

Reclaiming Voices and Disputing Authority: A Feminist Dialogics Approach in Reading Kee Thuan Chye's Plays

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ABSTRACT

Kee Thuan Chye in all four of his selected plays has appropriated and reimagined history by giving it a flair of contemporaneity in order to draw a parallel with the current socio-political climate. He is a firm believer of freedom of expression and racial equality. His plays become his didactic tool to express his dismay and frustration towards the folly and malfunctions in the society. He believes that everybody needs to rise and eliminate their fear from speaking their minds regardless of race, status and gender. In all four of his plays, Kee has featured and centralised his female characters by empowering them with voice and agency. Kee gives fair treatment to his women by painting them as strong, liberated, determined and fearless beings. Armed with the literary tools of feminist dialogics which is derived from Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and strategies of historical re-visioning, this study investigates and explores Kee's representations of his female characters and the various ways that he has liberated them from being passive and silent beings as they contest the norms, values and even traditions. It is found that the dissecting voices of Kee's female characters contain veiled messages and it is dialogic in nature. Their voices are caught in between opposition and struggle which echoes Kee's manifested resistance towards the authority's establishment of power.

Keywords: Bakhtin's dialogism; feminist dialogics; history; re-visioning strategies; voice

INTRODUCTION

Kee Thuan Chye is a prominent name in the Malaysian literary scene and he has been described as one of the protagonists in Malaysian literature. He considers himself as an 'honest' person who feels obliged to express what he believes is right. Issues such as freedom of expression, social equality, social justice, corruption and political abuse of power are commonly encapsulated in his plays. In the selected four of Kee's plays; *We Could ****You*, *Mr. Birch*, *The Big Purge*, 1984: *Here and Now* and *The Swordfish*, then *The Concubine* (henceforth, the plays will be known as *Birch*, *TBP*, 1984 and *Swordfish*, respectively), he has consistently included the various voices of different types of women who have transcended the borders of time and space. Even though most of his protagonists are males, within his female characters, Kee acknowledges the power of the women's voices and they too become part of his medium to deliver his forceful and provocative messages. Kee has given the appropriate voice and agency by positioning them as individuals who dare to challenge and question the patriarchal shackles that bind them. This act is parallel to a

revisionist effort that aims to reclaim the voice and history of these previously muted women by allowing them to express their voices and acknowledging them as opinionated beings.

The theory of feminist dialogics is particularly suitable for a reading of Kee's plays as the portrayal of his female characters are consistent with the aspiration of feminist dialogists; to alter society's stereotypical images of a woman and to demystify the patriarchal values that embody them. Feminist dialogics was coined by Dale Bauer (1988) who borrowed selected dialogism concepts from Bakhtin and appropriated them within the context of feminist readings of a text. The application of feminist dialogics aids in enhancing the audience's comprehension of the extensive and different roles of these female characters. Apart from that, this approach is utilised to preserve the sense of female agency as well as acknowledging the broad and independent feminist praxis by subverting and transforming their positions against the authority. The roles of these women are foregrounded not only to resist their subordination and position to men and authorial power but also to be engaged in an open dialogue with the society in order for it to reassess its view of women and consequently acknowledge the strength and abilities of female roles.

The key women who would be the focus of this study are Mastura and Kuntum from *Birch*, Mawiza and Joan from *TBP*, Yone from *1984* and Nurhalisa and Tun Dara from *Swordfish*. Each of these women possesses her own unique share of stories. They brazenly defy social conventions, values and tradition in order to assert their voices and agency. These women refuse to be the "silent bearers of meaning" (Bauer 1988, p. 3), instead with the agency provided to them, they take charge and be their own makers of meanings which reflect their courage to step out from their traditional roles by engaging in a "dialogic polemics" and "battle of voices" (Bauer 1988, p. 3). Kee illustrates their resistance to oppressive conventions, social dictate and disapproving dominant discourse as he unfolds the plot of each play that represents his personal stand and ideology. Their resistance and refusal are considered as a threat to "the disciplinary culture" in which they retaliate by rejecting some of these battling, alienating and threatening culture (Bauer 1988, p. 3).

Despite the challenges to be heard and acknowledged, the women persevere in breaking down the wall of stereotypes, marginalisation and subordination. They are fearless beings who continuously assert their voices within the hostile and discouraging authorial power. However, their resistance to social conventions are deemed to failure as none of them get the 'happy ending' that they aspire for, reflecting the harsh reality in which resistance needs to be fought off and uprooted to maintain 'order'. Nevertheless, their resistance is noteworthy as it foregrounds the conflict between 'persuasive resistance' and the patriarchal culture, hence providing space for feminist dialogics to "produce occasions for the disruption and critique of dominant and oppressive ideologies" (Bauer and McKinstry 1991, p. 3).

