

The Missing Coke Bottle: Arahmaiani and the Neo-colonial Shadow of Capitalist Globalization

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Abstract

Indonesian artist activist Arahmaiani uses art to call attention to the role of capitalist globalization as an exploitative neo-colonial force in developing nations. Beginning in the 1990s, Arahmaiani employed a Coca-Cola bottle in many of her installations and performances as a symbol of the commodification and Americanization of lifestyles and identities occurring in Indigenous and non-western cultures. Arahmaiani's work connects patriarchy, class exploitation, and environmental destruction to global political and economic structures in ways not typical of western liberal human rights discourses. In contrast, liberal constructions of human rights tend to focus ideologically on local, non-western institutions and practices as barriers to human rights. This gives rise to significant contradictions that complicate such conceptions of human rights and their proposed solutions, as will be demonstrated with a key work from feminist scholar Lucinda Peach. Arahmaiani's work thus challenges western liberal human rights discourse; it urges academics and activists to redirect their myopic gaze away from the cultural idiosyncrasies of non-western nations towards the global capitalist structures that support inequality and oppression across the globe.

Keywords: human rights; feminism; neo-colonialism; globalization; ideology

The formal dissolution of colonial rule bred high hopes for the newly independent countries, but it wasn't long before that they realized that the West hadn't yet given up on them—they were still tied to the West, economically, politically, ideologically. A true post-colonial age never really came. (Bakshi, Sengupta, & Paul, 2009, p. 3)

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, Indonesian activist artist Arahmaiani produced art installations and performances that call attention to the consequences of capitalist globalization, with a focus on the devaluation and stigmatization of local, non-western identities and cultures that accompany “modernization” and “development” in nations like Indonesia (Bodden, 2014; Rath, 2011). A devout but critical Muslim, her previous work focused on patriarchy and gender inequality imposed on women through Indonesia's Muslim institutions. This feminist perspective strongly informed her later work focusing on capitalist globalization, resulting in a distinct postcolonial critique that highlights the convergence of the global and the local in the exploitation of Indigenous peoples.

Importantly, Arahmaiani's art clarifies the centrality of this relationship to human rights issues in ways that western human rights scholars have often struggled to address, largely due to the ideological nature of the liberal conception of human rights. “Ideological,” in this Marxist sense, refers to forms of knowledge construction that operate to hide or distort facts (Mannheim, 1936).

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Such a conception of human rights emphasizes individual rights as upheld by western-derived legal structures, but typically fails to acknowledge political and economic structures that implicate the global capitalist order itself in human rights violations. A number of scholars, including Hadjor (1998), Lewis (1998), Mertus (2004), Schick (2006), and Wickens and Sandlin (2007), have offered critiques of the liberal conception of human rights or highlighted western human rights discourse as an ethical front for economic exploitation and even illegal wars. Such critical perspectives have informed and support the discussion in this article. Others, like Lucinda Peach (2001), have provided effective critiques of the individual rights-based, legalistic focus of liberal human rights discourse but fail to acknowledge the central role of western capitalist structures in the production of “non-western” human rights violations. A detailed critique of one of Peach’s articles forms the second half of this work. Her article provides a valuable example of the operation of liberal ideology in western human rights discourses, and is particularly salient in what it reveals about liberal ideology’s persistence even among certain discourses that otherwise challenge conventional liberal notions of human rights. The contrast it provides when held up against Arahmaiani’s art and message, a discussion of which forms the first half of this article, is striking.

Indeed, Arahmaiani’s art provides an unusually nuanced representation of the neo-colonial nature of capitalist globalization, one that stands in stark contrast to liberal perspectives that focus narrowly on legalistic or non-western cultural barriers to human rights, as exemplified by Peach’s article. Given the fact that capitalist globalization emerged directly out of a long history of violent and exploitative western colonial practices (Bakshi et al., 2009), a failure to consider its neo-colonial nature and examine it as an ongoing source of human rights violations can only be understood as an ideological omission. Arahmaiani’s art reverses the direction of the gaze inherent in such perspectives to challenge conventional liberal human rights discourses in important ways. Through an ingenious blending of western and non-western cultural elements that reveals the neo-colonial violence inherent in globalization’s cultural and environmental impacts, Arahmaiani’s art urges scholars and activists to broaden their focus to include the political and economic structures of capitalist globalization, being the underlying structural support of so many human rights violations across the globe.

