ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 55 No. 3–4 Pages 157–185

(Im)Possibilities of Development: Women and the Paradox of Growth in the Malaysian Novel

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Abstract: Though women figure prominently in the discourses of postcolonial nations that concern development, these discourses position women in a way that vacillates between tradition, which needs to be preserved, and modernization, essential for "catching up" to the developed or so-called first world. This article approaches the ambivalence surrounding the question of women and development through the lens of literature. It turns to two turn-of-the-century novels, Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* (1994) and Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998), to problematize the depiction of the "Third World" woman and development in colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. The article explores the coloniality embedded within narratives of growth of the women protagonists against the backdrop of the developing nation—and highlights when the conditions for women underwent far-reaching changes, for instance, at the end of colonial rule, when women became a part of an independent social and political nation, and persistent structures of marginalization and discrimination resulted in decreased opportunities for women. The article's focus on Malaysian Chinese writers foregrounds the colonial constructions of race and gender that Malaysia inherited from the colonizers, which continues to shape the lives of postcolonial subjects. The two novels provide a glimpse of the problems underlying the developmental agendas in postcolonial nations and call for a shift in the understanding of development—from a prescriptive sense of "how it should be for the third-world women" to a consideration of national and global frameworks of development that limit the choices and agency of women.

Keywords: women, development, coloniality, postcolonial nations, Malaysia

> While women [a]re now in more positions of power and even able to pilot a fighter jet plane, they should not neglect their role as mothers and educators to their children or else in [sic] could lead to social problem.
>
> Mahathir Mohammad, qtd. in Chong

On Malaysia Women's Day in 2002, Mahathir Mohammad, Malaysia's longest serving prime minister, expressed one of the central dilemmas surrounding the question of women and development in postcolonial nations. While the vision of a developed nation rests on the image of a free, empowered woman, Mahathir argues that women are supposed to ensure social and cultural continuity. They are the carriers of tradition, particularly if one considers setbacks like the breakdown of traditional social structures and erasure of Indigenous culture and knowledge systems during the colonial era. In the face of these setbacks, women, especially mothers, become a conduit for traditional values and ways of life. So although women figure prominently in the developmental discourses of postcolonial nations, these discourses position women between tradition, which needs to be preserved, and modernization, which is essential for "catching up" with the developed or so-called first world.

This article approaches the ambivalence surrounding the question of women and development through the lens of literature, particularly fiction. Fiction, as David Lewis, Denis Rodgers, and Michael Woolcock argue, offers "new insights and novel perspectives" on issues of development (4); fictional accounts reveal "different sides to the experience of development . . . and may sometimes actually do a 'better' job in conveying complex understandings of development in certain respects" (10). In other words, Lewis, Rodgers, and Woolcock insist on the potential of literature to present the nuanced realities of development since the "worldliness" of a text (to use Edward Said's term [35–36]), or its links

to the world from which it originates, explicate the deeper structures of that world and society—in this case, postcolonial developing nations. This article will explore the connection between development and the depiction of women's experiences in two novels during three important phases in Malaysia's development: first, the changes wrought by British colonialism to the sociocultural and economic structures of Malaya and their implications for colonial subjects, particularly women. Underpinned by Western structures of knowledge, economic practices, and ways of living, these changes were characterized by the colonial administration as fostering development. The next phase occurred during the period of post-independence nation-building, when anticolonial ideologies supported socioeconomic reform. These ideologies shaped the policies and agendas in the new postcolonial nations like Malaysia, with a strong welfare bias. However, as is evident from Mahathir's words above, newly postcolonial nations were ambivalent about the role of women because of the tussle between tradition and modernity.[1] This tension was further aggravated in the third phase of state-led developmental capitalism and neoliberalism that postcolonial nations embraced in the latter part of the twentieth century. These stages characterize the major turning points in the developmental history of postcolonial Asian nations, including Malaysia.[2] While the impact of national development on women in each of these phases is well-documented in social, economic, and political research, I revisit the portrayal of these phases in literary texts by Malaysian women writers in order to draw out the connections and continuities in the narratives of development vis-à-vis women and the persistence of factors that problematize agendas of development. This article turns to two turn-of-the-century novels, Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* (1994) and Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998), to examine their representations of women and development and the position of women contra development in colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. The two novels are set against the backdrop of the developmental history of the nation. This article explores these narratives of growth, highlighting when women's position changed and how the nation's developmental agendas often failed them.

A focus on literary texts humanizes development and reveals its messiness. In the case of Malaysian women's literature, it also reveals the intersection between gender, race, and ethnicity that has shaped Malaysian socioeconomic policies. This intersectionality, as I discuss below, underlies the dilemmas of gender and development in the country. The stories not only reveal the persistence of older links between gender, ethnicity, and development but also show the way that women, despite the efforts made by women's movements, egalitarian discourses, and governmental and non-governmental players, are trapped by the gendered dynamics of colonial and neocolonial structures. These stories, therefore, reveal the coloniality[3] embedded in discourses of development, especially in relation to women; they also foreground the discourse of race and gender that Malaysia inherited from its colonizers and that continues to shape the lives of postcolonial subjects. Since women bear the burden of carrying generational and sociocultural continuities, relationships between women—mothers, daughters, grand-daughters—become a site in which intersections of race, gender, and ethnicities are formed and ruptured. The stories of mothers and daughters in the two novels are marked by colonial constructions of race and gender that intertwine the disparate elements of their subject positions as Malaysian, ethnic Chinese, and women.