This paper employs feminist dialogics and historical re-visioning to argue that Kee liberates the women in his plays by casting them as bold and defiant characters who audaciously contest the norms, values and traditions of oppressive patriarchal societies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In revisionist works, post-colonialist writers bring the voices of their women forward and highlight the struggles of these 'othered women' and deflate the pre-conceived notion that women are incapable of articulating and rationalising the issues and elements that oppose or restrict their freedom. Apart from the revisionist, feminist dialogists also attempt to remove the barricades that obstruct the female voices from emerging by renegotiating the 'othering' of voices apart from the privileged ones into a "dialogic conflict" (Bauer 1988, p.xii). The effort of the revisionist and the feminist dialogists is similarly mirrored in Kee's works in

terms of the portrayal of his female characters. Dialogism is not only about establishing dialogues but it entails a struggle by these women to be heard and for the readers to acknowledge their presence and ideals. Botton and Puigvert (2005) argue that dialogic feminism no longer revolves on the competing issues of equality and differences, instead this approach urges the importance of listening and respecting diverse and variant voices. They believe that transformation of gender can be achieved through the act of solidarity or a unified effort. Furthermore, dialogic feminism focuses more on the theoretical elements that promote the idea of feminism among women in order to equip them with significant leading roles.

BAKHTIN'S DIALOGISM AND FEMINIST DIALOGICS

As previously mentioned, feminist dialogics as coined by Bauer (1988) is a spin-off from Bakhtin's notion of Dialogism. Bakhtin promotes the idea of resisting or persuasive reading against the dominant language that is totalising and regimented. He further continues that language is armed with dual forces; to cage human potential and to produce unconventional forces that are against the norms which the language commands. The similar restricting language can be converted into a disruption and a critique force (Bauer 1988). The opposing notion of resisting the dominant language is further developed into the concept of Bakhtin's 'carnival' which becomes one of the prominent elements of feminist dialogics.

The concept of carnival or the carnivalesque implies the reversal of social hierarchies which becomes one of the constitutive elements in a feminist dialogics reading of a text. Bakhtin (1984) states that during a carnival, all hierarchies and inequalities are suspended and consecrated. In the hype of the carnival, all are considered as equal. Carnival opposes all forms of authority and celebrates the joyful relativity of order. It is the concept of carnival that assists in relating feminism with that agency to resist order and establishment. Carnavalesque aids in multivoiced or polyphonic resistance to hierarchies as it 'laughs' at authority. The laughter does not indicate joy but it is ambivalent in nature. This ambivalent laughter is dialogic because it carries the binary opposition of being cheerful and annihilating, festive and mocking. The laughter is a mockery to those in power and subjected to it. Bakhtin (1981) calls it carnival laughter because it opposes the official as it celebrates "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (p. 284). During a carnival, hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions are suspended. It demolishes fear and piety which are the prerequisite component that one would need to approach or resist the world realistically (Bakhtin 1981). Resistance to hierarchy and carnival laughter is achievable due to the polyphonic feature of a novel as it strives to prove the hierarchies are mistaken. The female voice that is marked by process, change, absence and multi-voicedness laughs in the face of authority as the meaning of their language is always "elsewhere, between voices or between discourses" Herndl 1991, p. 9).

Carnival acts as a centrifugal force that helps the women to struggle against the centripetal force in order to overturn the dominant order of society or to subvert the authority. The women according to Bauer (1988) are alienated by society and find themselves in the position of the carnivalesque fool. They are the 'othered' and repressed characters. The "stupidity (a form of resistance)" (Bauer 1988, p. 11) of these women forces the unspoken repressions to be vulnerable to interpretation, contradiction and dialogue. Kee has shown how these women encapsulate a double nature of being the marginalised, while being the socially 'othered' female subjects they are also the protagonists who are in constant search to establish their identity as strong and liberated women. Hence, their discourses are double voiced as a result from a clash between the dominant and repressed discourses.

HISTORY AND RE-VISIONING STRATEGIES

Traditional history is not only subjectively written; it is also read and discussed subjectively. Although modern readers say they take history at face value, no one can help but compare the past to the present as a means of understanding it, which makes it subjective. Historical reality is at times too bitter to be swallowed at face value. It is a large mirror that reflects the facts of the past and all that has been etched into the pages of history, hence it can never be erased or removed despite's one effort to cover it up or forget it. The issue of 'truth' pertains when reading a historical narrative and it remains unresolved, therefore such narratives are left with gaps that need to be filled. White (1981) acknowledges that a historical narrative is incomplete and contestable, therefore interpretations of meanings are constantly shifting and changing. This view is parallel to Arnold's (2000) who maintains that the sources of history are unable to reveal the details of historic events making them gapped, silent, and spaced. These gaps and fragments are filled by re-visionists as they re-vision the past according to their own imagination and lenses. In the novels, made-up events and characters tell us things "that history books have never told us so clearly," so as "to make history, what happened, more comprehensible" (Rozett 2002, p. 57) and to trace the process through which the causes slowly produce their effects.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RESISTING TRADITION

