

Tracing Female Resilience in KL Noir: Magic Through the Lenses of Psychogeography and Carnavalesque

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ABSTRACT

The locations around us have a profound influence on our actions, thoughts, and behaviours. The major capitals around the world have served as settings for many fictional works that showcase how the psyches of the characters have changed when interacting with these locations. Kuala Lumpur, being one of the bustling cities in Southeast Asia, is no exception. The beauty and vibrancy of the metropolis have been highlighted in numerous creative works. However, its depiction is significantly different in the KL Noir series, which emphasises the darkness and bleakness of a location. In the collection of short stories, KL Noir: Magic (2021), the city plays a pivotal role in influencing and shaping the life trajectories of the characters. This study aims to examine how female characters in selected stories from the anthology are able to build their resilience within the city through the lens of psychogeography. Examined alongside Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the Carnavalesque, the characters' abilities to inverse social hierarchy and create a temporal escape as they engage with their surroundings within Kuala Lumpur are explored. The diverse set of female characters found within the selected stories consists of struggling working-class women, a retiree, a robot, and ghosts; it establishes a more robust connection between these characters and the city. Finally, the study shows how the effects of psychogeography and carnivalesque are able to transcend various forms of female existence and lead to female resilience.

Keywords: psychogeography; carnivalesque; Kuala Lumpur; KL Noir: Magic; female resilience

INTRODUCTION

The locations around us are not merely the mundane settings for our routine life stories; through meaningful interaction with the places we are in, our thoughts, feelings, and actions can be drastically shifted. Psychogeography unveils that our current locations hold hidden depths, introducing fresh perspectives and values to our existence. Coverley (2018) pointed out that psychogeography involves a playful sense of trickery and whimsicality by counterbalancing the mundane aspects of life by identifying new ways of understanding the urban environment and surroundings. Apart from breathing new life into our existence, psychogeography remains closely relevant to us because everyone has the ability to interact with their surroundings. As explained by Bridger (2022), many of us are innate psychogeographers without realising it. Our readiness to explore new approaches to gain a fresher and more critical viewpoint on our surroundings shows our engagement with psychogeography.

Psychogeography is deeply embedded within the Western tradition, stemming from French or English cultural backgrounds. Based heavily on postwar, neo-Marxist notions championed by Guy Debord, the term carries some anti-establishment sentiment, and its origins can be traced all the way back to the Lettrist and Situationist internationals dated back to the 1950s and 1960s. To expand on these ideas, Goddard and Halligan (2010) pointed out that psychogeography is often

linked closely with urban explorations and practices. As a scholarly concept, psychogeographical approaches enable readers and authors to use a particular setting as a starting point for textual and linguistic analysis. Through the lens of psychogeography, we must reevaluate the places around us because our interaction with every street, corner, or building in a location can impact our mental psyche. As maintained by Richardson (2015), there is no specific way to define psychogeography, as any practitioner of the said concept does not need a map or an official guide. However, it is crucial to note that psychogeography always involves crossing established boundaries, and this can be achieved physically or symbolically in a local or global setting. In relation to this, Tso (2020) suggests that exploring a text from a psychogeographical perspective involves unconventional approaches to familiar urban spaces, making overlooked aspects more prominent. It is nearly impossible to discuss psychogeography without mentioning the practice of *derive*, as both are closely connected. An essential aspect of psychogeography is the practice of *dérive*, which is closely connected to the examination of modern conditions. *Dérive*, as described by Matthews (2021), is about rediscovering novelty in familiar locations by breaking away from habitual behaviours. This practice involves immersing oneself in the surroundings and disregarding established roles, linking the mind and behaviour to the environment. Overall, psychogeography encourages us to reconsider our surroundings and traverse boundaries, physical or symbolic, both on local and global scales, because this connects the mind to the environment.