I. Women and the History of Development

Development encapsulates assumptions about progress and growth; it is an individual and a collective imperative. Hence, development seems natural and unidirectional: to develop means to improve or move towards the betterment of the existing state. Tony Barnett sees "development" as "a science which could bring about order in this suddenly changing and confusing world" (5). Noted economist Amartya Sen construes development in economic terms as a shift towards equity or the improvement of one's economic prospects. Development, for Sen, gives rise to political freedoms, transparency, freedom of opportunity, and protection from poverty and unemployment (1).

It is important to outline the trajectories of postcolonial development I mention above—colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal. For the early

administrators of the British Empire, development and the colonial enterprise were closely related. Malaya underwent rapid economic growth during the colonial era, and the colony emerged as a chief exporter of tin, rubber, and other important commodities. Frank Swettenham, Malaysia's British Resident General at the turn of the twentieth century, summed up his achievements in building roads, schools, telegraph wires, and post offices:

> I have no desire to enlarge on the greatness of their gain, but it is evident enough to those few who knew the Peninsula then and can see it now. . . . It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the position of all classes of Malay society and all individuals has been bettered. . . . [I]n the administration of a Malay State, revenue and prosperity follow the liberal but prudently directed expenditure of public funds, especially when they are invested in high-class roads, in railways, telegraphs, waterworks, and *everything likely to encourage trade and private enterprise*. (293–94; emphasis added)

The last line illustrates the colonial agenda of development. Public funds were carefully allocated for the improvement of roads, railways, and communication technologies to facilitate trade and private enterprise to extract wealth from the colony. Swettenham equates this with the comprehensive development of the region. Yet the incomes of most of the non-European inhabitants of the tropical colonies remained pitifully small and their standard of living abysmal (Havinden and Meredith 114).

What was the position of women within this developmental agenda? Scholars point out the discursive construction of colonial women as victims of tradition (Parpart 262–63) or as sex objects.[4] Women have also been confined to the private sphere by a repressively patriarchal society (Chowdhry 27–28). These constructions are evident in Swettenham's short stories "A Nocturne" and "A Malay Romance," which portray colonized women's lasciviousness as the cause of jealousy and violence amongst the men. Thus, "Third World women are discursively created, separate and distant from the historical, socio-political, and lived material realities of their existence. They [colonial discourses and liberal

feminist scholarship] share the implicit assumption that Third World women are traditional and non-liberated and need to be 'civilized' and 'developed,' i.e. more like Western women" (Chowdhry 28).

This "Third World woman," in a colonial depiction, is not a socioeconomic actor. Ester Boserup's 1970s study of Southeast Asian agrarian economies debunks this depiction by focusing on the participation of women in the economic activities of agrarian societies. Boserup argues that the gendered division of labour along the public/private axis developed in the advanced societies of the west. With British colonization of the region, this division of work came to shape labour policies in the colonies (43–4); ultimately, this ideological discourse reshaped colonial societies along gendered and racial axes (135).[5] Along with Boserup, Margaret Bocquet-Siek, Sharon M. Lee, Mahnaz Mohamad, and others note the presence of women in the economic spheres of precolonial and colonial Malaya. A substantial number of Indian and Chinese women had migrated to Malaya by the 1920s. Women worked in the plantations and mines (Lee 317) and also engaged in prostitution and domestic labour (319). These types of labour are seldom mentioned in economic accounts of British Malaya, even though women made up almost one-fifth of the total labour force of Malaya in 1931 (324). Women's work was commonly confined to roles related to tradition (mother or wife, ayah or amah) or gender (prostitution, domestic servitude). Women were considered unskilled laborers when working in in mines and plantations; higher-paid positions were fulfilled by men. Hence, the contribution of colonial women was largely ignored in the development of British Malaya.

The image of colonized women "as the hapless victims of endless pregnancies, bowed down by poor health, illiteracy and poverty" persisted from the colonial to the postcolonial era, and even into the neoliberal global world order (Chowdhry 33). This production of the "Third World woman" at the intersection of gender and racial hierarchies is constituted by the "coloniality of power," which, as Anibal Quijano points out, classified "the world population around the idea of race" (533): the hierarchy of races justified and served colonial capitalism whereby "inferior" races were enslaved or indentured[6] by "superior" ones. Maria Lugones