Arahmaiani and the Sacred Coke Bottle

A central motif in Arahmaiani’s work beginning in the 1990s is a Coca-Cola bottle, which typically occupies a prominent position in her installations and performances, and which Arahmaiani employs to represent capitalist globalization, commodification, and, more specifically, Americanization (Rath, 2011). In many of her installations, the Coca-Cola bottle is located at the center of a circular formation, while other cultural and gendered representations—including, in one installation, Arahmaiani herself as performer—are located on the periphery. This arrangement suggests a neo-colonial hierarchy of value, with the symbol of capitalist American culture—the Coke bottle—overshadowing and devaluing non-western and Indigenous cultural practices and symbols, such as Indigenous rituals and dress. The installations that employ this symbolism collectively present a coherent and nuanced artistic critique of the neo-colonial nature of capitalist globalization.

In Arahmaiani’s 1995 installation entitled *Sacred Coke*, as discussed by Rath (2011), a Coca-Cola bottle sits at the center of a round table, encircled by white powder suggesting cocaine. A condom has been placed around the mouth and neck of the bottle. The arrangement of this installation works allegorically to subvert Hindu *linga* (phallus) and *yoni* (vulva) symbolism, where the phallic *linga* is typically located at the center of a circular *yoni* receptacle, and which traditionally represents the balance maintained between cosmic feminine and masculine energies; the sacred symbology of Hinduism has been infiltrated and supplanted by a new “religious order,” the addictive “cocaine of capitalism” (p. 299) and the materialistic worship of American commercial products. The condom

atop the bottle suggests the need for non-western peoples to protect themselves from the destructive influences of these oppressive masculine forces. Indeed, Arahmaiani invokes this Hindu symbolism specifically because it emphasizes equality between the feminine and the masculine, as her “first concern is that the world is in a state of imbalance due to gender inequality. . . in which the energy of the feminine is ‘oppressed/repressed’ by the energy of the masculine” (p. 295).

A year later, Arahmaiani expanded on *Sacred Coke*’s concept with *Handle Without Care* (QAGOMA, 2018a), a performance that accompanies her installation entitled *Nation For Sale*, which similarly displays the Coca-Cola bottle prominently at the center of a circular formation. In *Handle Without Care*, Arahmaiani places herself in the installation to highlight her body and identity as gendered cultural artifacts and objects of exploitation. She employs them alongside Indigenous cultural dress and symbols, Islamic and Indigenous chants, and symbols of capitalism and militarism to highlight the intertwining relationship of global capitalist exploitation and local patriarchal oppression in a succinct and nuanced theatrical expression.

The *Nation for Sale* installation that serves as the set for *Handle Without Care* consists of a room divided into two main areas: On the left side of the room, items encircle a Coca-Cola bottle in front of a television showing footage of Indonesian slums, and on the right side of the room, rows of lit up white wooden boxes display a variety of items (Rath, 2011). A large “For Sale” sign hangs on the wall behind the boxes, with the Arabic script for “halal”—meaning “allowed” in regard to food, and in Indonesia, moral Muslim acts—displayed just below it. The boxes contain a range of thematically connected items: toy guns, fragmented images of women from cut up fashion magazines, jars of soil and water, and two mirrors. These items represent different aspects of patriarchy and neo-colonialism, from the glorification and use of militarism, to the objectification of women and exploitation of natural resources. The location of the “For Sale” and “halal” signs above the boxes suggests that local Islamic institutions collude with global capitalism in oppressing women and in carrying out the neo-colonial economic, environmental, and military violence upon which capitalist hegemony is predicated.

