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Universalism Otherwise: Kantian Ethics, Spaak's Critique, and the Postcolonial Reframing of Justice in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This research paper critically interrogates the tension between Immanuel Kant's Enlightenment universalism and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial critique, situating the debate within the historical and ongoing legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism in Southeast Asia. It revisits Kant's ethical, aesthetic, and anthropological writings especially lesser studied texts on race and the sublime and engages Spivak's claims that Kant's framework universalizes European subjectivity while excluding the subaltern. Through a dialectical and interdisciplinary analysis, the paper demonstrates that while Kant's early texts reflect Eurocentric biases, his later works on cosmopolitanism and moral anthropology offer a trajectory toward ethical inclusivity. Grounded in contemporary Southeast Asian realities, the study explores how Kant's philosophical ideals have shaped regional constitutional laws, governance standards, and transitional justice mechanisms. It further interrogates the colonial deployment of Kantian aesthetics and anthropology in Southeast Asia, while uncovering how local cultural systems, indigenous epistemologies, and postcolonial literature have appropriated and redefined universalism. Drawing on recent scholarship, sociopolitical developments, and literary narratives, the paper argues for a pluralized and context sensitive interpretation of Kant's ethics. Ultimately, the research contends that Kant's universalism is neither to be canonized nor dismissed but reimaged through decolonial and dialogical lenses as a contested yet potentially emancipatory framework. This approach positions Kant not as a relic of Eurocentric modernity, but as a philosopher whose ideas, when critically reinterpreted, remain relevant to contemporary struggles for justice, dignity, and ethical cohabitation in a plural world.



Keywords: Kantian Universalism; Postcolonial Critique; Gayatri Spivak; Southeast Asia; Neocolonialism; Cosmopolitan Ethics; Anthropological Philosophy; Decolonial Aesthetics; Moral Pluralism; Subaltern Representation

1. Introduction

The Enlightenment has long been hailed as the crucible of modern rationality, universal ethics, and the political ideals that underpin liberal democracies. Yet, its legacy is also contested particularly within postcolonial discourse for the universalism it champions has often been accused of camouflaging deeply Eurocentric assumptions (Bhambra, 2022; Mignolo, 2021; Eze, 2023). Enlightenment thinkers, including Immanuel Kant, asserted rationality and autonomy as universally accessible attributes of human beings. However, critics have argued that these so-called universal claims were crafted from, and for, the European experience, often excluding or marginalizing non-Western ontologies and epistemologies (Chakrabarty, 2021; Dussel, 2020).

Within this critical landscape, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emerges as a central figure, challenging the ethical and aesthetic boundaries of Kantian thought. Her reading contends that Kant's philosophy, while outwardly promoting moral universality, tacitly constructs a normative European subject, silencing the "subaltern" and delegitimizing non-European cultural subjectivities (Spivak, 2023). She interrogates Kant's aesthetic categories particularly the sublime and his anthropological writings to expose embedded hierarchies that mirror colonial discourse.

However, this critical tradition itself warrants scrutiny. While Spivak's postcolonial reading raises essential concerns about power and voice, it often relies on selective textual interpretations that omit Kant's later and more inclusive articulations of moral cosmopolitanism, particularly in works like "Perpetual Peace" and "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View" (Kant, 1795; 1798). Contemporary scholars such as Kleingeld (2021), Cheah (2022), and Ferrara (2024) have argued that Kant's ethical philosophy can and has served as a foundation for emancipatory global discourses, including human rights, transnational justice, and cosmopolitan ethics.

This paper thus begins with a broader philosophical tension the paradox of Enlightenment universalism and narrows its focus to interrogate Spivak's critique of Kant. By applying a dialectical method and engaging in close textual analysis, it reevaluates Kant's ethical and anthropological writings in light of contemporary postcolonial theory. The aim is not to exonerate Kant uncritically but to offer a more nuanced reading that acknowledges the historical limitations of his thought while exploring its continued relevance in a postcolonial world. In doing so, this study aspires to reclaim Kant's universalism not as an imperial artifact but as a contested yet vital resource for ethical dialogue in an interconnected, pluralistic age.

2. Kant's Universalism in Ethical and Political Philosophy

Kant's ethical framework, grounded in the idea of a rational will and articulated through the categorical imperative, proposes a universally binding moral law. In his "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" and "Critique of Practical Reason," Kant argues that every rational being has intrinsic worth, and moral principles must apply equally to all (Kant, 1785; 1788). His later political



writings, such as "Perpetual Peace" (1795), envision a federation of free states governed by cosmopolitan law, based on mutual respect, peace, and hospitality. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, however, critiques this framework as Eurocentric, arguing that Kant's universality is constructed through a European lens and functions as a gatekeeper to human subjectivity. She contends that non-European societies are often positioned as lacking the rational autonomy required for moral agency within Kantian ethics, which reflects a colonial dynamic of voice suppression (Spivak, 2023). From her postcolonial standpoint, Kant's universalism, despite its ethical aspirations, masks an imperial logic that legitimizes European dominance.