Zawiah Yahya (1988) in her book *Malay Characters in Malaysian Novels in English* claims that Malay women usually suffer from "under-exposure" in both fiction and reality. Many female characters are discriminately side-lined and portrayed stereotypically as "prostitutes, midwives, abortionists, 'mak andam' (the one who is responsible to beautify the bride), and servants" (Zawiah Yahya 1988, p. 58). They lack the opportunity to be on the centre stage as it is dominated by men and in some unfortunate cases, these women become the "victims of male domination" (Zawiah Yahya 1988, p. 58). This view is further asserted by Siti Hawa Salleh (1992) who states that traditional women are often depicted as passive, loyal, preserving, accepting, submissive and pure.

The portrayal of stereotypical images of Malay women is subverted through the portrayal of Mastura and Kuntum in Birch (1994). These two women are the embodiment of subservient women during the feudal period. However, such a representation is subverted by Kee when he highlights their feminist longings to liberate themselves from the control of uncontested patriarchal authority. Kee re-positions his female characters by portraying them as questioning and rational beings who resist being objectified as mere commodities. Even when objectification is present, Kee subverts the view by using their feminine power as a manipulation tool to their own advantage (Phillips 2008). Mastura and Kuntum are the symbols of the modern day women who are equipped with voice and agency. Kee transports these women into the past and their portrayals are manipulated to subvert the pre-conceived notion of feudal women. Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2003) maintains that feudal women were commonly perceived as subservient and their position was appropriated within the domineering patriarchal system. With the fusion of time, both Kuntum and Mastura are depicted as resisting their traditional roles as Kee reinterprets history by subverting the common perception of these women.

Mastura is a creation based on a modern feminist perspective. Being raised during a feudal period in which silence is the most desirable trait in a woman, Mastura defies the odds

as she eloquently expresses her desire “to wander to other lands and see new things. Discover how other people live and think” (Kee 1994, p. 33). Her drive to break the boundaries of conservatism is not only to affirm her true identity but also it highlights her refusal to be part of “the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Rich 1972, p.18). In addition, Mastura also embodies the traits of what Stubbs (1979) label as “the New Woman” who is battling for equality and personal freedom (as cited in Pyeaam Abbasi 2013, p. 120). Being the daughter of a respectable Malay chief, Dato Maharajalela, Mastura receives the best education and she is allowed to speak her mind while she is with her father. However, such liberty proves to be a mere illusion as her father still constrains her within the society’s conservative expectations of a woman; she is to be married off and a sense of fulfilment can only be achieved by serving her husband. Nevertheless, her extroverted voice can be perceived as defying tradition and order. In Lela’s eyes, despite her intelligence, Mastura is only worthy “to look after the home and the affairs of the men as well” (Kee 1994, p: 34) and the idea of a woman becoming a chieftain like him is laughable. Her intelligence is further highlighted as she challenges her father on the issue of slavery that was widely practiced by the Malay elites then. Mastura’s vocality embodies her own creative strategies to work around a constricting patriarchal system and her refusal to be merely a “silent bearer of meaning” (Bauer 1988, p.3).

The dichotomy of father-daughter relationship according to Phillips (2008) exposes Lela as an unreasonable and cruel man as he keeps insisting the maintenance of tradition and order at the expense of revoking the freedom of another human being. Lela is the embodiment of man’s power to instinctively “dominate, tyrannise, choose or reject the woman” and their charisma solely comes from their power over their woman and their “control of the world by force” (Rich 1972, p.19). Lela perceives Mastura’s defiance as a threat to the longstanding and naturalised disciplinary culture (Bauer 1988). From the perspective of feminist dialogics, Mastura’s assertiveness is dialogically engaging. However, Mastura’s objection to be domesticated is left in vacuum as her voice is considered as a threatening discourse that no one is willing to acknowledge. Despite the struggle of transmitting her voice across, Mastura can be perceived as one of Kee’s iconic female characters who is both idealistic and sentimental.