integrates the concept of the "coloniality of power," which is characterized by racial hierarchies, with the colonial operations of gender. Lugones points out the way that colonial constructions of gender normalized heterosexual patriarchal relations as represented in the image of a white bourgeoisie family ("Heterosexualism" 206). This "colonial, modern gender system" ("Heterosexualism" 202) not only deemed the colonial woman inferior but also fixed, controlled, and turned the "Third World" women into "various versions of 'women'" (from concubine to surplus labourer) because such a strategy "fit the processes of Eurocentered global capitalism" (Lugones, "Coloniality" 13). According to Lugones, this "colonial, modern, gender system" foregrounds standardized images of women. Its "light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonically, ordering the lives of white bourgeois men and women and constituting the modern/colonial meaning of men and women" (Lugones, "Heterosexualism" 206). "The 'dark' side of the gender system was and is thoroughly violent," she writes ("Coloniality" 32). Colonial women, written out of such a gender norm, were "violently inferiorized" (27) and reduced "to animality, to forced sex with white colonizers, to such deep labor exploitation that often people died working" (32). Hence, a woman could be represented as anything from the lascivious woman in Swettenham's stories to a concubine or a domestic helper, or, in the postcolonial globalized world, a skilled, well-paid employee, as long as the role suits Eurocentric global capitalism. However, the perception of her difference (from the racial and gendered ideal) always lies near the surface. Liberal feminist ideals of empowerment rest on this paradox: they present desirable images of egalitarian gender relations that are racially coded and elide the complexities of race and gender in the colonial world.[7]

In post-independence Malaysia, projects related to women and development remained burdened with the baggage of colonial modernity. Despite embracing certain modern institutions like mass education and women's participation in the social, economic, and political spheres, Mohamad notes an air of moral suspicion about the dangers of westernization that underpinned the ideas about women, development, and modernity (90–91). Moreover, the colonial legacy of ethnic conflicts[8]

aggravated the problem, and barriers between races and ethnicities in post-independence Malaysia foreclosed the possibility of a collective feminist movement. Liberal democracy was installed alongside the traditional authority of the Malay Sultanate; Islamic laws co-existed alongside secular civil laws. This duality was the origin and basis of the ethnic dominance of the Malays in the political sphere (Mohamad 83). In this scenario, although the anticolonial movement had spurred debates on women's empowerment, "race-based consciousness impeded any coming together of multicultural women" (84). Violent ethnic clashes between the Malays and Chinese in May 1969 led to the implementation of the economic and cultural policy that favoured ethnic Malays over other individuals of other races and ethnicities living in Malaysia. According to Mohamad, Chinese and Indian Malaysians

> became driven by self-seeking economic interests rather than by wider political goals, which were becoming elusive and practically unobtainable. Whatever dissent or sense of dejection they had over the legitimacy of the state gradually transmuted into an instrumentalist acceptance of what the state was able to offer in the form of economic gains and expedient notions of cultural "freedoms" (88).

Malaysia's flirtations with neoliberal development in the late twentieth century were characterized by this "instrumentalist acceptance" of hyperethnicized state policies.[9] Ethnic divides confined the collective feminist movement to universal issues like violence against women (Mohamad 90). As Malaysia entered a phase of rapid development in the late twentieth century, dissent—whether along the lines of gender or race—was silenced by the tightening of civil liberties and overridden by a wave of foreign investment and industrialization, resulting in a pragmatic acceptance of economic gains at the cost of social and cultural freedoms. The adoption of neoliberal tenets during this phase promised to quickly transform the country into a developed nation. Maila Stivens claims that this paradigm of development had mixed results for women. While it freed women from their domestic confines and roles of wives, mothers, or caregivers, it also intensified gender inequalities; decreased

women's social security continues to underwrite postcolonial development and limit women. By presenting the experiences of Malaysian Chinese women, the two novels place racial and sexual others at the center of the story of Malaysia's development. As I have argued elsewhere, their memories problematize linear narratives of Malaysian history and progress (Saxena, "Carnivalesque" 37–38). Following Jini Kim Watson's examination of the Southeast Asia's "postcolonial development paths" (4), I turn to the stories of Malaysian Chinese women to examine the way their engagement with Malaysia's development is complicated by the persistence of colonial constructions of gender and race. Living in a modern developing Malaysia and seemingly independent, the two protagonists present new forms of subalternity in the globalizing world: their subaltern subjectivity is "no longer cut off from lines of access to the center" (Spivak, "The New Subaltern" 326), yet they are unable to break free of "the long-standing patterns of prejudice" (333).

II. Echoes of History

Echoes of Silence, subtitled *A Malaysian Novel*, claims to be the story of the nation. Underlying its whodunnit plot are deliberations over the ethnic politics of Malaysia, developmental changes—including the country's economic rise, urban development, infrastructural changes, and improvement in wages and standards of living—and the place and role of Malaysian women caught amid these changes. The novel begins with Ah Lian, a middle-aged Malaysian Chinese woman returning to Malaysia two decades after leaving it in the wake of the May 1969 riots. Disillusioned by the racial violence and its political consequences, Ah Lian used her inheritance to leave Malaysia. Her newfound and accidental wealth came from Grandmother Lim, a bondmaid to Grandfather Lim. Grandmother Lim was freed only when the Lim family fell into hard times during the tin slump of the 1930s. Towards the end of her life, estranged from her son and family, Grandmother Lim raised piglets and sold vegetables in a remote squatter settlement. However, upon her death, she left a substantial amount of money to Ah Lian.

In contrast to the women's wealth, which is created on the peripheries of the organized economy, Ah Lian's lover, Michael, stands to inherit

a rubber estate in Ulu Banir, a remote town in Malaysia. Templeton Estate, owned by Michael's father, Jonathan Templeton, reflects the economic history of Malaya as a British colony—from the destruction of the forest to the profitable export of rubber to the succession of land and legacy from father to son. If Michael's inheritance reflects the economic history of the colony, Ah Lian's inheritance represents a counter-history of an invisible economic sphere—the work of a woman—bound to the hardships of her life and sexual and reproductive labour in the informal economy. While Michael's inheritance is a product of British policies, which continued to shape the postcolonial state, Ah Lian's inheritance was created at the intersection of social, gendered, and racial marginalization.