At the beginning of the performance, Arahmaiani, donning a white veil and gown, walks slowly into the room, suggesting a ceremonial procession. She then lies down and assumes a corpse-like pose on a large rectangular box at the front of the installation alongside the other boxes. This initial performance suggests a symbolic eulogy for cultural and environmental death caused by different forms of commodification and exploitation, as well as suggesting that Arahmaiani, as an Indigenous woman, is but one commodity among others. In the edited film of the performance (QAGOMA, 2018a), fragmented images of her naked body flash on the screen, highlighting the female body as a site of the male gaze, as well as the object of patriarchal power and control in both eastern and western societies. Arahmaiani then gets up and walks over to the circle surrounding the Coca-Cola bottle and plays synchronous Muslim and Indigenous chants on separate tape players placed on the ground in the circle. She then discards the white veil to reveal a seeming mishmash of Indigenous and modern garb, and picks up a traditional Indonesian *keris* knife—a symbol of masculinity—and proceeds to dance slowly in the shadows around the circle, brandishing the knife as if defending from some foreign threat. This act points to the complicity of local patriarchal agents and structures in the protection of the neo-colonial capitalist social order. After putting the *keris* knife down, she pulls a toy space gun out of a holster and aims it outwards, again defending against some invisible enemy. However, towards the end of the performance she aims the gun directly at the Coca-Cola bottle and then at a mechanical toy soldier she set crawling on the ground earlier, emphasizing their status as enemies and suggesting the backlashes that colonialism’s blatant disregard for local cultures often provokes. She also dons a pair of sunglasses halfway through the performance, which, alongside the flashy space gun, suggests a confused Indigenous identity caught between tradition and modernity and wooed by the prestige of Hollywoodesque narratives, fashion, and movie star

personalities.

Handle Without Care is decidedly more complex than the compact *Sacred Coke* installation. Like that installation, there is a stark contrast between the core and the periphery. However, in *Handle Without Care*, a more varied inclusion of non-western and western cultural elements highlights hierarchies of value, which place non-western races, religions, and cultures outside the space of value constructed by western capitalist formulations of worth and success, and in doing so permits their subjugation, exploitation, and even complete destruction. Arahmaiani's caricatured Indigenous character is confined to the shadows, to a devalued non-space defined only by its peripheral relationship to the glowing prestige of the Coca-Cola bottle. And indeed, for much of the performance, it seems Arahmaiani is diligently protecting the bottle itself, indicating the internalization of capitalist consumer values and the tragic existential implications of these values becoming central to the identities and cultures of the very non-western people who are increasingly alienated and violated by the forces of capitalist globalization. In her statement (QAGOMA, 2018b) on *Handle Without Care*, Arahmaiani clarifies these points, saying,

Human identity has become lost within economic calculations. We have simply become yet another commodity for sale. . . . Western nations have become the ideal model, and as a result whatever originates in the West is deemed to be high quality and thus worthy of imitation. . . . People smear themselves with skin lightening creams, undergo operations to make their nose and eyes appear more western, and wear leather jackets despite the tropical heat. In short, the styles of Hollywood movie stars and pop stars are imitated. . . . And so too the lifestyles. . . including food and furnishings, body language, gestures and dialects, they are all imitated. Without realizing it, people truly are living a contemporary nightmare. . . . The philosophy of life has become one of extreme materialism. . . . Society has become a consuming and compromising herd of docile sheep, devoid of personal opinion and individuality, receiving its daily bombardment of the advertising, material goods, and images. . . . We are all obsessed with materialism and a taste for western goods that appear to us as "sacred objects" which must be protected with guns and defended to the death. (excerpts from 2:25-8:15)

Arahmaiani (QAGOMA, 2018b) does not merely present this dark cultural transformation as a result of the influence of apolitical cultural prestige, but locates its power precisely in global political and economic structures, stating,

The general western attitude is present among those who are in the position of strength, and as such are in a position to create the system. . . . The global economy is a political instrument confirmed and agreed to by many of the world's leaders in the name of "neo-imperialism" and "neo-colonialism." Through the disintegration of local Indigenous cultures and transferring of the factories of developed nations to "underdeveloped" nations, which then go on to desecrate the environment by exploiting cheap labour and manipulating the mass media in attempt [sic] to stimulate lust and passion, and to direct public opinion. . . through the establishing of "authority and control over the independence of body, soul, and mind of the weak." In the name of profit, all is justified, all is for sale. (excerpts from 4:30-6:33)

Arahmaiani clearly indicts the political agents and structures of capitalist globalization in the cultural subversion and environmental destruction inherent in "modernization" and "development." She specifically refers to the industrial outsourcing practices that increasingly became a key feature of American-led capitalist globalization following the slowdown of the postwar economic boom beginning in the 1960s (Eisenstein, 2005).