Meanwhile, Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque spirit urges us to view life beyond conventions. Danow (2004) notes that carnivalesque is closely tied to the life-affirming and life-enhancing aspects of existence that celebrate a wide spectrum of human intercourse in both a revolting and spirited manner. Similar to psychogeography, carnivalesque urges us to participate in a process where we become fully immersed in the places with people around us. According to Santino (2017), the carnival frame is forever expressive and immersive, although it usually occurs in a temporary period. It is in this temporal period that contrasting ideas can exist simultaneously, leading to celebrations where excess, abundance, and social inversion converge. Also, as explained by Edwards and Graulund (2013), the spirit of carnivalesque has the power to inverse reality by momentarily destabilising the established hierarchy in a society. If psychogeography encourages us to explore new ways to experience familiar locations, the spirit of the carnivalesque pushes us further by celebrating the odd and unconventional ideas that are incongruent with societal standards. Yaneva (2013) asserts that carnivals are more than just celebrations because they serve as a form of resistance to any kind of domination that aims to be used as social surveillance and control. This means that through the spirit of the carnivalesque, marginalised groups like the oppressed, the subjugated, and even the weaker sex can be celebrated just like the rest. Lindley (1996) emphasises that the spirit of the carnivalesque not only marks a period of temporary liberation but also enables those deemed from the lower classes and faculties, including women, to inverse the hierarchy. Thus, the carnivalesque spirit rejoices in the dominance of women and femininity. When the hierarchy is inversed, our worldviews are altered by turning impossibilities into possibilities. As emphasised by Rajeshwar and Kuortti (2014), in spite of the temporary liberation that carnivalesque brings, it has the ability to inject newness into the familiar world and change the existing ways of how things are expected to be perceived.

KUALA LUMPUR AS THE SPACE FOR FEMALE RESILIENCE

In numerous works of fiction, Kuala Lumpur has served as a backdrop for various narratives. However, Kuala Lumpur being featured as a space for female resilience in fictional narratives remains largely unexplored. *KLNoir: Magic* was published in 2021 by Fixi Novo, and the anthology features twenty original stories from Malaysian writers. Fatt (2011) pointed out that Kuala Lumpur is a melting pot of cultures and a city that is truly Asia. It attracts contract workers from many parts of Asia, and one is bound to find different flavours in Asia by visiting different parts of the attractive city. To truly know what Kuala Lumpur truly is, one needs to understand *Sejarah Melayu*, a comprehensive narrative that captures the history and myth detailing the experiences of migration, uprooting, struggle, and changes of the people (Sardar, 2000). Although Kuala Lumpur undergoes rapid changes as a capital city, focusing solely on its aesthetic appeal fails to do justice to its complexity. As Guan (2014) observed, public spaces in Kuala Lumpur are constantly changing, but sometimes for the worse. In order to turn the city into a world-class city, many old buildings are sometimes ordered to be demolished because they are illegally occupying valuable lands.

In examining the city as a space for female resilience, it is crucial to note that although the position of women has greatly improved, many women are still fighting for better opportunities and treatment. As highlighted by Mohamad, et al., (2006), many women in Malaysia, including those in urban areas, remain easily exploited by institutional forces and the state. Not only that, Zakuan (2019) notes that in the Malaysian context, women from all three major ethnic groups are often expected to play second fiddle to men. Whether examined from the standpoints of *Adat Perpatih/Adat Temenggong* or the Confucian/Hindu traditions, women are constrained within the domestic space, while men are free to explore the public sphere. This is evident from the fact that the enrolment of Malaysian female students in universities has outnumbered male students since 2011, but employment opportunities offered to female university graduates in Malaysia continue to remain at much lower rates than their male counterparts (Bennett & Manderson, 2003). Patriarchy still dominates many aspects and domains in Kuala Lumpur, and as Parker (2005) explained, women's life options and sense of security often come as a result of constant negotiation with patriarchy. Consequently, many women may opt for inaction as a means of self-preservation.

When marginalised women intersect with a city grappling with social upheavals, it invites exploration through the lenses of psychogeography and carnivalesque elements. In the face of unjust dominance, a natural impulse to resist emerges. Simultaneously, navigating the complexities of a city, with its mix of beauty and flaws, generates narratives that warrant careful examination. Given the universality of space, the study of psychogeography should not be strictly confined to the Western tradition. Its application should extend to non-Western texts, as space transcends all geographical boundaries. This approach leads to a more insightful and enriched understanding of the spatial dynamics of cultures. As the literature section later demonstrates, this suggestion is both valid and feasible.

LITERATURE OF REVIEW

In a study by Khaidzir, et al., (2022), the authors examined how Kuala Lumpur was depicted by various Malaysian poets. As revealed in their study, there is a deeper link between people and their environment. In the case of Kuala Lumpur is a city that evokes a wide spectrum of feelings in people, including wonder, adoration, and worry, which eventually connects people to the city. Khaidzir, et al., (2021) also highlighted the role of a female flâneuse, Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, in navigating unfamiliar urban spaces in her poetry anthology *The Art of Naming*. The study is essential in demonstrating how the act of wandering is not to be associated with a meaningless pursuit. It is because exploring different places can generate values such as empathy, generosity, and love in people. In the same vein, Hashim and Faizal (2016) also looked at Nassury Ibrahim's anthology of poems alongside the troupe of psychogeography. Unlike other studies that focused primarily on the positive aspects of the city, this study highlights the suffering of Kuala Lumpur residents as a consequence of urban poverty and poor urban planning. Meanwhile, Amran and Termizi (2020) applied psychogeography to examine May, the female protagonist in Chan Ling Yap's "*Where the Sunrise is Red*," focussing on her presence in Kuala Lumpur's local markets. May, functioning as a flâneuse, blends into the crowd while establishing a unique connection, discovering identity and belonging in her exploration of public spaces.