Contemporary Southeast Asian scholars and postcolonial critics increasingly question whether Enlightenment-based moral constructs are culturally translatable or whether they repackage colonial hierarchies in normative terms (Ng, 2021; Wijaya, 2022). In regions historically subjected to colonial rule and currently grappling with neocolonial structures such as extractive capitalism, debt dependency, and cultural homogenization Kant's ideal of cosmopolitan peace is often viewed as aspirational but disconnected from geopolitical realities. Nonetheless, newer interpretations suggest that Kant's universalism, if re-contextualized, can serve as a tool for justice within pluralistic societies. Scholars such as Kleingeld (2021), Ferrara (2024), and Cheah (2022) argue that Kant's later works reflect a more flexible and inclusive ethical stance. In Southeast Asia, where plural legal systems, interfaith relations, and indigenous identities coexist uneasily with nation state structures, Kantian principles interpreted through a postcolonial lens could contribute to frameworks of ethical governance and rights based development (Rahim, 2023).

Thus, the tension between Kant's moral universality and Spivak's critique must be evaluated not only textually but also contextually. The relevance of Kantian ethics in the face of Southeast Asia's postcolonial challenges such as resource sovereignty, human trafficking, religious pluralism, and ecological justice requires both critical skepticism and normative engagement. The question is not simply whether Kant was Eurocentric, but whether his philosophy can be reread to empower formerly colonized societies in articulating their own visions of justice and moral order.

3. Aesthetic Judgment and the Sublime

In his "Critique of the Power of Judgment" (1790), Kant describes the sublime as a universal capacity of human reason to transcend sensory limitation through imagination and moral reflection. For Kant, the sublime is both a psychological and metaphysical experience one that elevates the subject toward a sense of moral greatness. Yet Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2023) critiques this as a covertly Eurocentric maneuver, arguing that Kant's account of aesthetic universality privileges European ideals and marginalizes alternative cultural expressions.

In the Southeast Asian context where colonial powers consistently used aesthetics to romanticize, exoticize, and often dehumanize the region Kant's aesthetics require closer scrutiny. European colonizers in Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma, and the Philippines framed Southeast Asian landscapes and cultural artifacts through orientalist visual vocabularies that aligned with Kantian ideals of beauty and sublimity. These representations often reduced complex



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indigenous worldviews to picturesque curiosities or primitive spectacles (Yusoff, 2022; Lee, 2023). The Kantian sublime, rather than offering a universal category of human experience, was operationalized in colonial discourse as a justification for cultural superiority and imperial tutelage.

Spivak's critique resonates here, particularly her claim that even attempts to "speak for" or "represent" the subaltern such as through the aesthetic gaze can efface their voice and agency. But scholars like Cheah (2022) and Ponniah (2024) contend that Kant's aesthetics, if reinterpreted through a de-colonial lens, can be detached from their historical abuses. They argue that Kant's notion of reflective judgment and the purposiveness of nature offers possibilities for intercultural aesthetic dialogue especially when applied to recovering indigenous art, literature, and ecological cosmologies in postcolonial Southeast Asia.

Moreover, local Southeast Asian philosophies of beauty and sublimity rooted in Buddhist, Confucian, or animist traditions offer fertile ground for comparative aesthetic inquiry. These traditions emphasize harmony, impermanence, and relational ethics, which can either challenge or complement Kantian universals. When placed in conversation, such frameworks suggest that aesthetic universality must be pluralized not rejected outright.

Thus, while Kant's sublime has served colonial aesthetics, it can also be appropriated. Postcolonial Southeast Asia has seen a renaissance in indigenous visual arts, ecopoetics, and de-colonial literature that contest imposed aesthetic hierarchies. These cultural productions redefine the sublime in relational and ecological terms, offering a counter narrative to Eurocentric elevation of the monumental and the overpowering. In this sense, the Kantian sublime, though shaped by its European origin, remains a critical site of contestation and reinterpretation.