Interestingly, Arahmaiani's statement on *Handle Without Care* and her art in general contain strong parallels with a political strategy popularized by neo-Marxist activist artist Guy Debord (2002) called *détournement* and with his notion of the *commodity as spectacle*, as described in his treatise *The Society of the Spectacle*. The political art philosophy known as "social sculpture" that was pioneered by one of Arahmaiani's key influences, Joseph Beuys, was itself influenced by *détournement*, and so the parallels are not without a historical connection (see Moore, n.d.; Putri, 2019). In *The Society of the Spectacle* (2014), Debord contemporizes Marx's notion of the commodity as the fundamental unit of capitalist societies to reflect its evolution into "an immense accumulation of spectacles" and a society where "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (para. 1). For Debord, the only way to effectively intervene in this "pseudo-world" (para. 2) and reclaim "individual autonomy and creativity from the passive 'spectacle'" (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p. 252) is by using *détournement*, which entails modifying popular cultural representations in order to turn "the expressions of the capitalist system against itself" (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p. 252). In a style very much congruent with Debord's *détournement*, Arahmaiani appropriates the "commodity" represented by the Coca-Cola bottle to reveal its true operation as an agent of cultural subversion and existential alienation. However, she further clarifies its distinct operation as an agent of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism and as a symbol of the politico-economic order behind so much cultural and environmental devastation that is carried out in the name of "modernization" and "development."

The philosophical background of Arahmaiani's work can help clarify her approach to neo-colonial capitalist exploitation. However, regardless of whether Arahmaiani was consciously invoking Marx or Debord, nuanced artistic approaches like hers also represent a common strategy for alternative voices in politically repressive nations like Indonesia, a nation that has seen the massacring of hundreds of thousands of leftist thinkers and where even today "outspoken social-democratic or socialist public figures are nonexistent on the national political stage, even at the margins" (Lane, 2018, para. 5). Importantly, the massacres and political repression that shaped Indonesia's contemporary political environment came about with help from the international community, and most significantly from the United States (Simpson, 2015). Indeed, the United States's role as the world's leading superpower and the geopolitical strategies it has employed to maintain and expand that power continue to weigh heavily on the lives and identities of people in such nations. While Arahmaiani's work in the 1990s demonstrated a keen awareness of this reality, she would also be personally confronted with a new phase of American neo-imperialism when her identity as a Muslim woman became the cause of a violation of her human rights in the immediate post-9/11 period.

In June 2002, Arahmaiani was detained at the Los Angeles airport for traveling without a visa, while en route to Canada for a series of lectures at the University of Victoria (Bodden, 2014). After being interrogated for over three hours, she demanded she be allowed to sleep in the hotel room she had booked for her one night layover in Los Angeles. Immigration officials granted her request but had an immigration officer accompany her and monitor her while she slept that night. The seeming profiling and sexism and resultant violation of privacy made Arahmaiani the victim of a concrete manifestation of the neo-colonial power relations she calls attention to in her art. The experience further cemented her identity as a Muslim woman, the stigmatization of which she highlighted alongside the Coke bottle imagery in two works she produced soon after her detention experience, entitled "We Love Each Other" and "Arahmaiani / 11 June 2002" (Bodden, 2014). The fact that Arahmaiani was subjected to these violations in the country where the United Nations's main headquarters are located and in a nation that has a record of employing human rights rhetoric to justify neo-imperial aggression, including the devastating illegal invasion of Iraq (Ben-Porath, 2007; Schick, 2006), points to the problematic nature of western human rights laws and discourses. Even prior to her experience in Los Angeles, Arahmaiani's art addressed issues of oppression and

exploitation in ways that expose the ideological qualities of such laws and discourses.

From a conventional, legalistic human rights perspective, Arahmaiani's experience in Los Angeles represents a violation of her right to privacy, as stated in Article 12 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and likely also her right to be free from discrimination, as stated in Article 2, which stipulates no individual shall be subject to discrimination based on race, colour, gender, or nationality (United Nations, n.d.) And yet, while conventional human rights discourses typically employ this formalized conception of human rights to focus on human rights violations as violations of individual rights, Arahmaiani's art is poignant precisely because it complicates such discourses by emphasizing global capitalist agents and structures as an ongoing source of human rights violations, while presenting the cultural subversion implied in capitalist modernization itself as a type of violation. This astute focus on capitalist structural sources of human rights violations is lacking from conventional human rights discourses, including many otherwise "progressive" discourses that critique certain liberal conceptions of human rights.