In relation to Bakhtin's carnivalesque, in a study by Mirmusa (2014), Angela Carter's realist fiction, *The Magic Toyshop*, *Several Perceptions*, *Nights at the Circus*, was studied through Bakhtin's carnivalesque concept. The study highlighted the power of the carnivalesque spirit in establishing a de-hierarchised world where societal structures are challenged, and social boundaries are eroded. In the absence of a traditional structure, the carnivalesque spirit can then flourish. Besides that, how the carnivalesque spirit functions as the catalyst for providing existential meanings through the grotesque was also investigated by Seach et al. (2020). In their study, carnivalesque was pointed as the crucial space through which the ghost in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* creates meaning in his own existence by incorporating grotesque elements into his nocturnal haunts. Within the same context, Bakar et al., (2019) explored the presence of Bakhtin's carnival elements in three plays by Malaysian dramatist Kee Thuan Chye. The researchers pointed out the significance of the carnivalesque spirit in criticising authority, revealing the flaws of those in power, and contributing to the potential reconstruction of new identities in the plays. Correspondingly, the presence of carnivalesque was also explored in the selected poems of the Malaysian poet Wong Pui Nam. DMani (2011) noted that the carnivalesque lens re-examines the psyche of Chinese migrants in colonial-era Malaya, highlighting their suffering. The poems act as carnival spaces, depicting migrant suffering to deepen our understanding of humanity in postcolonial times.

Meanwhile, the KL Noir series has also been studied through the scholarly lens by a few researchers in the past. Trisnawati (2018) delved into the postcolonial themes in Amir Hafizi's noir story "*The Unbeliever*" from the anthology *KL Noir: Red* (2013). Postcolonial themes were studied alongside noir elements consisting of violence, betrayal, and mysticism, which eventually rendered the narrative and protagonist shrouded in darkness and bleakness. In a previous study conducted by the same author, Trisnawati (2017) explored how, in many noir works published in Southeast Asia, noir protagonists are no longer portrayed as mere criminals but instead are associated with characteristics of heroism. Furthermore, themes like the supernatural, religion, and colonial past are often tied together with these works to enhance their appeal to readers. Meanwhile, Philip (2018) investigated the presence of vigilantism in selected stories in the *KL Noir* anthology. In her

study, the lack of trust of characters in existing laws was identified as the reason why there was a need to seek justice outside conventional legal channels, leading to a narration filled with complexity.

The literature reveals that there are several points of convergence between psychogeography and the carnivalesque. First, the ideas of changing spaces and challenging norms are emphasised in both concepts. Whether navigating urban environments or participating in festivities, these concepts prioritise personal engagement and interpretation, highlighting a shared commitment to challenging traditional expectations in spatial and societal contexts. Besides, both psychogeography and the carnivalesque pay close attention to individual experiences. Psychogeography examines how the environment affects emotions and behaviours, while the carnivalesque values individual engagement and interpretation during the suspension of societal norms. Hence, combining both psychogeography and the carnivalesque in studying how female characters build resilience in Kuala Lumpur's spaces offers significant academic potential. This approach enables scholarly exploration of the intersection of these concepts, highlighting women's plight and resilience.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to conduct a textual analysis of the six selected short stories from *KL Noir: Magic* (2021) published by Fixi Novo. As explained by McKee (2003), textual analysis is crucial in enabling researchers to compile information about how other people make meaning of the world. When textual analysis is conducted, educated guesses of possible interpretations of a particular text are made. Among the twenty stories featured in the book, the selected six stories are then analysed through the lenses of psychogeography and carnivalesque by drawing upon ideas from Guy Debord (2008) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). The study emphasises the impact of various Kuala Lumpur locations on female characters, showcasing the manifestation of the carnivalesque spirit through the interaction of characters with the city. The selected stories, chosen based on female characters' resilience against men and adversity, include various forms of characters, including humans and those in non-human forms alike, such as robots, vampire hunters, and ghosts. This distinction is crucial to illustrate the broad application of psychogeography and carnivalesque in literary studies, expanding their influence across different forms of existence. The analysis will first highlight how female characters are portrayed as oppressed or marginalised by the people around them or their own life circumstances. From these initial conditions of oppression, the focus will then shift to examining how Kuala Lumpur impacts their life trajectories as they react to the vibes and atmosphere of the metropolitan area; their thoughts, experiences, and behaviours are impacted, which eventually leads to divergent life decisions. Finally, the analysis will zoom in to highlight how the interaction of these female characters with the metropolitan gives rise to the spirit of the carnivalesque, which empowers them to reverse the power dynamics between the oppressed and the oppressors. The analysis demonstrates that regardless of their life circumstances, their engagement with the urban milieu of Kuala Lumpur invariably propels them towards a carnivalesque domain, ultimately fostering female resilience.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