In contrast to Mastura who belongs to the privileged class, Kuntum in the hands of Kee does not belong to any “neat, ethical, social or historiographical category” (Watt 2001, p. 98). Initially Kuntum is represented as a typical colonised woman who is imprisoned in a stern patriarchal society. She is narrowly observed as a mere sex object as Dato Sago unashamedly displays his lust for her despite her status as a married woman and slave. Sago wants Kuntum to bear sons for him as he views her as only worthy for her reproductive ability rather than being acknowledged as a human being. However, Kuntum does not reciprocate Sago’s sexual advances, thus displaying her feminine power. In fact, by spurning Sago, Kuntum has emasculated and robbed Sago’s dominance as he fails to “derive pleasure from the woman who is supposed to be...subordinate to him” (Phillips 2008, p. 94).

However, later in the play, Kee controversially portrays Kuntum as a morally ambiguous character when she finds salvage in the arms of Birch whose altruistic intention is questionable. According to the feminist dialogics lens, Kuntum’s defiance against her religion and her status as a married woman signifies her yearning for dominance or power and wanting to break free from the dual authorities; Sago and her religion. While trying to maintain adherence to her religion, she also acknowledges that “I am only a human being” (Kee 1994, p. 59). However, the acknowledgement of her vulnerability as human should not be misconstrued. Her submission to Birch is a carefully calculated decision and a manipulative act. Birch, who is far superior than the Malay aristocrats would be able to exercise his control over them, which would subsequently liberate her from Dato Sagor’s

clutches. Her defiance also reflects her carnivalesque trait as she fearlessly mocks and rejects Sago, her master over a ‘Mat Salleh’ who is not necessarily sexually superior. Kuntum, unlike Mastura, disallows the audience to sympathise and feel sentimental towards her. She participates in the play’s alienation effect as she drops out of character to justify her actions. Kuntum’s justification as observed by Watt (2001) throws the audience into an “ethically grey territory” as they wonder if Kuntum’s surrender to Birch is one way of asserting her independence or to fulfill a personal agenda (99). Kuntum’s character displays multi-layered representations and she cannot be cast as belonging to a simplistic good or evil category. Watt (2001) further asserts that Kuntum does not leave the audience with the option to place her within “the banalities of dichotomies” that limit the reach of both post-colonial and feminist criticism (99). Kuntum is the representative of the people who would take whichever action that they see fit in order to survive. She is not armed with privileges and being triple colonised by colonial forces, patriarchal structure and social class, we are unable to judge her according to conventional moral traits (Watt 2001).

In *Swordfish* (2009), Kee introduces Nurhalisa, the daughter of Ranjuna Tapa, who dares to question and disobey the Sultan. She was chosen to be the Sultan’s concubine and she was forced to consent as he possesses “the power to do to us whatever you wish” (Kee 2009, p. 32). In the Malay Annals, the daughter of Ranjuna Tapa was nameless and voiceless. Her presence was brief before she faced her death punishment. Kee once again manipulates history by introducing and reimagining Nurhalisa within the mould of a contemporary female persona who is vocal, fearless and a risk taker. She was said “...to be too clever” for her father and even for Sultan Iskandar. She outwits him by refusing to be his concubine as she believes that “there’s more to life than being a concubine. Or even a wife...” (Kee 2009, p. 23). Nurhalisa consistently articulates her vision for the *kerajaan* (Government) to allow the subjects to speak freely without fear, to debate issues for the betterment of her people without worrying that it would be too “sensitive”. She yearns for a “society where there is justice, where you can speak freely without fear of getting detained without trial” (Kee 2009, p. 28). Her voice of resistance marks the juxtaposition of the past and the present which mirrors Kee’s own position that one should be assertive to ensure that one’s voice is heard.

Nurhalisa’s closeness with Iskandar is misinterpreted and intimidates the others, therefore, her quest is made even more difficult by the palace officials. Through the feminist dialogics lens, the palace officials or the ‘bourgeois authority’ as coined by Bauer (1988, p. 6) find it necessary to subdue her assertive voice as they find it threatening, ergo it needs to be silenced once and for all. A malicious plot is planned to have her detained for being seditious. Nurhalisa denies the accusations and she argues that the only crime she had committed is wanting “to give our people voice” (Kee 2009, p. 43). She is defenseless and her objections to the charges and false testimonies are bluntly denied by the supposedly learned judge. As expected Nurhalisa is found guilty and she is sentenced to death by the Sultan and her death symbolizes the ‘death’ of her righteous ideals and voice. According to the traits of feminist dialogics, her voice is heard in a vacuum. Despite her persuasive effort to get Iskandar to alter the old ways and listen to the voices of the grassroots, he refuses to acknowledge these emerging voices. Hence it neither carries any merit nor is it worthy of acknowledgement by him. In fact her voice of defiance which is supposed to reveal a space for dialogue is perceived as a violation to authoritative codes and cultural powers (Bauer 1988).