Wealth, inheritance, and economic exchanges in the colonial and post-colonial world form the background of the novel, and these exchanges lie at the intersections of race, gender, and class that circumscribe the lives of the Malaysian Chinese women. Despite the real-life political and economic changes in the twentieth century such as the end of British colonization and the post-independence pursuit of economic and social development, the experiences of women in the novel are characterized by the continuation of earlier structures of race and gender. In fact, the kind of hardships Grandmother Lim experienced are exacerbated in the next generation: in the life of her stepdaughter, Charbo. Charbo, Jonathan Templeton's Chinese amah and mistress, mother of Michael Templeton and his half-brother Hafiz, and Ah Lian's lost aunt, is the enigmatic core of Chuah's novel. Ah Lian meets her during her visit to the Templeton estate, where she becomes embroiled in the investigation of the murder of Jonathan Templeton's young fiancée. Changing names indicate the multiple identities and ethnicities that Charbo/Mary/Puteh has adopted in the course of her life. As Charbo, a generalized Hokkien term for "girl" (often used as a diminutive term of endearment), she began her life as the favoured daughter of a Eurasian concubine in the Lim household. Well-educated, beautiful, and docile, she was an asset created in the Peranakan tradition for the purpose of a favourable marriage.[10] However, after the death of the Lim patriarch, the son attempted to sell his stepsister via marriage to pay off his debts and assaulted her

when she resisted. The trauma of the assault "struck her dumb," as Dr. Berger, who examined her, explained (Chuah 143). Made mute by this trauma, Charbo escaped and joined the Templeton estate as the amah for Jonathan, the young son of the estate owner Jonathan and Charbo, now Mary, became lovers. During the Japanese invasion, while dissuading Jonathan from marrying Mary (on the account of racial and class difference), the estate manager, Simon, persuaded Yusuf, their driver, to marry her. By conversion to Islam and marriage to Yusuf, Mary became Puteh. Jonathan Templeton is the father of her older son, Michael, who was raised as an heir to the estate. Her second son, Hafiz, is the son of Yusuf, her Malay husband who, with her advice and help from Jonathan, bought the land around the Templeton estate to become an influential figure in post-independence Malaysia and achieves the title of Dato, an honorary title bestowed on the notable male citizens.

In the few essays on the novel, Puteh is read as a representation of Malaysian multiculturality (Perera 21) or a link that connects various characters of Malay, Chinese, and European heritage (Sim 37). However, I would like to highlight how the "colonial, modern gender system" (Lugones, "Heterosexualism" 202) and its socioeconomic implications shape Puteh's story. This colonial construction of race and gender is bequeathed to Ah Lian, whose existence as a free and independent woman is connected to women like Puteh and Grandmother Lim not only by their intergenerational links but also through the colonial continuities in Malaysia's post-independence socioeconomic institutions.

Consider the socioeconomic implications of race and gender within the traditional setup of the Lim household. Charbo is a product of an interracial alliance: her mother's position as the fifth wife in the Lim household was predicated on her racial difference and sexual labour. In patriarchal Chinese households, as Bocquet-Siek notes, the boundaries between domestic and sexual labour are blurred. Charbo's mother as well as Grandmother Lim each "start[ed] out as an opium maid for Grandfather Lim and ended up in his bed" (Chuah 22). Writing about the affluent Peranakan community (which the Lim family in Malaya would have belonged to), Bocquet-Siek notes that polygamy and a preference for sons were defining principles that shaped women's lives (40).

Begetting a son was a way for a woman to rise in status among other wives and concubines. Despite the class privilege of the Peranakan Chinese, in the absence of rights to inheritance or property, women were largely dependent on men. In such a structure, Charbo's mother occupied a lowly position on account of her racial difference (being a European) and inability to produce a son. Yet Charbo, with her exotic looks and racial difference, was an asset in the bilateral family system: daughters were important since "marriage [was] one of the ways to strengthen or raise the family's position in society" (Bocquet-Siek 45). The Western colonial emphasis on women's education was channeled into enhancing their value on the marriage market because "men wished for wives who would speak or at least understand Dutch or English, who were familiar with Western ways, and would not embarrass them with their ignorance" (Bocquet-Siek 44). Thus, colonial intervention bolstered the traditional patriarchal structure of the Peranakan community. In other words, Charbo's beauty along with her English education and her "unusually liberal upbringing" (Chuah 22)[11] enhanced her economic value. It is hardly surprising that her brother tried to arrange Charbo's marriage to his biggest creditor. The match lay bare the exchange economy that underpinned a woman's role in this familial structure. Charbo's refusal to marry, in this light, was a woman's assertion of her existence beyond the exchange economy, a rejection to fall into a role that was assumed to be normal and natural for girls in the community.