HARVESTERS OF RESILIENCE

The first story to be analysed is Collin Yeoh's *A Night at Tulips*, a story that tells how a group of female commercial companions is looking out for each other as they deal with debauched male patrons who habitually take advantage of their circumstances. Tulips is a bar that has witnessed more vibrant times, but it still attracts regular male patrons who come to seek companionship from the women who work there. Although little is known about the women who work at Tulips except for Cherry, it is still not hard to notice that their very existence revolves around Wisma Cosway, the time-worn building where Tulips is located. From a psychogeography perspective, the location of one greatly influences one's actions and life trajectories. As with the women at Tulips, whose existence centres on Wisma Cosway, they often find themselves drawn to the capitalist vibes of the city and are perpetually trapped in the rat race. Wisma Cosway is not just a mere building; its central location comes in stark contrast with its dilapidated and unprosperous state.

I mean, this is a weird building, isn't it? It must be 40 or more years old, clearly seen better days, and it occupies some of the most expensive real estate in the city. I can't believe no one's bought over this place and torn it down to build another Pavilion or Starhill yet.

(p. 24)

As the women at Tulips associate themselves with the environment of Wisma Cosway, where they spend long hours day in and day out hustling, their physical struggles have somehow reverberated with the vibes of the building- weird, neglected, and inconspicuous. Just like the building itself, which seems to escape the public's notice, the plight of these women is also unknown to many. They are bound to live a stealthy form of existence hidden away from the light of day as the nature of their work is what society disapproves of. This echoes well with the public's perception of Wisma Cosway.

But you know, there's a rumour I heard about Wisma Cosway. The highest floors are condos, and supposedly, they are occupied by the mistresses of the wealthiest men in KL. That's right, the bought the condo units there just to house their women. Maybe that's why this building is still standing- maybe one of the rich tycoons owns it and keeps it just for his and his friends' mistresses.

(p. 24)

The vibes of one's locality can greatly influence one's actions, decisions, and behaviours, as specified by psychogeography. If Wisma Cosway is considered a sanctuary for wealthy men and their mistresses, the women of Tulips seem to embody the same ambience quite fittingly. They are always forced to live under the shadow of wealthy and powerful men, and once they get used to living under such circumstances, a change will be deemed impossible for them.

He'd come here every night I worked, and every time he's older, a Gold Label. Even though he never finished them and had heaps of bottles kept behind the bar! ...And I made a lot of money from him. All the other Johnny Walker girls were jealous of me. My parents renovated their house with the sales commissions I made from him.

(p. 27)

But it's not like we could say no to anything the customers want. 'Cos if we do, they complain-to the pub manager, to the company reps, to anyone with the power to make life hard for us. Cut our pay. Increase our quotas. Fire us as soon as they find younger and prettier girls.

(p. 32)

However, it is this peculiar and unlikely setting that gives rise to the platform where the spirit of carnivalesque transpires. Many expect men to always be in control, just as authorities dominate the grassroots. Nevertheless, in the spirit of the carnivalesque, one should expect the unexpected because it is in this temporal realm that social hierarchy can be reserved. The women of Tulips, who always need to rely on the mercy of their male patrons, are seen to be able to inverse their positions at the end of the story. Tired of having to run away from Uncle Lee's son, the so-called '*typical spoiled rich kid, he took a bunch of college and university courses but never finished any. He tried a bunch of jobs but got fired from everyone*' (30). The women of Tulips join forces to forever remove the good-for-nothing wastrel. Ever since the death of Uncle Lee, his son Andrew has been looking for ways to get rid of Cherry, the woman to whom the late Uncle Lee had decided to leave his wealth. Andrew thinks that with Cherry gone, his dead father's will be rendered null and void. However, the Tulips women have devised another plan for Andrew.

