women, tribal peoples, peasants – who for the reason that of their difference from the "national whole" or mainstream could not fully belong to the nation. The "national" narrative does not make space to include this group of people in the state's institutional histories, as of having played a role in anti-colonial nationalism, for example, or as having contributed to the national story — these "fragments" are pushed to the margins and excised from the nationalist imagination and from official or elite or imperial accounts of national history. Along with the aim of offering a kind of counter-history to address the imbalances of "official" histories, which tend to focus exclusively on the affairs of the state and the ruling class, Chatterjee [2] and his colleagues in the Subaltern Studies collective, mostly historians of India, called these fragments "subalterns".

The term "Subaltern", originally meaning "of inferior rank" in the military, was used by the Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci to refer to social groups, namely the working or lower social classes, who were subject to the cultural hegemony of the ruling classes and denied agency and voice. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. Not everyone who is marginalised is a subaltern. Who exactly comprises the subaltern class can vary from nation to nation and also from setting to setting within the nation and thus is dependent on context, time, and place.

Thus, given the existence of these fragments who are not accounted for in nationalist narratives, the postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha [3], draws our attention to the nationalist myth of the "whole", cohesive, or unified nation. It is worth noting that Bhabha is not against the idea of the nation, or nationalism, or of national unity but that he is against the false idea of a harmonious, stable, and homogeneous nation that is embedded in the idea of "national culture". He cautions us to be wary of such a neat or smooth narrative of the nation. He draws

attention instead to the complexity of the nation, to the dissonances, splitting, and ambivalences of national culture, for that is the reality of national space, and only by acknowledging this reality can we begin to address the problems and challenges of mounting a nationalism that is inclusive of the nation's cultural diversities. The argument here is that a national culture that is formulated as coherent and homogeneous is often forged by excluding certain groups of people from the dominant narrative of national culture and identity. These groups have been excluded on the basis of their class, religion, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality, and are similar to whom Chatterjee [2] referred to as the nation's "fragments" as they don't fit the idea of the "national" whole or body politic. Hence national unity is often a myth fabricated by the state for its own ends, to keep intact the stability of its own discourses and rhetoric, to preserve its own power. To put it simply, the "national" is often an authoritative, top-down label through which the state exercises power by dividing populations against one another according to a particular separatist logic based on politicised differences.

Therefore, I hope it is now clear why we should place the "national" idea under scrutiny. This means we must also pose these questions. How does the concept of the national function? Whose interests does this concept serve? Who determines the codes and grammar for narrating the nation? Who owns the national narrative? What are the power relations involved? How have we inherited these structures from colonialism? Why has the nation-state, for example, continued to use the colonial template of race in its practices and discourses of governance? What is the role played by race in the nation-state's systems of power? How can we dismantle racialised thinking? Indeed, when we talk about race in Malaysia and many other nation-states, it offers us a way to talk about inequality and about processes of exclusion and absolute differentiation or othering in national policies.

In Malaysia, for example, one main effect of the nationalist discourse pursued by the state is that Malaysian literature in English has been denationalised, devalued, and delegitimised. The "national idea" endorsed by the state, through categories such as "national language" and "national literature", has "othered" the English language and placed it in effective opposition to, and as competing with, the national language, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay). The assumption is that Malay is the only Malaysian language that possesses a decolonising impetus.

People tend to assume that the language of the coloniser was simply imposed upon the colonised. By a long way of the colonial encounter has been one of violence, exploitation, and dispossession that people automatically associate the agency and resistance that typify anti-colonial nationalism in terms of the repudiation of everything connected to the colonial experience. But we must remember that the colonisers never wanted the English language to be ours. Whilst eroding our self-respect by doing damage to our linguistic and cultural worlds, they introduced English to advance their interests and administrative purposes and as a means to create a class of intermediaries or interpreters between them and those they governed. English was always meant to be a borrowed tongue. It was never intended to belong to us.