The three women mentioned above possess the courage to disrupt and criticize the dominant and oppressive ideologies that were shackling them (Bauer and McKinstry 1991). Their valiance allows them to vocalize their innermost thoughts in order to be critical towards the curbing social conventions. Their assertions for the freedom of expression and resistance towards traditional roles of women foreground “the moments when the patriarchal work and

the persuasive resistance to it come into conflict” (Bauer and McKinstry 1991, p: 3). The men in the lives of these women superficially ‘romanticise’ them as long as their “words and actions” do not compromise or “threaten their privilege of tolerating or rejecting us according to their ideas” of how a woman should be and behave (Rich 1972, p. 20). Even though the women’s resistance is to no avail and even fatal at times, their refusal to be forcefully silent marks a renewed and reformed view of female strength and power.

MOTHERHOOD AND THE BETRAYED WIFE

When dealing with the depiction of female characters in any literary work, the portrayal of the mother and the wife is inevitable. These two titles are the common yearnings of all women and some even postulate that a woman’s life cycle is incomplete if one does not become a wife and a mother. In Islam, being a mother is considered as the “highest honour in human life” (Zeenath Kausar 2001, p. 72) and the responsibility of childbearing and childbirth are divine non-transferable privileges as well as a gift of nature that is “desirable and fulfilling” (Roziyah Omar 1994, p. 35).

Joan in TBP (2004) is one of the characters that is constructed through appeals and entanglements of concepts such as love, loyalty, home and family, in order to address the fears, desires and hopes of ordinary Malaysians. The internal play thus operates as irrevocably multiracial and multicultural, both inside and outside the mono-Equa political sphere. Joan like her parents is both fearful and prejudiced (Lim 2004). Joan is introduced into the play as the wife of Rong, who is a Chingchong (a pseudonym for Chinese as used in the play). Being just another ordinary common person, she too gets affected by the political and racial turmoil of Equaland (a pseudonym for Malaysia as used in the play). The turmoil particularly alarms her as she finds out that she is with child. Despite the racial tension, Joan still opts for an Equa (a pseudonym for Malay as used in the play) gynaecologist upon her husband’s recommendation even though her decision is frowned upon by her fellow Chingchong colleagues. Being a future mother, it was imperative that she goes to a doctor whom she could “trust”, “have confidence in” and is able to “put her at ease” (Kee 2004, p. 32). Joan is able to see beyond a racial barrier as she describes Dr Maba as someone with an “affectionate personality” (Kee 2004, p. 32). In this scene, Joan has broken down the racial barrier and prejudice in order to make sure that she receives the best pre-natal treatment for her unborn child. Starting from this point onwards, Joan’s behaviour and decisions are shaped by and revolves around her motherhood and nesting traits. Joan’s expression of her internal desire reflects her maternal instinct that wishes for only the best for her baby. It is a natural reaction for any mother to ensure that her child is secure and is presented with the best opportunities. Joan re-visits the idea of migrating overseas to Rong and her decision is justified as she no longer feels safe being in Equaland where “there could be a racial riot any time now, the whole city is so tense” (Kee 2009, p. 59). In an unfortunate incident at the embassy, Joan was caught in the riot and she has a miscarriage and blames Rong for the misfortune. Both Rong and the motherland that are supposed to be protective and safe have robbed and deprived her from being a mother.

Rong’s arrest for illicit proximity with an Equa woman is another agonising blow to Joan as she has to cope with the emotional burden of losing her child and her husband’s infidelity. Her emotional turbulence is reflected by her solemn silence on stage. Her silence brings multiple dialogic connotations as it indicates both strength and defeat. Her lack of response to her parents’ persuasion to abandon her husband could be decoded as a sign of defeat as their words might have penetrated her mind, ergo bringing some sense into her. Her husband’s infidelity would be the last straw that would make her withdraw from him as well as from their homeland. However, her silence could also be deciphered as a wise and strong

reaction. The silence allows her to digest the sudden pile of adversities as she rationalises her inner thoughts and intentions to decide on the best course of action.

The idea of motherhood is apparent in rationalising Joan's expected decision. She is not only betrayed by Rong, but Equaland too has betrayed her and diminishes her faith and assurance that it is a safe and secure land to live in. The motherland that is supposed to be embracing has denied her from her own transition from a wife into a mother. Despite her husband's total rejection of the idea of migration, she flatly opposes him, thus breaking the stereotypical image of a subservient wife. She takes control of her life by being her own policy maker in determining her own fate. Even though she has to uproot herself from her motherland, the decision is crucial as she sought happiness and security that her husband was unable to provide.