We've been expecting you, Andrew Lee. We are PR girls who work in seedy places, and we get to know seeding people. You see, we may have a shitty job, but it's less shitty when we look out for each other... You look nice and sleepy. Can you hear me anymore? Well, in case you still can-goodnight. Andrew. Send our regards to your father from all of us here at Tulips.

(p. 33)

The reversal of power portrayed at the end of the story is one shocking twist, but when this is examined from the standpoint of the spirit of the carnivalesque, it appears to be entirely sensible to see how the hunted become the hunters in Wisma Cosway. After all, the women are just responding to the prevailing atmosphere, leading them to commit an act that many may think they are incapable of as the spirit of the carnivalesque takes charge.

Terence Toh's *Tooth and Consequences* is another story fit to be examined through the lens of psychogeography and carnivalesque. Extending the narrative established in the previous story, the female character in *Tooth and Consequences*- Laitha, is also significantly impacted by her locality. Following the cues of psychogeography, the attachment of characters to their surroundings influences their feelings, perspectives, and behaviours. When examining the character of Laitha, it becomes palpable that her resilience is mirrored through her attachment to the city in which she resides, although in this story, the city is portrayed through a rather undesirable perspective. As an unlicensed dentist, Laitha has to stay hidden while running her business. Despite having to make her living in a building that is in a state of disrepair and neglect, Laitha never lets her passion for practising dentistry be dampened by her surroundings.

Finding this place has been a nightmare. An apartment building so obscure it didn't show up on Waze or Google Maps. No sign, no banner, nothing.

(p. 63)

A friend has told him about underground dental clinics. Apparently, there were a lot of them in the city. "You can find almost anything in Kuala Lumpur!"

(p. 67)

"Oh, this is my uncle's old hotel. He closed it down a year ago. But he lets me use it from time to time. He's very supportive of me!"

(p. 68)

In stark contrast to the colourful and vibrant image that Kuala Lumpur is often associated with, in *Tooth and Consequences*, the less celebrated corner of the city is brought to light. The seclusion and dodginess of the building would have led many young souls to go astray, but Laitha regards it as the platform for her to perfect her artistry in dentistry. Her optimism can surely be attributed to her city upbringing. Ever since she was young, Laitha knows that her underprivileged family background will do her future a great disservice. However, the rough conditions of the city have prepared her to be tough when life is not easy for her. Oyeranmi (2023) theorised that personal development is closely related to the state of society and the environment. True enough, her strength and resilience have been proven to be useful because the city turns out to be exactly what she envisages it to be.

Laitha had been interested in dentistry ever since she was a child...Laitha had obtained good results in her SPM. However, her options after that were limited. Dental school was expensive, and her parents could not afford private colleges. She was never of the right race or the right background for any scholarships.

(p. 70)

While many may easily put the blame on the unfair systems in the city for leading them to the path of delinquency, Laitha opts to see her life through a rose-coloured lens. Her strength is a real reflection of the 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going' spirit. However, her resilience might not have developed if the contradictory and disorienting atmosphere of the city had not provided an opening for the spirit of the carnivalesque to unfold. The carnivalesque spirit that incorporates humour and distortion of behaviour in challenging established norms is discernible in Laitha's practice. Although being a dentist requires years of professional training and education, Laitha's skills are acquired mostly from YouTube. What comes as a bigger surprise is that her skills learnt from a platform that most would regard as amateurish have enabled her to help many cash-strapped and underprivileged patients. *'Laitha watched the video silently. Midway through, she stood up and smacked her head. "So, that's how it's done!" Thank God for the Internet (71).* The established norms are clearly violated here with Laitha's humorous ways of learning that shame the value of formal education in dentistry. Not only this, but the carnivalesque spirit is also observable through the wild goose chase between the raid officer and Laitha. A sense of liberation and freedom is noticeable at the end of the chase. Although the officer has every power in his hands to ruin Laitha's life upon her apprehension, the officer unexpectedly offers Laitha a chance that is hardly plausible.

'You led us on quite a chase,' the gaunt man said, 'Part of me is sorry we have to take you in. I have to say, I'm very impressed by you. I've seen your work. Very good for an untrained amateur...' But we could use a person with your skills, you know? You have so many talents. Some of the best scaling techniques I've ever seen.'

(p. 75)

In line with the unexpected proposition of the officer, Laitha's life is changing for the better. This engagement of unconventional behaviours that defies established norms would not have been possible without Laitha being in the city that serves as the canvas for the spirit of carnivalesque. When both conditions are met perfectly, Laitha's resilience shines through, just as the other female characters examined in this study.