Her refusal can be read as a modern educated woman's disavowal of the gendered structure of Peranakan patriarchy. After escaping the Lim household, Charbo ended up in a convent where she was rechristened as Mary. The convent and several other Christian missions, as Richard Eves notes, claimed to offer refuge to colonial women against the assaults of native patriarchy. However, their proselytizing ambitions also helped the colonial enterprise by producing a docile labour force that was industrious and obedient (Eves 85). If the name Charbo (a generic term for a girl) tied her identity to her gender, then her rechristening as Mary evoked an equally generic image of chastity and sacrifice associated with the Virgin Mary. Mary emerged from the convent, mute

about her shameful past and cultural background, an ideal gendered and racialised subject of colonialism.

Although she appeared to gain economic independence as an amah in the Templeton household, the place turned out to be another site of domestic and sexual labour.[12] The Templeton estate depended on a racial and class hierarchy in which, as the estate manager Simon pointed out, Jonathan and Mary's legitimate or legal union was impossible. Jonathan's grandfather, who was one of the Templeton pioneers, committed suicide after he was ostracized and punished by the Civil Service for marrying a native woman (Chuah 138). The intersection of racism, classism, and coloniality that underly Simon's objections to the marriage are coupled with an unabashed acceptance of Jonathan's position as an English man and the options it offered:

> "She's your servant. What will the world say . . . ? . . . [L]oneliness is something I understand, that everyone understands. No one would have anything to say if you were to . . ." His voice dies away. "Carry on" is what he has almost said. He searches his mind for a suitable term . . .
>
> . . . "You are a Templeton. You own all this before you. How is she going to cope with being your wife? . . . How's she going to manage when you have to attend some official function as this area's biggest land- and plantation owner?" (Chuah 164–65)

The disparities between Jonathan's and Mary's positions exist along multiple axes: only an unofficial relationship is acceptable because she is a servant and a native woman with whom Jonathan could "[c]arry on" but not marry. In colonial society, "[r]ace structured the institutionalization and containment of sexual nature by standing . . . as an apology for various sexual practices" (Manderson 373). One of these practices was concubinage. Race becomes a justification for the clandestine nature of the relationship.[13] Simon further justifies it by emphasizing that "everyone understands" the loneliness of a planter's life. In the absence of options for marriage (forbidden by race and class), the advice is to "carry on" with Mary as the Eurasian mistress. The transactional nature

of their relationship is evident in how Mary becomes "a servant without a portfolio" who "makes herself useful by looking after his more personal needs" (Chuah 163). "Jonathan, aware of his new position of unqualified power," the narration continues, "has made quite clear to Mary soon after they settle in the bungalow that what he wants from her is somewhat more than what a Nanny normally provides" (163). Mary's concubinage reinforces colonial hierarchies, and Simon imagines the embarrassment that would arise if these hierarchies were challenged.

Thus, the socioeconomic betterment promised by Western education emerges as a site of betrayal as Charbo becomes a domestic and sexual labourer. In Chuah's Malaysian novel, Charbo's changing identities reflect the trajectory of a woman's life shaped by the intervention of the colonial civilizing mission in which an English education and liberal upbringing were supposed to guarantee relief from the oppressive structures of precolonial societies. But her transactional relationship with Jonathan is not much different from the one arranged by her brother: in return for her sexual and domestic labour, Mary is promised a living. During the Japanese invasion, coerced by Simon to marry Yusuf, Mary (now Puteh) returns to the roles of mother and domestic laborer that she had previously escaped. Thus Charbo/Mary/Puteh's life reflects the violence that constitutes the subject of coloniality; it tells the story of how impossible it is for a woman to grow or claim agency within the racialized and gendered structures of colonial authority. She is the mute subaltern who literally cannot speak; she exists in the background "deeply in shadow" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 287). Her story emerges indirectly—in the interstices of the stories told by other characters. In the postcolonial nation, her status as Datin (the title for the wife of a Dato) depends on her husband and, later, her son. Puteh's life story, like that of Grandmother Lim, offers an implicit critique of women's position in the rhetoric of Malaysia; despite the preoccupation with women in Malaysia's rhetoric of development, their experiences remain on the margins of national history. Alicia Izharuddin notes the paradox involving the position of women in Malaysian nation-building: "Women have played a marginal role in 'official' Malaysian history, as auxiliaries to men's dominance in postcolonial politics and

nation-building. Their marginality has been attributed throughout the postcolonial world to the gendered construction of the nation as feminine and the circumscription of women's citizenship to the domestic sphere as wives and mothers" (Izharuddin 63).

However, the fruits of the developmental agenda of the new nation do seem to be available to the post-independence generation of Malaysian women like Ah Lian, who appears to be in control of her destiny. She is no longer subordinate to the Templetons. Despite her modest background, she grows up to be an ideal subject of postcolonial modernity: an intelligent, educated, independent woman capable of managing herself—a perfect representative of an emerging and developing nation that has succeeded in improving opportunities for women.