The issue of motherhood continues to be explored by Kee with the portrayal of Tun Dara in *Swordfish* (2009). She is the antagonist who manipulates and exploits her power as the Royal consort to satisfy her personal vendetta against her husband's favourite concubine. Tun Dara is the daughter of the Bendahara and also Iskandar's first cousin. She is betrothed to Iskandar as a union effort between the Maharaja and the Bendahara who want to keep it "all in the family" (Kee 2009, p. 33). Like a commodity she is transferred from her father to Iskandar, to whom she had been betrothed since she was five years old. Such exchange of women as a commodity within the Malay court is highlighted by Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2003) in which she states that as these women are exchanged, they become the property of men. It was a common practice for a *Bendahara* to promise his daughter to the Sultan or any other influential court official as part of their means "to gauge each other's loyalty and indebtedness" (p. 89). Such an exchange is of course highly debated and disapproved of by feminists who reject the idea as it is an act of oppression against women. Such self-centred marital transactions with economic and political motives only benefit the men and not the women who lose their subjectivity and agency during the process (Ruzy Suliza Hashim 2003).

In order to honour the promise, Iskandar is left with no choice but to succumb to the royal decision of his father, the Maharaja. Trapped in a loveless marriage, Iskandar openly displays his contempt towards Tun Dara as he feels her to be a nuisance who "pisses me off" (Kee 2009, p. 33). He refuses to consummate their marriage leaving Tun Dara as the virginal wife. Iskandar out rightly robs Tun Dara from the privilege of motherhood and her prime duty as the royal consort to provide an heir for the Sultan. Apart from that, according to Islamic law, Iskandar as the husband is obliged to care and protect his wife. Allah has created men and women to be united in a union that needs to be nurtured with affection in order to preserve harmonious relationship between them (Nor Hashimah et al. 2004). The denial of such a right perhaps could be considered as the primary motive for Tun Dara to devise a conspiracy that destabilises Singapura and most importantly tears Iskandar away from his concubine. Tun Dara schemes a despicable and malicious slander out of her envy against Nurhalisa, the young concubine who faces a fatal punishment as a result of the slander. Such a national scandal initiated by Tun Dara confirms Cheah's (1993) claim that women in the Malay court may appear harmless only on the surface as their activities are "subtle" and "sophisticated" due to which they are dismissed as mere onlookers. Their presence is occasionally known when they peep from behind the curtain. They literally had no roles to play with hardly any influence on the court officials. On the contrary, these harmless beings were capable of "guile, manipulation and ruthlessness" in spreading slander and causing scandal with terrifyingly deadly result (Cheah 1993, p. 2). Tun Dara makes her presence known by bringing herself into the focus and limelight by wearing the mask of a 'victim'. She is the brilliant, manipulative, powerful mastermind whose evil intention is satiated when Nurhalisa is sentenced to death.

Unlike other female characters created by Kee, Tun Dara is particularly unique and distinctive. Tun Dara is portrayed as a malicious and scandalous woman, yet her malevolence is executed subtly. Unlike Nurhalisa who fights for the freedom of expression, Tun Dara merely fights for the love of her husband. Her devious intentions drive her to commit the sin of libel and become an accomplice in the execution of an unjust death punishment, as well as to engage in an illicit affair which results in an abortion. She brazenly survives all the sins without tarnishing her reputation as the royal consort though Iskandar is very much aware of her true cunning traits. Her power is majestically depicted when she successfully deceives an entire court and its spectators inclusive the judge. Her unobtrusive display of power and manipulative nature affirm the notions of carnival through which she has subverted and inverted the display of power without “smashing social frameworks” and instead “reinscribes them by being contained within them” (Hohne & Wussow 1994, p. xii). The display of her carnivalesque nature signifies her repressed anger and deprivation of love from her husband, the Sultan. Instead of fighting to break the common patriarchal and male dominance, Tun Dara relentlessly perseveres in attempting to win over her husband’s affection and love. Other feminists may find her motive as weak and foolish, yet I perceive her as a woman of power who dares to retaliate against the man who is supposed to be her protector and provider. Furthermore, he is also supposed to grant her with the opportunity of motherhood as bestowed by God.

THE FEMME FATALE

The final category of Kee’s female characters portrayed in his plays is the femme fatale. Each of the categories is represented by Mawiza in TBP (2004) and Yone in 1984 (2004). These women are unique in their own ways and they become active tools for Kee to deliver his ideological and socio-political stands during the period when he wrote and produced the plays. These women reflect the generation of women today who are fearless, vocal, intelligent, confident and carnivalesque in nature. These carnivalesque women is the embodiment of Bauer’s (1988) theory of feminist dialogics, which states that the women use their feminist voice and power to deconstruct and dismantle “the exclusive community and patriarchal critical discourse” (p. 708). Each of them is intimately connected with the central male characters, but their characters are not entirely dependent or defined by their male counterparts. Their roles have evolved exponentially as Kee employs them as key players in the plays. They are actively involved in determining the direction of the plays as they exploit their intelligence and sexuality to not only liberate themselves from the stigma of a stringent patriarchal society but also to audaciously defy the social, moral and religious dictations and values.