Nevertheless, it is a sign of our resilience and creativity that we have made good of what history has given us. We have now made English ours. Whether the English like it or not, and whether the Malaysian nationalist elite wish to acknowledge it or not, we have made English our own, we have infected and inflected it with our accents, stresses, emphases, and priorities. From our long, close, and complex relationship of creative tension, negotiation, contestation, and acculturation with the English language, especially since the 1950s, we have created our own literature. Malaysian literature in English has its roots in the very history of the Malaysian nation and participates in the cultural processes of nation making. Yet, national formulations have pushed literary writings in English along with those in the nation's other languages of Chinese and Tamil to the margins, as not deserving of the status of the 'national'.

I want to make this clear. My argument is not that English should be made the National Language of Malaysia, but that English is no longer the language of the English national consciousness. The hegemonic nationalist stance obscures the historical process of the heterogenising and localising of the English language that has taken place in Malaysia over many generations.

2.1 The nation-state and the nation

As of what you have heard from my lecture thus far, you may have grasped that there is a need to differentiate between the nation and the nation-state. The nation, in a Gramscian sense, is a key "site of struggle" over meaning. As the social field is a dynamic arena of contending discourses and perspectives, at any one moment there are various narrations of nation existing alongside, and often in contestation with, one another. The meaning, then, of the nation, and of cultural life, is never fixed or stable but dynamic, with forces of resistance creatively intervening in hegemonic discourses circulating in society. Gramsci saw the struggle for hegemony as a primary factor in cultural change.

The nation is a narration, a cultural formation. The nation-state is an apparatus of power. Consider the following as a further illustration of the differences between the nation as an imagined community and the political geographies of the nation-state. The imagined community of Malaysia or Indonesia or Singapore, and of the wider Nusantara (Archipelago) of which they were part, as cultural formations may be ancient, with shared origins that are lost in the mists of time, but as nation-states they are relatively recent historical and geographical constructs, products of the political processes of the twentieth century.

That is to say, the territorial imagination of nation-states is not sympathetic to the transnational composition of nations. From 2009 to 2011, Indonesia and Malaysia waged a series of "culture wars" with each other over what each alleged was the (mis) appropriation of various arts and artefacts, such as the temple dance, *the Pendet*, the shadow puppet theatre, the *wayang kulit,* the traditional ensemble music, *the gamelan*, the bamboo musical instrument, the *angklun*g, the beef curry dish, *the rendang*, and even the melody of Malaysia's national anthem "Negaraku" ("My Country"). Indonesia had claimed all of these to be of Indonesian provenance and therefore to be regarded as emblems of Indonesian-ness.

A similar spate of culture wars was waged between Malaysia and Singapore when the latter nominated its "hawker culture" for recognition on UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. The culture war this time was over who had the right to ownership of street food such as the *cendol, satay*, chicken rice, and *rojak.*

The objects and art forms that these countries once shared have now been subjected to closed meanings of "Malaysian" or "Indonesian", or "Singaporean" national culture, one which attempts to squish the criss-crossings and entanglements of culture within the narrow geographical and historical grid – and bound social memory – of the modern nation-state. These objects and arts extend back to a time when a more inclusive logic – of flows, reciprocity and "planetarity" [4] – would have been defining features of social and political life.

The point here is that nations that were once culturally and geographically in conversation with one another, who were once part of a shared cultural imaginary, now want to wield their nation-state's competitive advantage and symbolic cultural capital over one another. It is also worth noting how food and art and other cultural forms have been objectified as commodities for the global market. This market-oriented model of national culture or something that is distinctively "Malaysian" or "Singaporean" or "Indonesian", for example, is something "unique" that the nation-state can trade on and raise revenue from.