Yet, on closer examination, one finds complex racial and gender continuities in post-independence Malaysia. After leaving Malaysia, Ah Lian meets Michael Templeton, Charbo/Mary/Puteh's first son, in Europe. The two fall in love. From the start, Ah Lian lies to Michael about her modest background. Even though her grandmother's money had made her rich, she is aware of a disparity when it comes to his old and her new money: "[W]as he laughing at me, a young, naïve girl from a small town of Malaysia . . . ? At that moment it became important for me to let him know that I was not in any way inferior to him. . . . I wove him a tapestry of half-truths and half-lies" (Chuah 12). Ah Lian's need to be seen as equal illustrates her unconscious awareness of history and Michael's privileged obliviousness to it. In a particularly telling scene in which Ah Lian visits a travel agency with her mother, Chuah reveals the impulse behind Ah Lian's need to lie. At the agency, Ah Lian observes several interracial couples: European or American men "without exception" and Asian women who "wore their men like badges of honour" (211). She is horrified by the image and fears being seen as one of them: would she be viewed as "[a] hanger on? A white man's groupie?" (211). The scene offers a key to understanding several incidents. It throws her engagement to Michael in a new, perverse light as she remembers the incidents of racial and sexual humiliation she experienced as his girlfriend. She remembers a Christmas party in London where another man watched her with "a distinct leer . . . driven by a complex of racist and sexist

chauvinism . . . signaling to me that I was a fair game for him because I was a white man's girlfriend" (212). At the travel agency, she is enraged as she watches an American man speak to the girl accompanying him in pidgin English and thinks of the smirk on his face (213–14). Now she thinks she can decipher the underlying cause of her humiliation: "Would it always be assumed that I was just another Chinese 'dolly bird'? A brainless, twittering oriental sparrow which has attached herself to a white man because that was where all good things in life were supposed to have their source? . . . So from the viewpoint of the westerner, was I seen as a Suzy Wong?" (212–13). In this brief scene at the travel agency, Chuah highlights the link between Ah Lian's independence and the impossible circumstances of the older generation of women, including Puteh. The image of Suzy Wong, a Chinese prostitute catering to British clientele in Hong Kong, reveals the persistence of gendered and racial imaginaries not only in Ah Lian's consciousness but also in the people around her—in Asia and in Europe, where the humiliating incidents occurred. This scene reveals how relationships in modern Malaysia and beyond carry the burden of colonial history.

Despite witnessing and deciphering the colonial dynamics underlying contemporary interracial relationships, Ah Lian remains strangely unaware of the coloniality of her own perspective as she assesses Malaysia's rapid development in the 1970s and 80s. Her money, now invested and reinvested, generates income without her needing to work. She profits from the rapidly developing Malaysia of the 1990s by gaining an "unheard-of salary" (Chuah 219). She describes "stock markets going through a bull run" and the rapid growth of the real estate market, wherein "nature's plans for man's pleasure [are] confounded by vast amounts of concrete" (219). These images echo the Euro-American model of development and depict Malaysia as racing to join developed economies and societies.

Ah Lian's critique of Malaysian development contrasts with her romantic idea of Europe. She "longs" "for concerts, the operas, the theatre[,] . . . for parks designed and laid out for the love of nature," "for night-long discussions with people who cared about people for what they were, not what they own" (219–20). She feels the longing of a

colonial subject long after colonialism is over. Ah Lian's desire for what she sees as cultured Europe echoes Malaysia's reliance on the developed world and its model for growth. She overlooks the fact that she too is a beneficiary of this development: her investments yield money and her house gains real estate value. As Michael's brother, Hafiz, points out, with her decision to leave Malaysia after May 1969 she has given up responsibility for the country's future, despite benefitting from its development. Her "success" as an enlightened, educated global citizen is divorced from social and communal engagements or responsibilities.

If Puteh poses a dilemma for colonial development and postcolonial nation-building, then Ah Lian's coming-of-age in developing Malaysia remains riddled with the effects of colonialism. Towards the end of the novel, Ah Lian's elation at the discovery of her kinship with Puteh and Hafiz—"[a] family connection, at last," (Chuah 332)—serves as a homecoming of sorts, a return of the exiled. Her decision to donate the Templeton estate to Hafiz for the college of science that he plans to open in the future indicates a possible reconciliation with Malaysia.[14] Yet the novel ends with Ah Lian returning to the world of buying, selling, and money-making (336), and the reconciliation remains tentative. Chuah's novel offers a critique of the history of women and development under unequal socioeconomic relationships and structures. The place of women in Malaysia's development remains open and uncertain.

III. Coloniality, Development, and Self-Fashioning

In a more explicit way than *Echoes*, *The Flame Tree* depicts the self-fashioning of a successful, modern Malaysian Chinese woman. Unlike Ah Lian who lies about her background for her lover, Ooi's Jasmine Lee not only tells lies but lives them. She transforms herself completely, taking on the persona of an educated and successful Malaysian Chinese woman making her way in the cut-throat world of international law in London. However, the colonial past interrupts and reveals the pretense.

Much like *Echoes*, Ooi's novel begins with Jasmine's return to Malaysia after a decade away. During that time, she has transformed herself, both through her education, which makes her the most promising young lawyer at a London firm, and her appearance: she returns "re-invented

stunningly and dressed for respect" (Ooi 5). These changes come from hard work and a belief that her acquired Englishness can cover her impoverished origins and guarantee success. This mimicry of Englishness is rounded off by a Tiffany platinum diamond ring that announces her engagement to Henry Taunton, a minor British aristocrat and a broker in a finance firm.