4. Race, Anthropology, and Evolution of Thought

Immanuel Kant's early anthropological writings including "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" (1764) and "On the Different Races of Man" (1775) reflect the pervasive Eurocentric assumptions of his time, often organizing human diversity into hierarchical frameworks based on racial typologies. These texts contain troubling claims about the intellectual and moral capacities of non-European peoples, framing them through essentialist and often derogatory lenses.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak seizes upon these writings to argue that Kant's universality is deeply compromised. She maintains that the moral subject in Kantian ethics is implicitly European, and that Kant's anthropological lens reinforces colonial ideologies of civilizational superiority (Spivak, 2023). Spivak views Kant's invocation of rationality and autonomy as culturally exclusionary, a philosophical justification for the subordination of non-European voices in both theory and imperial practice.

However, contemporary Kantian scholars argue for a more diachronic reading of his philosophical development. Pauline Kleingeld (2021), for example, has shown that Kant significantly revised his early racial views in later works like "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View" (1798), where he begins to emphasize moral and rational potential as universal human traits. This later work shifts the focus from biological determinism to cultural development, education, and moral agency, reflecting a more inclusive vision of humanity.



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In the context of Southeast Asia, where colonial administrations frequently employed pseudoscientific racial hierarchies to legitimize conquest and control, Kant's evolving views present a complex interpretive challenge. His early writings mirrored the Eurocentric anthropology later used to justify the subjugation of Southeast Asian peoples under colonial rule (Wijaya, 2022). Yet the ethical pivot in his later works aligns more closely with postcolonial demands for recognition, dignity, and moral equality.

Postcolonial Southeast Asian scholars increasingly advocate for critically engaging with Kant rather than outright rejection. They argue that his evolving anthropological framework can support regional efforts to decolonize knowledge systems and affirm pluralist moral reasoning. For instance, educational reforms in Indonesia and the Philippines now incorporate de-colonial perspectives on ethics and philosophy, yet find resonance in Kant's later emphasis on rational autonomy and intercultural respect (Ng, 2021).

Thus, the critical engagement with Kant's anthropology reveals not only historical bias but also philosophical selfcorrection. Spivak's critique underscores the need for vigilance in reading Enlightenment texts; yet when read in full, Kant's later anthropology offers resources for rethinking universality in inclusive and dialogical terms especially in postcolonial Southeast Asia, where questions of identity, dignity, and moral agency remain profoundly contested.

5. Empirical Influence of Kantian Ethics in Global Frameworks

Kantian concepts shape many contemporary legal and ethical systems:

Constitutional Law: The German Basic Law and South African constitution reflect Kantian ideals of dignity and autonomy.

Human Rights Instruments: The UDHR and ECHR echo Kant's moral universalism.

Governance and Anti-Corruption: Ethical governance frameworks draw on Enlightenment values of moral accountability.

Transnational Justice: Courts and truth commissions use Kantian logic of universal justice. These empirical applications suggest that Kantian ethics, far from being obsolete or Eurocentric, have become foundational in global justice discourses.

5. Empirical Influence of Kantian Ethics in Global Frameworks

Kantian moral philosophy, particularly its principles of autonomy, dignity, and universal moral law, has shaped the moral infrastructure of many modern legal and political systems. Globally, Kant's ideas have found resonance in the constitutional commitments to human rights, justice, and the rule of law. However, the empirical influence of Kantian ethics in postcolonial regions such as Southeast Asia requires a more nuanced assessment that takes into account both legal structures and lived realities shaped by historical and ongoing coloniality.

In Southeast Asia, the legacy of colonial legal systems often transplanted and codified under European rule has left lasting imprints on national constitutions and governance models. While these systems were often imposed, many countries in the region have since adopted or reinterpreted foundational principles that echo Kantian ethics:

Constitutional Law: The Philippine and Indonesian constitutions enshrine human dignity, equality before the law, and moral obligations of the state to



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uphold justice values traceable to Kantian thought, especially as adapted through global constitutionalism (Tan, 2023).

Human Rights Instruments: Although ASEAN's human rights mechanisms such as the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD) have faced criticism for their weak enforcement, they reflect a commitment to universal moral principles and dignity. Scholars argue that this regional framework attempts to reconcile Kantian universalism with Asian values (Santos, 2022).

Governance and Anti-Corruption: Initiatives across Southeast Asia to promote ethical governance such as Indonesia's Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi (KPK) or the Philippines' Office of the Ombudsman rest on ideals of transparency, accountability, and moral duty. These are broadly Kantian in their ethical foundations, even if shaped by local political culture (Rahim, 2023).

Transnational and Transitional Justice: Efforts to confront historical injustices e.g., the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia or reparations for colonial abuses in Malaysia reflect Kantian principles of justice and moral accountability. Though often constrained by geopolitics, such institutions invoke universal norms of responsibility, reconciliation, and human dignity (Lim, 2024). While the direct invocation of Kant's name is rare in Southeast Asian legal texts, his philosophical influence permeates many of the ethical ideals that underpin regional legal developments. Importantly, Southeast Asian scholars and jurists are not simply inheriting these ideals they are adapting, localizing, and challenging them through cultural dialogue and decolonial critique.