Mawiza an Equa woman is satirically disguised for a Malay/ Muslim. She is painted as a liberal and radical woman who shares the belief and cause of H.O.P.E (an activist group supporting racial integration) as her live-in boyfriend Runid. Just like most of Kee’s women, she too is equipped with her own revolutionary voice and agency. Her liberal ways are unacceptable to the rural society with whom she works and she states that they “were shocked by some of my ideas” (Kee 2004, p. 71). She takes her job seriously to avoid being labelled as ‘a lazy native’, which is a dialogic remark that is immediately recognisable and associated with the Malays. The term was first coined by Syed Hussein Al-Atas in his book *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1966). Mawiza’s remark highlights the notion of Bakhtin’s double-voicedness in that her utterance is multivocal and is influenced by another utterance. The double-voicedness indicates Mawiza’s vision of a progressive Malay who believes in diligence and perseverance as keys to success. Her passion in her job reflects her intention of breaking the stereotypes of the Malays who are commonly or perhaps unfairly perceived as

complacent, indolent and dependent on the ‘crutches’ that are continuously provided by the government. This deliberate act of defiance against the stereotypes towards her race is consistent with the Bakhtinian dialogic utterance as a form of an individual’s consciousness, psyche and ideological stand. The utterance is reflected in one’s way of thinking and speaking, that is by subverting any hierarchies or authority into dialogic words (Morson 1983).

In a controversial attribute that debases tradition, Mawiza openly affirms her cohabitation with her boyfriend Runid, whom she refuses to marry on the basis that “you can’t know a person really well until you live with him” (Kee 2004, p. 72). Being a Muslim, her ignorance of Islamic teachings and the concepts of *halal* and *haram* is outrageously provocative. Religion is problematised by Kee through Mawiza as she associates religion to “extremists” who “should mind their own business” and questions them for not “letting other people be, let them live their own lives” (Kee 2004, p. 70). She is clearly perturbed by “the ultra-type” who she fears might be poisoning Runid’s mind. Her disobedience and prejudiced view towards religion is carnivalesque in nature as it breaks the boundary of conformity that is demanded by authoritative discourse (i.e. religion). Such conformity reduces the individual to an “object of control” by rendering “invalid any codes, conventions, or laws” (Bauer 1988, p. 14). A feminist dialogist would perceive her as a carnival participant who challenges hierarchy by overthrowing its conventions and suspends its discipline of “terror, reverence, piety and etiquette which determine the social order” (Bauer 1988, p. 14). Through Mawiza, Kee problematises religion with a narrow and biased assessment. Religion is perceived as an obstacle that hinders Mawiza’s liberal way of living and thinking. Her liberal lifestyle and refusal to obey Islamic teachings are not brought into question by Kee as Mawiza justifies her wrongdoings by stating, “it’s between me and God” and she is only “answerable to Him” (Kee 2004, p. 79). In today’s society, in which there is a significant increase in the awareness of the need to embrace the teachings of Islam, Mawiza’s controversial portrayal would certainly stir and trigger displeased responses from the audience and the society at large despite the character’s fearlessness in speaking her mind.

Mawiza establishes a newly found friendship with Rong as she empathises with his ordeal. She states that being an Equa does not equate to possessing special privileges. On the contrary, Mawiza claims that both she and Runid have to face their own predicaments by having to “put up with the nationalist extremists, the racial extremists, the religious extremists” but those do not break their spirits as they continue to “carry on as we think we should” (Kee 2004, p. 79). Despite being curbed by authorial control, Mawiza’s insistence to continue living the way she sees fit is in line with feminist dialogics that justifies the dissonant voices in the society in which the dialogics “cohere with a central, dominant ideological stance” (Ruzy Suliza Hashim 2003, p. 59). As Rong further shares his deepest fear by self-proclaiming that he is “just an ordinary, middle-class coward”, Mawiza reassures him that “we’re all ordinary” (Kee 2004, p. 76). Bakhtin terms this as a ‘two-sided act’ which is a product of reciprocated relationship and sharing of territory between an addresser and an addressee (Morson 1983). The collision of Mawiza’s optimism and Rong’s pessimism reflect two heteroglot voices that indicate “socio-ideological contradictions...that intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new typifying language” (Bakhtin 1981, p. 291).