The Missing Coke Bottle

Western-led human rights discourses and legal frameworks have been subject to various criticisms, the most cogent being from feminists who problematize their individualistic, male-centric, and Euro-American ethnocentric theoretical and legal biases (Peach, 2001). The "universality" of the UDHR has been strongly criticized for reflecting a liberal, white, patriarchal conception of universality that fails to account for cultural diversity and ignores the distinct needs and interests of women, especially women in non-western nations (Peach, 2001). Indeed, feminist and cultural critiques of conventional liberal human rights discourses are necessary and help move human rights discourse forward towards more gender inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. However, such otherwise progressive critiques may still fall within the basic discursive boundaries set out by liberal ideology, that is, implicitly treating the capitalist free market and "economic opportunity" as synonymous with "progress" and the "good life" or not considering that its basic tenets—freedom and equality—have always operated to mask exploitative relationships between classes and between developed core nations and underdeveloped peripheral nations (Bakshi et al., 2009; Brown 2009; Schick, 2006). Furthermore, a narrow focus on patriarchy or other local barriers to human rights in non-western nations—alongside an implicit championing of economic opportunity—may itself obscure the pervasive role of capitalist structures and social relations in human rights violations in those places. At worst, such discourses may provide a cover for the advancement of neo-colonialist projects carried out by dominant western nations and actors (Bakshi et al. 2009; Brown, 2009; Elachyar, 2002; Schick, 2006). Alternatively, given the near universality of capitalist social relations and economic structures to most contemporary human rights violations, the most important target for critique and reform may not be the "patriarchal" and "conservative" cultures of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as conventional human rights discourses suggest, but rather the capitalist structures of western nations that represent the ideological and economic base for capitalist globalization. Arahmaiani's art is powerful and unsettling precisely because it reverses the direction of the neo-colonial gaze of conventional human rights discourses away from "underdeveloped" nations and back on the hegemonic heart of exploitative capitalist structures that cause or support human rights violations in nations across the globe.

In contrast to Arahmaiani's work, Lucinda Peach's (2001) article "Are Women Human?: The Promise and Perils of Women's Rights as Human Rights" provides a striking example of how liberal ideology operates in western human rights discourse. As Tomalin (2017) describes, among Peach's contributions to academia and the human rights discussion more broadly is her perspective that in many cultural contexts religion must be considered as integral to the dynamics governing inequality and discrimination, as well as the conditions for positive social change. This perspective represents a significant shift from perspectives within the fields of gender studies, law, and ethics that see

religion either as irrelevant or only as an obstacle that must be overcome. Peach asserts that by presenting human rights as already coherent with certain existing local religious tenets and cultural norms, human rights awareness can be advanced in ways that avoid the typical backlash from local conservative institutions—even as it operates to transform them. She asserts culturally sensitive awareness building as an alternative to externally imposed, rigid legal human rights frameworks that may not be compatible within certain cultural contexts.

Peach's perspective is, in and of itself, well founded, and it helps move the human rights discussion away from the ethnocentric and patriarchal legalistic trappings of conventional liberal human rights discourses. Her work raises necessary arguments against the effectiveness and appropriateness of individual rights-based international human rights laws within certain non-western contexts. And yet, like the feminist and cultural critiques mentioned above, her focus—how she constructs her argument—also operates ideologically to mask the overarching role of capitalism in the human rights violations she describes. Peach's (2001) article is salient to this discussion for this reason, because it exemplifies the pervasive ideological operation of liberal discourse in even progressive human rights critiques. A closer examination of Peach's article will help clarify this point and allow for an important contrast with Arahmaiani's work that urges western human rights scholars to be more self-reflexive as they emphasize non-western cultural features as barriers to human rights while seeking solutions in potentially exploitative western economic structures.

The main focus of Peach's (2001) article is the Thai sex industry. Describing the conditions surrounding Thai prostitution, she briefly acknowledges the role of "dismal alternative economic opportunities to sex work" (p. 171) amidst a range of obstacles to human rights that she locates within Thai governmental and cultural institutions—including families and local Buddhist institutions—as well as collectivist cultures more generally. The passing nature of this acknowledgment is indicative of how Peach's overall narrative fails to consider that the decisions being made by and for women in these types of situations largely reflect compromises made to navigate impoverished conditions perpetuated by capitalist globalization. Tellingly, the modern Thai prostitution industry is itself a reflection of the ways capitalist globalization reinforces the unequal conditions and social relations that see people doing whatever they can just to get by and feed their families. This industry also represents a blatant form of neo-colonial exploitation, given that it has traditionally been a "market" contingent on a flow of "sex tourists" from wealthy foreign nations (Baffie, 2017). Certainly, such practices also reflect a convergence of the patriarchal cultures of both eastern and western nations, but to construct them as separate from the global economic structures that have largely facilitated and—to the impoverished women and families involved—necessitated them, is to obscure the structural basis of their production. In contrast to Arahmaiani's presentation of commodification as a force that intersects with local patriarchal institutions, and which necessarily extends to the commodification of women as sex objects to be consumed on a global capitalist market, the important role of commodification is missing from Peach's analysis.