Jasmine's transformation exemplifies aspirational mobility for the educated woman from the developing world. It optimizes the self through personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, qualities firmly in line with neoliberal ideology. The dreams of financial freedom and physical transformation overlap in the image that Jasmine presents of "classic Chinese features, and the confident manner of a Western woman" (Ooi 23), the exotica of the former coupled with the universal symbol of freedom represented by the latter. If the goal of development is to empower or uplift third world women to the standards of the first world, then Jasmine is an ideal realization.

Through Jasmine's mobility, the text links London and Malaysia—the metropole and the colony—and past and present. Jasmine's trip to Malaysia is an effort to lay the past to rest by meeting her mother, Mrs. Fung, one last time before beginning her life as the wife of an Englishman. The estrangement between Mrs. Fung and Jasmine is voluntary. Jasmine's childhood is marred by the memories of her drunken and abusive father. After being abused and abandoned by her husband, Mrs. Fung found work as a maid in an English household. Once again, it is the invisible domestic labour of a poor Chinese woman that oils the colonial machinery. With her decision to send Jasmine to England, Mrs. Fung severs Jasmine's ties with their painful past.

Education in the postcolonial developing world promises a means to escape the cycle of injustice and inequality. Hence, Jasmine's admission to Oxford University is seen as the pinnacle of academic achievement and a guarantee of success. For Mrs. Fung and Jasmine, it is the only way to escape their past in Malaysia. However, Jasmine finds herself trapped in the same circuit of abuse as her mother. Her relationship with her English fiancé (then husband) replicates colonizers' violent control and sexual exploitation of colonial women. At the beginning of the

novel, Jasmine lovingly recalls Taunton's claim of being her "Svengali" (16)—George Du Maurier's exploitative character who dominates and abuses a young girl to make her a successful singer: "You are mine, my creation! You belong to me and I command you to stay!" (Ooi 16–17). Strains of Orientalist fantasy in the garb of romance transform into resentment about Jasmine's independence and focus on work, as Taunton complains to his English mistress, "She was going to be my creation, my pure woman. A child of the East, uncorrupted by our English hypocrisy" (263). His frustrations find an outlet in the violence he perpetrates on Jasmine and, in her absence, on Asian prostitutes. Racial slurs follow the revelation of Jasmine's background—instead of being the daughter of Chinese couple who had died in a car crash, she is the daughter of a poor Malaysian Chinese woman: "Fucking little whore, pimped by her parents, most likely! Dirty bloody Chink coolie!" he says (409). From calling Jasmine a model of purity to a whore, Taunton's colonial stereotypes obstruct Jasmine's efforts to project herself as an educated, independent woman. Like Ah Lian's humiliating experiences in Europe, Jasmine's marriage reveals the persistence of coloniality in the globalizing world. In such a scenario, Jasmine's bid to reinvent herself may be seen as defensive. She transforms not merely to escape her humble beginnings but to be seen as equal in a world bent on imposing demeaning racial and sexual identities onto her.

Jasmine's decade-long transformation coincides with the transformation of Malaysia, with its "sleek buildings of steel and glass that gleamed in the sunlight[,] . . . the city of money" (249). Ooi presents Jasmine as the face of the new developed nation. Because of her rise in the colonial metropole, Jasmine sees herself as a player on the global stage with the power to bring developmental opportunities to her homeland. Jasmine's pretext for her visit to Malaysia is to assess the viability of a development project that would require clearing rainforests and resettling her old town. However, the novel problematizes this flow of developmental projects and knowledge from West to East. Jasmine's client, Jordan Cardale, heads a business corporation in London that is in the race to make profits from Asia's emerging economies. Cardale surreptitiously bribes influential locals to create support for his bid

for the construction of a grand university building at the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia in the 1990s was characterized by several such multi-billion-dollar projects launched "mostly for functional, symbolic or ideological reasons" to mark "the shift from Third to First World status, from cultural periphery to creator of cultural symbols for global consumption and regime maintenance based on legitimization through internationalization" (Zainal 164). Like Jasmine's self-fashioning, which attempts to suppress the painful memories that live on in her nightmares, the story of Malaysian development, according to Ooi, conceals multiple tragedies that accompanied the era of mega-projects.[15] Jasmine is invaluable for Cardale because she presents a local face to help his bid.

Caught in the discourse of Western liberalism and the baggage of (neo)coloniality, Jasmine is reduced to her gendered and racial identity—as the lover of Luke McAllister, the son of her mother's former employer, Taunton's Asian wife, and the local face of development for Cardale—which overshadows her education and skills as a lawyer. As she discovers dangerous structural flaws in Cardale's construction plan, Jasmine is torn between the life that she aspired to and the wellbeing of her local community. After the collapse of the building during the construction and the tragic destruction of a part of the town, Jasmine turns against her client. Her testimony against Cardale makes way for the local designer to build an environmentally friendly structure.

Yet the novel ends on an ambiguous note. Mrs. Fung realizes that she had a chance to choose a destiny for her daughter but "chose a wrong one" (Ooi 434). What could have been the right choice if not education, independence, and distance from the horrors of the past? This unanswered question lays bare the structural inequalities that continue to delimit the question of women and development; the promises of education, employment, and financial freedom fail to address the inequalities and prejudice that underlie the institutions shaping developmental agendas, including global multinational corporations and the neoliberal state. At the end of the novel, Jasmine decides to join a much smaller local law firm in Taiping, Malaysia that specializes in family law and domestic violence cases, a decision borne out of her belated sense of responsibility for the tragic destruction of the town.