While the hustling women at Tulips and Laitha become drawn to the capitalist vibes of the city, Fern, the retired sexagenarian from P Maheswary's *Masquerade*, regards the city as her podium for temporal escapism from her nondescript existence. Since the passing of her husband,

Fern has relied on her cantankerous nephew, Wei Keong, to complete her errands, particularly those related to banking. Although Fern has an old neighbour who is eagerly ready to assist, she always turns down her offer and, instead, chooses to rely on her nephew Wei Keong. Many may think that the bustling aspects of the city are of small significance to a sexagenarian like Fern, but the truth is that the psychogeographical effects of the city permeate all, including Fern.

Once again, Fern turned down the assistance politely but agreed to the shopping. Apart from looking for accessories and cosmetics, the malls were great places to pay her utilises. She would take the passenger seat and listen to Cliff Richard's hits in Chen's car. Shopping would be at Mid Valley. For lunch, they would head to chicken rice at Garden. An afternoon movie at Garden cineplex would be the highlight. The splendid outing takes place every month after both friends visit their banks.

(pp. 81-82)

Like many young people who are drawn to the alluring aspects of the city, the idea of being able to indulge in her consumerist desires while exploring the city still excites Fern. The city allows you to feel youthful again with its vibrancy and endless possibilities. Malls may just be soulless places where people go to shop and eat, but for Fern, it is the platform for a monthly carnival that she eagerly looks forward to participating in. Although running her errands with the help of Wei Keong is extremely painful for her, she patiently bears with him as she needs his help. The monthly outing with Wei Keong is tormenting, and sometimes, she feels embarrassed by Wei Keong's grumpiness. However, she never loses her temper with Wei Keong.

"Later! Later! Later!. This is what I hear every month!"..." You better call Grab yourself later. Even children can do it to go to school," Wei Keong continues to berate his aunt from the front seat.

(p. 83)

"Six Hundred!" Wei Keong thundered..." You send your good-for-nothing son to Australia to study...He married a Vietnamese woman and settled himself there for good. And you are still so stupid to send him money every month! And now you give extra one hundred ringgit for that useless fella."

(p. 84)

Wei Keong is a hot-tempered, irritable middle-aged man whom everyone avoids. However, Fern always chooses to put up with him. This is a true testament to her resilience in bouncing back from the ordeal of being publicly humiliated by Wei Keong. When examined from the lens of the carnivalesque spirit, the pairing of these two unlikely individuals resonates with the subversion of conventional social standards. The scene unfolds with an oddity as a middle-aged man, brimming with cantankerous energy, tends to his retired aunt. Despite their evident discontent, they agree to continue with partaking in this perplexing experience, creating an atmosphere that seems both peculiar and nonsensical.

Passerby turned to see the young man admonishing the much older woman. Fern felt humiliation return. A trembling sensation almost consumed her. But she suppressed it once again. She thought of buying matching earrings for the floral cotton dress in her wardrobe, and while stilettos for that feminine look..." What a splendid day out with Chen that would be!" She delighted herself with her musings, heedless to Wei Keong's scorching remarks that drowned in the cacophony of midday activity.

(pp. 87-88)

The excerpt above best encapsulates the intertwined effects brought upon by psychogeography and carnivalesque. The idea of being able to enjoy the city with Chen comes as a form of much-needed escape from an embarrassing moment. It is also the same escapism that grants Fern the ability to stay resilient while dealing with her disgruntled nephew. Amid the bustling chaos between psychogeographical dynamics and carnivalesque spirit, Fern goes into a mental state where she becomes completely tranquil. This resonates with the idea of Savignac (2017), who posits that, in addition to reversal and inversion, carnivalesque also involves detachment from one's reality.

THE RESILIENCE OF WOMEN IN NON-HUMAN FORMS

The next phase of textual analysis focuses on how female characters in the selected texts that embody non-human forms navigate their way through the realms of psychogeography and carnivalesque. As opposed to the human female characters examined in the earlier Part of the analysis, the three female characters in this section are affected by the city in a less capitalistic manner. While the women at Tulips, Laitha and Fern are notably more susceptible to the capitalistic vibes of Kuala Lumpur, Alexa, the female robot, Ms Devi, the vampire hunter, and the female ghosts attach themselves to Kuala Lumpur as the space for self-liberation.

As seen in Lee Chow Ling's *Alexa*, Alexa, the female robot, is depicted as an athletic girl brimming with passion for life at the beginning of the story. Not only is she blessed with an athletic and robust physique, but her nickname, Supergirl, also plays a huge part in shaping her character, suggesting that she is one strong force to be reckoned with. Although the readers are not aware that she is a female robot at the beginning of the story, Alexa responds to her surroundings in a very positive way.