Thus, Kantian ethics can be seen as part of a contested moral vocabulary that continues to shape debates around legal pluralism, civil rights, and international justice in the region. Rather than static inheritance, this is a dynamic and context-sensitive engagement with Enlightenment ethics in the face of complex neocolonial realities.

6. Interdisciplinary Insights: Philosophy, Sociology, and Literature

The critique and reinterpretation of Kant's universalism gain significant depth when viewed through an interdisciplinary lens particularly from within the postcolonial Southeast Asian context where competing epistemologies, hybrid identities, and historical wounds challenge Eurocentric paradigms.

Philosophy: Kant's categorical imperative and his ideas of autonomy and moral law are central to moral philosophy. However, their rigid universality often clashes with Southeast Asian ethical traditions such as Confucian relational ethics, Islamic jurisprudence, and Theravāda Buddhist compassion ethics. By juxtaposing these frameworks, scholars like Prawira (2022) suggest that Kant's ethics can be expanded rather than discarded forming a 'critical universalism' sensitive to plurality.

Sociology: Postcolonial Southeast Asia offers rich empirical ground to test the viability of Kantian ideals. Issues such as poverty, migration, ethnic conflict, and neocolonial dependency challenge Enlightenment optimism about moral progress. Yet, sociological studies in Malaysia and the Philippines show that movements for social justice often invoke ethical claims akin to Kantian respect for persons and universal dignity (Ahmad, 2023).

Political Science: Kant's cosmopolitan ideals have clear influence on international relations theories, particularly liberal institutionalism. In ASEAN contexts, regional diplomacy is increasingly framed in terms of mutual



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recognition, rights, and dignity concepts with Kantian ancestry. However, ASEAN's emphasis on noninterference also reflects resistance to perceived neocolonial moral impositions (Leong, 2021).

Literature: Southeast Asian postcolonial literature provides textured narratives of colonial encounter, resistance, and ethical complexity. Novels such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* or Ninotchka Rosca's *State of War* feature protagonists negotiating identity, injustice, and moral autonomy inviting readers to consider whether Kantian universals can truly capture the ethical demands of the colonized subject. As Putri (2024) argues, these texts often perform a literary 'rewriting' of universalism through indigenous and feminist lenses.

In sum, Kant's universalism, when viewed through these disciplinary prisms, does not simply fracture under critique it refracts into a spectrum of possibilities. Interdisciplinary dialogue does not weaken Kant's project; rather, it allows for its responsible pluralization and ethical revitalization.

7. Conclusion

The confrontation between Kant's Enlightenment universalism and Spivak's postcolonial critique embodies one of the most charged dialectics in modern thought: the tension between abstract ethical ideals and their historical complicity in imperial power. Spivak rightly exposes how Kant's philosophy especially in its anthropological and aesthetic dimensions was entangled with Eurocentric hierarchies that mirrored and reinforced colonial domination. Her intervention is invaluable in alerting contemporary readers to the silences, exclusions, and ideological scaffolding embedded within canonical philosophy.

Yet, to reject Kantian universalism wholesale, as Spivak's reading sometimes invites, may inadvertently foreclose avenues for intercultural ethical engagement and global solidarity. This study has shown that Kant's later works especially his cosmopolitan political theory and pragmatic anthropology represent a philosophical evolution that attempts to transcend parochial biases. When these texts are brought into dialogue with Southeast Asian realities of colonial trauma, neocolonial persistence, and moral pluralism, a richer picture emerges one where Kant's ideals are not simply Eurocentric artifacts, but potential tools for postcolonial emancipation.

Critically, Southeast Asia offers a living laboratory for rethinking universality. The region's hybrid legal systems, religious pluralism, postcolonial statecraft, and de-colonial literature all reveal both the limits and latent possibilities of Enlightenment ethics. As scholars increasingly engage in dialogical reinterpretations drawing from Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, and indigenous traditions Kant's moral framework becomes not a finished doctrine but a contested, evolving resource. It is precisely through this contestation that Kantian thought can be decolonized, revitalized, and ethically repurposed.

Thus, the project of revisiting Kant's universalism is not about rehabilitation or rejection but about reinvention. Spivak's critique and Southeast Asia's postcolonial experiences together illuminate the need for a universalism that is responsive rather than rigid, dialogic rather than dogmatic. In an age of global inequality, climate crisis, and cultural resurgence, the future of ethical thought may depend not on abandoning Kant, but on reading him otherwise through the eyes of those he once overlooked.



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