In this age of disruption, of social distancing, social alienation, and cultural wars, it is imperative, if we are working in the field of Southeast Asian literature, for example, to keep in mind the following questions: How do we as scholars highlight the interconnections between Southeast Asian countries and between Southeast Asia and the rest of the world? How can representations of the nation as an imagined community move beyond the confines of the nation-state? How can we emphasise the transnational connections of nations in our readings of texts? How can we use literature to think beyond the mythologies of the "national idea"? What would be the value of recuperating the thinking of historical figures who dared to imagine another narrative of nation and identity? (One historical figure who comes to mind in this context is Tan Malaka (1897-1949), the anticolonial Indonesian nationalist who viewed the nation not in terms of ethno-nationalism, but as an expansive, inclusive, cosmopolitan phenomenon, beyond the imperatives of the nation, as a post-nation, if you will.)

Asking such questions would be to stress a humanities orientation to think of others, citizens of other nation-states, as fellow human beings, to build alliances and coalitions with them, so as to work towards a "planetary" consciousness. The emphasis is on the search for affinities, solidarities, and commonalities of history and experience. This is better than thinking that I am "Malaysian", "Singaporean", or "Indonesian" — because that kind of perspective sets up differences and antagonisms between nations, ethnicities, or religions, with no possibility of reaching out and across to build solidarity with the other, resulting ultimately in resentment, insecurity, paranoia, and xenophobia.

2.2 Postcolonialism and the global

As mentioned earlier, postcolonialism questions power in its various guises, not only power within the nation-state but also beyond it. This means that we also need to understand what globalisation means and how global power works.

The term "globalisation" gained popularity after the Cold War in the early 1990s and is the system or regime under which it is assumed that the world exists as a larger, interdependent structure that is also developing interconnected economic and cultural systems. As of this received definition of globalisation, we are led to assume that there is a single economic system governing the world and that this single system also shares similar cultural traits no matter where one lives. The assumption also is that as national borders have become more porous, globalisation allows for free cross-border movements of people, commodities, services, technologies, information, and capital. These are some of the fundamental claims made about globalisation.

As of these claims and assumptions, it is easy to detect the Eurocentric underpinnings of globalisation both as an economic and cultural system. It is Eurocentric because it presupposes a mobility and freedom to move seamlessly across borders, to move freely from one nation-state to another. Nonetheless, a more critical definition of globalisation would contest this simplified view as the freedom and mobility to travel or to cross borders is only available to those who live in the developed world.

Therefore, leading on from my earlier argument, there is global power and there is national power. What we need to keep in mind is that both forms of power produce distinct types with reference to exclusions. If the power within the nation-state rests on excluding people "in the name of nation, ethnicities, and races", then there is a "new colonialism" operating through globalisation and "tending toward nationless-ness". The literary scholar Masao Miyoshi [5] argues that global power has created new minorities who comprise "those who are completely

outside the scope of the global economy, the marginal, the superexploited […] rural poor, the landless laborers" (1993: 740, 747) of most of Africa, Asia, and South America.

In the face of these hierarchies and exclusions produced by state and global power structures, postcolonial studies scholars are interested in asking, how much of what is happening in the current postcolonial state caused by local processes, factors, or actors? How much of it is pre-determined by the global commitments and protocols of neoliberal capitalism that these nation-states are confronted with? What is the role of post-World War II institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (the IMF) and the World Bank and debt in the fate of these nations? What is the impact and implications of neoliberalism on the peoples of the Global South? What is the role played by the nation-state itself in this highly globalised, neoliberal capitalist environment?

This means that postcolonialism now also must incorporate the study of neoliberalism — the system of economics that is dominant in the world today and often imposed on developing nations. Postcolonial scholars would be interested in asking, for example: What happens if the government withdraws from the market and transfers the control of economic factors from the public sector to the private sector? If the nation-state has deregulated competition and privatised vital public services such as health, water, energy, education, trains, then whose interest does the nation-state serve? If the nation-state cannot offer support and protection to its own people, what is the value of the nation-state?

Indeed, now more than ever, we need a civic nation-state that is responsive to the needs of the people, one that is democratic and can provide protection and safeguards to the people against powerful and intrusive institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and so on that are self-interested institutions which take their orders from or work to cater to the interests of powerful nation-states.