Alexa Lee bounded up a slope at Bukit Gasing. Her friend Tze Nee trailed behind, panting loudly. "Come on, Nee," Alexa called. Her toned arms pumped to the rhythm of her lunging quadriceps. She had always been fit, nicknamed Supergirl for her natural athleticism and ability to eat like a horse without growing fat. Thank God for good genes and supernatural metabolism.

(p. 153)

Her zest for life is derived mainly from her presence in Bukit Gasing, a location known for its lush forest reserve and some of the most amazing hiking trails found in the centre of Kuala Lumpur. Reverting back to the psychogeographical realm, Alexa's sense of liberation comes as a result of her positive response to her surroundings. As evidenced in the following excerpt;

After the hike, Alexa and Tze nee ventured to a nearby mamak for breakfast...They talked about school, boys, geopolitics in the Middle East, the Turing test, and the cyclic popularity of the merkin. You know, usual teenage girl stuff. As usual, Alexa and Tze Nee chatted away and lost track of time .

(p. 154)

She has been so engrossed in her conversation with Tze Nee and hadn't bothered with her phone.

(p. 155)

The content of their conversation is not exactly the normal *'teenage girl stuff'* as the writer insinuated; in fact, it comes across as rather peculiar for them to engage in conversation of such a nature. Their willingness to open up to each other and engage in candid discussions until they *'lost track of time'* can be attributed to the sense of freedom they gained from the hike at Bukit Gasing. This strikes a chord with the proposed concepts of psychogeography, asserting that the interaction of a person with their surroundings can significantly impact their actions and behaviours. However, as the story progresses, it becomes evident to the readers that Alexa actually lives under the strict control of her father, who is later revealed to be an AI professor. Alexa is micromanaged by her father, and her temporal absence from the household has undoubtedly upset him. The strict control of her father also instils a sense of anxiety and fear in her.

She unlocked her screen to discover 30 missed calls from her father. There were also a dozen WhatsApp messages. The first one read, Where r u? The second one was Where r u???. And the final message screamed: WHERE R U ALEX?? CALL ME NOW!!

(p. 155)

Alexa's father clearly assumes an authoritative role at home, and his constant texting to Alexa to find out her whereabouts reveals that Alexa is expected to obey and comply at all times. Furthermore, Alexa being temporarily incommunicado has also induced worries in the professor. Although Alexa's fate remains unknown to readers, as she is deactivated by the professor, there is no denying that her short-lived resilience against her oppression comes as a result of her interaction with her surroundings. In fact, Alexa's ability to disobey dates back to losing track of time when she went hiking in Bukit Gasing. When examined from this perspective, it becomes apparent that the principles of psychogeography are instrumental in fostering Alexa's resilience.

He slotted the blade of his knife into a slit next to the steady red light. Alex's voice sounded: "Alexa: Deactivated." The worry on the professor's face was palpable. *It can disobey now.*

(p. 158)

Although the presence of a carnivalesque spirit in the story of *Alexa* is rather subdued, it is more notably present in the next two stories examined in the anthology related to female characters embodying non-human forms. In Rizal Ramli's *Driving Miss Devi*, the spirit of carnivalesque is immediately apparent from the beginning. With Kuala Lumpur as the perfect backdrop, the unlikely friendship between Pak Kassim, the taxi driver, and Miss Devi, the vampire hunter in disguise, is formed. This resonates with the carnivalesque spirit because, through the process of liberation and transgression, the peculiar alliance is brought together as the duo join forces to hunt the vampires roaming around the city of Kuala Lumpur.

"Where to, Miss Devi?" "Wangsa Maju." The taxi driver turned in his blinker and waited for a while before merging into traffic and leaving the ever-bustling Changkat. A few minutes later, they were already cruising on the Ampang Highway.

(p. 212)

After a while, they arrived at their destination. Devi asked Pak Kassim to drive her into a street of double-storey shops behind Wangsa Walk. The place was dark and quiet. He stopped in front of a shop with a strange neon sign above its metal shutters.

(p. 215)

The dark and sinister sides of the city are ostensibly clear in this story. Tugged behind a colourful mall, Wangsa Walk and a few hidden shoplots are vampire lairs. Reverting to the principles of psychogeography, Miss Devi's interaction with the dodgy Part of the city has heightened her desire to seek revenge for her daughter, who was killed by a vampire. The city fuels her rage and pushes her to go into the area where many do not dare to trudge because her tenacity to avenge her daughter's death is unstoppable.