Ideological discourses, which knowingly or unwittingly distort or hide elements of truth, inevitably contain contradictions due to their incomplete correspondence with reality. Coherent with this understanding of ideology, buried within Peach's (2001) predominantly "cultural" descriptions—as well as in the details of the feminist pragmatist approach she later proposes—are clues to the structural role of global capitalism in the practices she constructs as representing "local" barriers to human rights law. For example, describing the role of the Buddhist "gendered system of merit making" (p. 168), Peach writes,

Thai daughters, especially the youngest in a family, feel a strong burden of indebtedness to take care of their parents, which they can satisfy by sending money home. . . . Family members may willfully neglect to inquire how the money was earned, especially as it can be used to make merit by giving lavish donations to the local temple. . . . Many families

are so pleased to receive the money that they frequently are willing to remain “willfully ignorant” about how their daughters obtained it. (p. 168)

This merit system is also what leads local Buddhist institutions to turn a blind eye to prostitution, as it has become a major source of financial support. Peach writes,

The trafficking in women results in indirectly supporting Buddhist institutions. It facilitates the ability of males in an impoverished economy to become monastics rather than wage earners. . . . supported by the goods of merit making earned by the sexual labor of their sisters. (p. 169)

The “impoverished economy” of Thailand is seemingly a secondary factor for Peach, perhaps reflecting her liberal feminist perspective that chooses to focus on the sources of gendered exploitation in overtly conservative patriarchal institutions. Rather than clarifying the predominant capitalist structural influence on the practices that support Thailand’s prostitution industry, Peach emphasizes local patriarchal attitudes and practices and problematizes the fact that “people in Thailand, as in other Asian countries, are less concerned with individual rights than with social duties” (p. 169).

Peach’s (2001) argument is that rigid law-based human rights strategies are not appropriate in certain cultural contexts, especially in places where no legal framework or cultural basis exists that acknowledges women’s rights and where the women themselves have little to no self-awareness as rights-bearing individuals. The local Thai practices that she highlights support her argument. However, they also consistently point to the ways local patriarchal institutions have coalesced with capitalism to reproduce gendered forms of exploitation, a key point that she fails to emphasize. As an alternative human rights strategy, Peach asserts a “feminist pragmatist approach to women’s human rights” (p. 171) for achieving rights awareness and social transformation. This approach contains important insights and certainly warrants serious consideration. However, it is problematic in the very same ways as her descriptions of the Thai prostitution industry are, demonstrating an underlying ideological consistency that ultimately limits her argument. Whereas Arahmaiani’s emphasis on the inherently neo-colonial nature of capitalism in non-western nations implicates all levels of capitalist globalization, Peach’s failure to adequately acknowledge the exploitative structures of capitalist globalization in her analysis ultimately sees her asserting an expansion of those same exploitative structures as means of “economic empowerment” (p. 180).

Peach’s (2001) feminist pragmatist approach is “centrally concerned with determining what approaches are likely to be practically effective for empowering women and ending women’s oppression” (p. 172). This includes paying closer attention to the dynamics of specific cultural contexts, as they may or may not be compatible with externally imposed legal rights frameworks. Rather, they may be more receptive to awareness-building approaches that are at least somewhat compatible with existing norms and institutions. Peach’s approach also includes practical strategies for increasing “economic independence,” some of which are problematic in ways coherent with liberal ideology more broadly, as will be discussed further below. Peach’s feminist pragmatist approach certainly stands in contrast to rigidly legalistic individual rights-based constructions of human rights. However, even as Peach seeks to correct aspects of conventional liberal human rights approaches, her alternative approach continues to reductively locate problems primarily within non-western cultures, while constructing potential solutions around ideological liberal conceptions of “economic opportunity” and “economic independence” as key markers of progress.