Thus, what has been made clear thus far is that postcolonial scholars do not only focus on the nation-state and the cultural aspects of domination-subordination in power structures within the nation-state. An exclusive focus on the nation-state would limit our understanding of the range of constraints and material realities under which we live and within which human life must be understood. Postcolonial scholars now also must take stock of global processes and the hegemonies of globalisation and must account for the economic as well as cultural aspects of globalisation.

Economic globalisation refers to the process where it is said that all national economies have been absorbed into an interlocking global economy, meaning that no national economy is now an island. In this global economy, production is internationalised and financial capital flows freely and instantly between countries.

We must be both attentive and critical of the assumptions that goods and capital move freely in a globalised world. Thus, as of the economic perspective, when we say globalisation has opened borders, we must understand that borders are open only to facilitate world trade. Another way of understanding this is to think in terms of how globalisation only allows commodities and capital to cross borders, to move freely. It does not allow workers or labour to move as freely. As a matter of fact, quite the reverse happens. Capital moves to places where labour is cheap. The primary question asked by neoliberal capitalism of nation-states is this, how much labour can you extract from your workers and how cheaply can you hire them?

In order to understand the reality of globalisation is to be aware that so much of the flows of capital go back to the North Atlantic regions (the Global North). It is to understand that the so-called "global" spread of the economy is weighted heavily toward the Global North. That is to say, globalisation still privileges the developed nations (those with economic and political clout) and increases the precarity of the developing world. Countries in Asia and Africa simply

do not have the symbolic power to deny the dictates that the West sets for them. The United States, for example, who is the main financial contributor to the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organisation, holds effective veto power over many decisions made by these monetary institutions.

This is the reality of a so-called "globalised world" that we need to keep in mind. The current economic system privileges the agenda and interests of the developed world (the US, Canada, Japan, China). Hence, the flows of globalisation are uneven. The world is still divided between the developed nations and the developing nations, between the rich and the poor, between countries that are still beholden to the dictates of the IMF and other transnational institutions and countries that can impose their veto power on these institutions.

If we view globalisation from this economic perspective, then, we have the ability to see how globalisation becomes another word for exploitation — labour is fixed in its place, labour has no rights, no trade unions to collectively bargain for it. The exploitation of labour underwrites the success of globalisation. As the government withdraws from the market, leaving competition between market forces to determine what is best for the national economy, a precarious labour market is created with its "natural" hierarchy of winners and losers. Along with huge tax cuts for the "winners", the quelling of trade unions, privatisation, deregulation, outsourcing and competition in public services, it becomes easier to exploit workers, to suppress their wages. Along with the rich being freed from tax means there is no equality in the distribution of both income and wealth, a means by which the nation-state that can lift the people out of poverty. Furthermore, without the protection of the nation-state, the people, especially the poor, have no social safety net to fall back on in times of crises, no access to resources, and no protection in matters of welfare or health. Yes, these are the very reasons by which a nation-state rationalises its existence for the good of its people.

The argument here is that globalisation has not improved ordinary people's lives. On the other side of the euphoric, celebratory narrative of globalisation – which valorises merit, enterprise, individualism, and natural competition – lies a world of precarity, disempowerment, and injustice, one inhabited by neoliberalism's "losers".

3 Conclusion: The corporate university

We would first need to have a working understanding of the "corporate university". There is of course not just one definition of the corporate university, but a main characteristic is that such a university places emphasis on its business needs and then tries to meet those needs in very cost-efficient ways. Indeed, higher education's traditional "Humboldtian" role of producing citizens and leaders for the nation is being overwhelmed by a market-oriented model that functions, directly or indirectly, to serve business interests. This is evidenced for instance in the rise of the audit culture and the increasing commercialisation of knowledge, notably symbolised by the university's participation in global rankings. Intended for the increasingly corporate university, universities are no longer seen as places that equip students with disciplinary knowledge but rather as places geared towards branding and certification, in training individuals in practical or on-the-job skills for supplying the needs of the "market". In this climate of neoliberal disruption, ethical thinking, and critical reflections, which lie at the heart of all humanities work, and particularly in literature, have become a supplement, if at all, to education, rather than its core. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that research for humanities

disciplines also does not receive much, if any, support from universities and granting or funding institutions.