Interspersed within the issues of political turmoil and racial conflict, Kee features one of his most ambiguous and perhaps the strongest femme fatale, Yone in the play 1984 (2004). Her inter-racial romantic relationship with a privileged Party member illustrates the “instability and arbitrary nature of social categories as an effect of the struggle for political dominance” (Lo 2004, p. 95). She is first introduced in the play as she diligently and indiscreetly trails Wiran’s (the protagonist) movement. Her sudden presence is both ambivalent yet intriguing. The way she lurks and follows Wiran is a classic femme fatale

characteristic that foreshadows her ambiguous stand and role in the play. Having been brought up in a harsh and hostile family environment, the experience has shaped Yone's self-positioning and perception towards the polemic issues of race. Her preference to associate and socialise with the Party members angers her narrow-minded and communalistic father. He finds her defiance as dishonouring the family, race and culture. Refusing to continue enduring the abuse from both her father and brother, Yone moves away from home resulting in her being disowned and alienated by her family. Her extraction from home is her attempt to break the cycle of abuse by rejecting the 'racial stereotypes' and defies 'social conventions' that were forced upon her by her family (Lo 2004). She suffers both physical and mental abuse from the men in her family who perceive her as the weaker being, hence to be dominated. She is doubly oppressed by her gender and race. Women are conservatively subordinated to patriarchal communities, hence any act of rebellion against these norms is dismissed. Yone's refusal to be othered and cast out is part of her effort in "unmasking dominant codes" by forcing unspoken repressions into the public eyes, even at the price of making her "vulnerable to interpretation, contradiction and dialogue" (Bauer 1988, p. 11).

Yone's relationship with Wiran a Party member is her ultimate act of defiance in fracturing the conventions of racial discrimination and chauvinism. Being in a vulnerable and perhaps gullible state of mind, Wiran places his confidence and trust in Yone who instantly becomes his pillar of strength and voice of reason. However, their relationship is crushed under Wiran's chauvinistic inquisition of Yone's past relationship. His swift sexist moral judgement reflects similar judgments by her father and brother. Despite being divided by race, the men are "united in positioning women in a subordinate relationship to men" (Lo 2004, p. 98). Such conventional and typical male language and style that resort to profane name calling for any promiscuous woman is an example of authority that Yone needs to resist. She needs to maintain the delicate balance between her own competing voices and the surrounding authoritative discourse in order to conceal her true identity. Furthermore, her femme fatale characteristics are maintained by her flair for mystery. Instead of using her sexuality, Yone seduces Wiran by sharing his passion and ideals in fighting for the Brotherhood movement. Yone's ambivalent character is finally revealed to Wiran by Shahdrin, his former confidant and friend. In a brutal interrogation process, Shahdrin shows him a video of Yone making love to a Prole (a pseudonym for the Chinese as used in the play) man which contradicts what she had confessed before. It is Yone's final act of betrayal towards Wiran and Shahdrin reveals to him that Yone is "one of us" who has "slept with many men, most of the time in the line of duty" (Kee 2004, p. 80).

Like any femme fatale, Yone is subjected to society's judgement as a morally ambiguous and corrupt character who breaks the conventions and stereotypical images of women's purity. Not many acknowledge the idea that being a femme fatale is an act of resistance towards patriarchal values or other forms of societal domination. Bauer and McKinstry (1991) state that resistance does not necessarily mean voicing out in an authoritative and public manner. Instead, in a feminist dialogics reading, Yone's resistance is reflected in her decisions to negotiate, manipulate and subvert systems of domination. The carnivalesque nature of Yone as she ambivalently mocks the authority is evident when she exercises her right to choose being a double agent. This is a demonstration of her strength and courage. The audience is forced to accept Yone's power and strength as a woman as Kee has subverted her promiscuous portrayal into an intelligent act of survival.

CONCLUSION

Kee might not be a proclaimed feminist; however his determination to give his female characters significant voices and agencies is noteworthy. His women are not featured to merely function as fillers without any justified significance. Instead his women are featured to deliver his ideological beliefs and stand. Kee's carnivalesque women brazenly subvert authority and suspend hierarchies, norms, restrictions and barriers that prevent these women from being progressive. Despite facing obstacles, Kee does not allow the voices of his women to be "lost among other competing sounds" (Herndl 1991, p. 20) as he places his complete confidence in them to be part of his ideological tools. The liberated voices of these women signify Kee's prevailing themes in his play such as freedom of expression and the fight against unjust authorial power. As an active revisionist, Kee has transformed and revised the portrayal of women during the feudal times as well as the present time by depicting them as women who transcend the restricting boundaries of patriarchal values. These women boldly break down social barricades whilst expressing their needs and aspirations. In addition, the modern women are depicted as well-educated, refined, and fearless. Kee's women are always in a constant battle to assert their voices and stand against the authority that curbs them. The lenses of feminist dialogics and historical re-visioning therefore aid readers in exploring the representations of the women in Kee's plays as they reclaim their voices and assert their meanings by breaking down societal conventions and mocking the authority.

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