Interestingly, Peach (2001) briefly mentions the “globalization of capitalist exploitation of labor” (p.174) early within her outline of feminist pragmatism. Later, she asserts, “Basic economic empowerment and alternative modes of economic survival for the sex trade workers and their families are vitally important to ending trafficking in Thailand” (p.180). The question then arises, what sort of economic empowerment and alternative modes of “economic survival” would be free from

the global capitalist exploitation of labour? Would it be similar to the “economic empowerment” exemplified by America’s biggest employer, Wal-Mart, whose predominantly female workforce is trapped in low wage, part-time jobs with little job security and no union protections (Eisenstein, 2005)? Indeed, the “practical strategies” (2001, p. 180) that Peach goes on to highlight as means of economic empowerment are themselves deeply problematic, in particular her inclusion of literacy programs and micro-credit, two increasingly interconnected projects that have been associated with exploitative neo-colonial capitalist structures.

On the surface, both literacy programs and micro-credit—very small loans given as financial aid to impoverished communities—present as benevolent initiatives. However, both programs have been strongly criticized for their connection to exploitative neo-colonial capitalist structures (Wickens & Sandlin, 2007). This connection is related to their funding structures and ties to western finance; the biggest source of funding for global literacy programs is the World Bank, which also supports their second biggest funder, UNESCO. As described by Wickens and Sandlin (2007), while UNESCO’s global literacy programs have slowly been moving away from “neocolonialist models” (p. 287) that impose western ideological and economic structures on non-western nations, both UNESCO and the World Bank nonetheless still “faithfully reflect interests of the major industrialized countries” (Stromquist, 2002, as cited by Wickens & Sandlin, 2007, p. 287). Jones (1998) writes, “We cannot understand World Bank education policy independently of its position as a bank” (as cited by Wickens & Sandlin, 2007, p. 288). Despite ideological constructions of literacy programs as inherently well intentioned and empowering, within the echelons of capital that fund those programs, “education is not viewed as a right, a joy, a tool for liberation and empowerment, but as an investment” (Punchi, citing Brock-Utne, 2001, p. 365). Most tellingly, the World Bank has worked alongside the International Monetary Fund to impose “structural adjustment programs” on developing nations, including Thailand, that offer financial loans in exchange for a range of state-level concessions, including opening markets up to foreign investment and control, and cutting “government spending on education, health care, the environment, and price subsidies for basic necessities such as food grains and cooking oils” (Cavanagh & Mander, 2003, p. 19). Given the World Bank’s key role in these coercive measures that have demonstrably negative impacts on local peoples and cultures, the integrity and functionality of the literacy programs funded by the World Bank and UNESCO warrant ongoing scrutiny, and certainly not tacit endorsement. Furthermore, the micro-credit programs that represent a key means of connecting “investors” with this newly “liberalized” market are even more questionable, further complicating the “practicality” of Peach’s recommended economic strategies for empowering impoverished women.

Championed as a means of economic empowerment and embraced by many NGOs working in non-western nations, micro-credit has primarily resulted in the “financialization of poverty” (Mader, 2015), by which wealthy investors and banks have turned poverty into a means of profit accumulation through interest on very small loans to impoverished people and communities. It has ultimately gone hand in hand with the traditional trappings of debt bondage and seen corporations colluding with states to create a new means for exploiting, disciplining, and controlling impoverished peoples (Eisenstein, 2005; Elyachar, 2002; Mader, 2015). Paraphrasing Elyachar, Eisenstein describes this neo-liberal project as ultimately signaling “the abandonment of any notion of genuine economic development” (Eisenstein, 2005, p. 508). Despite their seeming potential for helping impoverished communities, micro-credit and literacy programs currently represent powerful ideological and economic tools for neo-colonial capitalist globalization.

That literacy programs and micro-credit are among the practical economic strategies that Peach (2001) suggests as means of fostering “economic independence” (p. 180) is symptomatic of the ideological liberal lens that limits her argument elsewhere in her article. It seems to be the same limiting factor that allows Peach to narrowly locate the source of human rights violations

in non-western patriarchal institutions while minimizing the central role of poverty and personal “economic calculations”; it allows her to focus primarily on how local institutions in such nations turn a blind eye to the exploitation of women and have operated to preclude “the presence of ‘legal consciousness’ and or ‘rights consciousness’ within [the] culture and within women in particular” (p. 176). While Peach correctly asserts that this means coercive external interventions will not be effective and may even be harmful, she fails to address the overarching external influence of the deeply exploitative and equally patriarchal global capitalist economic structures and social relations that pervade every religious and cultural context she describes. This ideological blind spot in Peach’s discourse ultimately sees her endorsing economic strategies that have been effectively described as representing a deepening of the very “globalization of capitalist exploitation of labor” that she herself acknowledges as a repressive force. This kind of contradiction is symptomatic of discourses that take the basic tenets of liberal capitalist ideology for granted—discourses that fail to understand labour exploitation as the rule, not merely an exception, in capitalist structures and social relations. Peach’s argument thus ultimately fails to address the capitalist structural conditions of human rights violations in non-western nations. In contrast, Arahmaiani presents a clear indictment of neo-colonial capitalist globalization in the violation of Indigenous and non-western communities, cultures, and identities.