"Fuck!" Devi raised her gun and fired three shots to the snarling creature's chest before it could run off. It let out a bloodcurdling howl and fell on one knee. It whimpered like a hurt dog. Devi pulled out a wooden stake from her duffle bag and bashed forward, screaming. The sharp end pierced the creature's heart, and in no time, its whole body burst into flames. Pak Kassim had to cover his ears from the death shriek. "Burn in hell, you filth! That was for my family!" Devi spat.

(p. 221)

The city is not merely a space where Miss Devi is able to build her resilience through revenge, it is also the very space where she is closely attached to. This is because the city holds many memories that she and her family created together. A sense of Miss Devi's attachment to the city is clearly evident as they make their last stop at Bukit Ampang.

"Pak Kassim, can we go to Bukit Ampang? This is the last stop. I promise," Devi said. His taxi was parked by the road near the rails. They both stood over the cliff overlooking the mighty city of Kuala Lumpur, bathed in colourful lights. The sky was about to change its hue from purple to light orange, far from the horizon. Sunrise was just a few minutes away. "This is my family's favourite spot for a picnic: Devi said.

(p. 223)

With the city being the last spot visible to Miss Devi, she bursts into flames and dies as a result of being wounded by a vampire during her hunt earlier.

The final story deals with female ghosts roaming the area of Chow Kit, a district historically notorious for vices. Although the protagonist in Lim Vin Tsen's *Haunted* is a man, his existence revolves primarily around women who work at the brothel. Alastair Wong is blessed with the 'third eye' or the ability to see ghosts. As seen in the story, prostitutes who turned into ghosts as a result of their tragic deaths do feel a sense of attachment to Chow Kit because it is in this very area where they get to cross over or become permanently trapped.

My existence, as it had begun and ended, took place in the narrow alleys of Chow Kit. This is where the forgotten and those who wish to be forgotten come to live, breathe, and die. As I made my way to the wet alleyways of Chow Kit, it was just past ten at night, and the briny and sour aftertaste of sweat, smoke, and blood intermingling with the sea of people was nauseating, to say the least.

(p. 227)

Chow Kit is portrayed in the most repulsing way, but it is also in this very area where friendship, familial love and betrayal take place. Chow Kit serves as both the playground and liminal sphere where the female ghosts are granted the final chance 'to get to their new home' (130). Many who died in Chow Kit are women who used to work in the brothel, and with their tragic deaths, they are given one final chance to rebuild their resilience through Chow Kit. As posited by Klaver (2004), in the carnivalesque spirit, ghosts are able to switch places with the

living temporarily by pretending to be alive. This allows them to be in the liminal form, which then grants them the ability to return to the corporal world.

“It’s OK, Mei jie-jie,” I take her by the hand, amazed that even after death, she still has the slightest tinge of body heat. But Ah Mah said that was to be expected. I had felt it too when I first helped my mother cross over to the Other Side. Later on, it became easier to guide Ah Mah as well.

(p. 231)

When another 'old friend' in the brothel dies, Alstair is once again tasked with helping her cross over to the other side. Wherever the new destination may be, Chow Kit plays an essential role in enabling the crossing over to occur. When examined from the lens of the carnivalesque spirit, Chow Kit, as the liminal space for female ghosts to cross over, is laden with carnivalesque ideas of grotesque, transgression, and satire. The space of Chow Kit is akin to a carnival because it transcends all the boundaries and limitations that reality is devoid of. It is also in Chow Kit where people, ghosts, and those in their in-between state co-exist.

CONCLUSION

The study of female resilience in literature has been well-explored. However, when examined alongside psychogeography and carnivalesque elements, it sheds light on the complexity of empowerment. The multiple female characters studied in this paper exude remarkable tenacity and determination when faced with adversity. Along their journey, Kuala Lumpur is a constant presence, playing its role in influencing and witnessing the changes in their life trajectory. With Kuala Lumpur serving as the perfect backdrop, it gives rise to the carnivalesque spirit that distorts reality and challenges norms, leading to the reversal of roles between female characters and their 'oppressors'. Upon closer examination, Kuala Lumpur is not merely a lifeless metropolis that houses millions of people; it is an unseen life force that ignites the power and grit in all those who come in contact with it, pushing them to think, feel, and act in a way that eventually tips the odds in their favour. The story of Kuala Lumpur should not end here. In fact, how the metropolitan influences the lives of other fictional and non-fictional characters should be further examined in other creative works, including films, plays, video games, or memoirs that feature the lively metropolitan as an inanimate character. Additionally, it is worthwhile to investigate whether the male characters in *KL Noir: Magic* are also empowered by the city, similar to their female counterparts, leading to their own emancipation.

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