Furthermore, academics are constantly being told to publish, and *where* to publish. It is as if our contribution as scholars and teachers should primarily be measured in terms of quantifiable outcome and outputs. There is a constant need to see knowledge translated into the "doing" of things or in terms of action, as if "doing" is of a higher register than "thinking". This can be equated with us, as scholars and educators, working within the neoliberal logic of excessive and profitable production. Just as culture is treated in market terms, as a commodity, hence is knowledge production. Equally, if not more, important, is to carve out a space and time to think —historically, imaginatively, contingently, and critically. It is time we went back to taking the classroom and our discipline as a site for active thinking and contemplation.

In Southeast Asia, the humanities have been a particularly important site for the spread of anti-hegemonic ideals, especially after ideological opposition was wiped out at the height of the Cold War. The notion of the "public intellectual" began to gain currency as scholars used the knowledge and insights from their research and participated actively in the public sphere to propose important knowledge interventions. The need for public intellectuals has become even more urgent today when notions of public good and social justice are subsumed by a neoliberal narrative of "development" that favours privatisation, entrepreneurialism, and individualism. Even the original decolonising spirit – and the richness of ideas – of the Bandung Conference of 1955 has now largely been reduced to matters of trade and economics, as if in keeping with the overriding logic of our age.

Indeed, how to retain the important intellectual role traditionally played by the humanities in higher education is the question that confronts us today. Along with its imperative to examine language and text, the humanities are underpinned by the need to examine political discourse and rhetoric, and in doing so it has the ability to help us to both effect and understand social and cultural change. Now more than ever, we need the humanities to articulate public discourse and attention away from the language of business and finance and toward reflective, contemplative thinking.

In order to do the important humanities, work that my discipline can help me do, in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us by means specific to it, I have often found it useful, drawing from Walter Mignolo [6], to refer to the following questions and thinking points for my research and teaching: What are the problems and issues that require our attention? What kind of knowledge or understanding is demanded by history, society, and the intellectual genealogies we choose? The knowledge we learn formally is someone else's knowledge. Who authorised this knowledge? Whose knowledge, is it? How does knowledge about our nation, and the world we live in, become dominant? What kind of alternative knowledge can the study of literature advance? Of what importance is literary knowledge? From what perspective (disciplinary, ethnic, sexual, national, and so on) will we produce such knowledge or understanding? This last question presupposes that the disciplinary perspective is not neutral and is marked by ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and so on. For what purpose will we produce knowledge? Do we produce knowledge to play a role in the transformation of society?

Keeping these questions in mind means that I am aware that literary knowledge and thinking cannot be delocalised, and that literary knowledge production should be contextualised by a local trajectory of concerns. As we are aware, any knowledge becomes dominant by excluding or silencing or suppressing all other knowledges that challenge it. The nation-state through the official media, through the history textbook, and through its public rhetoric, endorses a certain idea of the nation, which it then naturalises through its national policies as

the only way to understand or know the nation. The way such knowledge is normalised is an act of power.

In business, for example, students are told how to succeed within the existing economic model, and not how to change the system for the better. In contrast to this is the humanities classroom, where we can use stories to ask our students to reflect critically, to ask — why is this system unjust, how can we collectively change it, change ourselves, and change the world? How are the characters in these stories produced by such ideologies? What are their thought processes and subjective experiences? What kind of system would be an alternative to the neoliberal order?

These are among the valuable critical thinking positions of the humanities in this age of disruption — how to critique globalisation's systems of inequalities, how to contest the nation-state's mythologies of nationhood, how to imagine a world where we can build coalitions and solidarities with others so that we can together fight the imperatives of global neoliberal capital and state power.

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