Conclusion

This article has compared two very different conceptions of human rights violations. As an Indigenous Indonesian artist activist, Arahmaiani draws from her lived experience and knowledge of local history to depict exploitative and oppressive local patriarchal institutions and practices that are deeply interconnected with global capitalist structures to reveal the neo-colonial nature of capitalist globalization. In contrast, Lucinda Peach constructs human rights violations in Thailand as primarily stemming from patriarchal institutions and practices, in a way that obfuscates the pervasive role of global capitalist structures in those institutions and practices. In Arahmaiani’s art, the Coca-Cola bottle, the commodity, represents capitalist globalization and is clearly depicted as central and pervasive. The glowing prestige of the commodity casts a shadow outwards in all directions, overshadowing/devaluing local traditions and identities; Arahmaiani’s estranged Indigenous character dances in that shadow, existentially alienated from her own identity and culture, while at the same time feeling compelled to protect the commodity and the social order it represents, and also to defend her very life on the basis of its terms. The commodity—the capitalist order itself—is understood as a form of tragic violence, a human rights violation on simultaneously immense global and intimately personal levels that transcends national boundaries.

Capitalism, as a source of human rights violations, is front and center in Arahmaiani’s work, and indeed the installations and performances that include the Coca-Cola bottle imagery function specifically to reveal the destructive neo-colonial nature of capitalist globalization. In contrast, the neo-colonial shadow of capitalist globalization is cast only lightly on the background of ideological liberal human rights discourses like the one demonstrated in Peach’s article, discourses that may otherwise even be considered progressive. The pervasive influence of commodification and its profound structural and cultural implications that are so central in Arahmaiani’s work are all but missing from Peach’s discourse. Rather, Peach places the spotlight on “cultural” barriers to human rights in Thailand and fails to clarify that the problems she locates within non-western institutions and practices are in fact deeply interwoven with western-imposed capitalist structural and cultural elements that have infiltrated and transformed the economic and cultural landscape of places like Thailand. This kind of limited focus is symptomatic of ideological liberal discourses, and gives rise to a number of contradictions in Peach’s argument. These include recommending problematic neo-colonial capitalist interventions as means of “economic empowerment” and referring

to factors like personal “debt bondage” to describe the conditions of Thai prostitution without mentioning that poverty in nations like Thailand also reflects national debt bondage enforced by wealthy western nations through exploitative neo-colonial economic arrangements (Cavanagh & Mander, 2003; Eisenstein, 2005).

Arahmaiani’s art urges human rights scholars and activists to pay closer attention to the pervasive structures that produce and perpetuate the conditions that normalize or necessitate desperate work conditions like prostitution. It challenges them to shift their gaze from a myopic focus on non-western nations and redirect it towards the source of global capitalist hegemony, which lies in the west and was forged in the United States—a nation that has itself normalized the exploitation of women within its own borders as cheap “flexible” labour (Eisenstein, 2005). Furthermore, while certain conventional human rights discourses may highlight the importance of respecting cultural differences, Arahmaiani’s work goes further to urge a broadening of the definition of human rights to include culture itself as something that can be subject to egregious human rights violations. The latter specifically implicates capitalist globalization and the transnational corporations that operate with impunity in nations like Indonesia, even as they devastate local cultures and natural environments.

Arahmaiani’s bold artistic statements represent a deep yearning for the reawakening of non-western cultures and identities in the face of profit-based globalization that devalues and seeks to subvert all the “non-rational” and non-western elements that lie outside its economic calculations of value and success. Her message is an urgent call to western scholars and activists to wake up from their liberal slumber. It represents a plea for them to shine a light on the neo-colonial underbelly of capitalist globalization, to lift it from the ideological shadows of their cultural analyses and place it at the sacred center of their prestigious circle of attention, where it belongs.

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