IV. The End of Development and Beyond

The two novels use mother-daughter plots to highlight the continuities and relationality that characterize the lives of women. Generational attachments become channels for material and emotional support; they are also the conduits for trauma and affective responses to a history of marginalization. In Chuah's novel, Ah Lian's memories and dreams about women of the past fill her with loathing: "I am conscious of an old naked hag, standing at the door, looking at me with fearful disapproval. A hag, a sorceress I know in my dreams to be my mother, Puteh, . . . all rolled into one. So that I rise from these dreams filled with terror and self-loathing" (Chuah 279). This hag-like motherly figure, who embodies madness and monstrosity, is the image of a colonial woman—a woman of the "third world" constituted by the coloniality of gender and race and denied any source of legitimate agency. The image persists despite efforts to self-fashion and gives rise to terror and self-loathing—a matrilineal legacy that passes down through generations of women via memories and stories (Saxena, "Matrilineal Legacies" 173).

The twin murders in both the novels are a manifestation of these continuities. Though the murders lie at the center of the two novels, the plots are not about murder. In fact, the novels' detective plots are not geared towards uncovering who committed the murders but rather why the victims were killed, and this question leads to a revelation of the problematic socioeconomic and cultural situations that Malaysian women have negotiated with as the nation moved from colonial to postcolonial to the developing state. In *Echoes*, the story of the murders of Jonathan Templeton's wife and his fiancée twenty years later manifests the traumatic counter-history that simmers beneath the peaceful Templeton estate. The murders coincide with important moments in Malaysian history and with the phases of economic development I mention above; the first occurs during the early years of independence and the second in the 1970s when Malaysia was emerging as one of the fastest growing Asian economies. Puteh kills Jonathan's wife and fiancée not out of personal jealousy but in a bid to save the estate for her son. In both cases, the murder is the result of a woman's desperate effort to

control the events around her, but agency—a course of lawful, legitimate action—remains impossible.

The Flame Tree narrates Mrs. Fung's killing of Jasmine's abusive father and her later killing of Taunton when he assaults Jasmine. The similarities in the circumstances of the two murders, including the slurs tossed by the men at the women during the violent event, reveal how little change education and economic independence have brought to the lives of Mrs. Fung and her daughter. The murders can be read as a distortion of women's reproductive labour: the mothers commit these crimes in an attempt to protect their children and safeguard their futures in a world that denies them agency. The mothers in the two novels are subaltern figures, silent and mute, and the murders represent the ambiguous locution or opaque gesture of the subaltern. The momentary act pushes them further into silence, and subalternity becomes a permanent condition. Both mothers continue to live in the shadows to avoid detection, now silenced not just by a socioeconomic framework but by a legal one. Left with the mute and murderous female subaltern, the narratives impose a neat resolution. *Echoes* concludes with Puteh losing her mind, while Mrs. Fung in *The Flame Tree* is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Their reasons and motivations remain hidden, and the connections between the murders and the circumstances of the two women, which continue to haunt the experiences of their daughters, remain obscure.

The stories of Ah Lian and Jasmine show how subalternity and its manifestations have shifted in the developing neoliberal world. Their trajectories reveal the agency (or lack of it) available to postcolonial women in the age of neoliberalism and globalization. Despite Ah Lian's and Jasmine's mobility and freedom, the narratives reveal the circumstances that continue to condemn them to the postcolonial peripheries of the world system. Their self-fashioning shows their imbrication within the very structures that circumscribe their spheres of action; their language echoes the dominant discourse of development (such as the multinational corporation Jasmine works for and the world of borderless capital that Ah Lian inhabits). This form of subalternity, as Gayatri Spivak insists, is no longer cut off from the center or the metropole because the center is interested in women like Jasmine and Ah Lian;[16]

they are amenable intellectual resources for neoliberal, multinational corporations. Can they speak? They can, but their language is that of a dominant discourse that has reinvented them. Thus, coloniality continues to power the inequalities of the neocolonial world system. At the same time, the ends of Ah Lian's and Jasmine's stories challenge their definitive assimilation into this uneven world system. Their reconciliation with the past and their homecomings defer the conclusion of the development narrative and leaves open the possibility of alternative forms of growth and development, for individuals as well as communities.

V. Conclusion

In March 2022, while announcing plans for the empowerment of Malaysian women, which included laws against harassment and the provision of financial aid, the Malaysian government insisted on its commitment to "ensure that women get fair space and opportunities in the development of the country" (Ishak). At the same time, the Prime Minister, while announcing these measures, recognized the high rate of unemployment amongst women as well as a declining health index and a gap in income (Ishak). Despite the state's continued commitment to uplifting women, the gap between the current situation and the goal is as wide as ever. In *Seeing like a State*, James C. Scott offers an insightful perspective on this gap when he notes that a state's development agendas and policies are driven by research that makes the "society legible"—to arrange and manage the population in ways that simplify state functions (2). This kind of research includes censuses and data on families, women, work and employment. For instance, the data on employment seldom includes childcare, domestic labour, or women's involvement in the informal economy; similarly, as I note above, women's agricultural work in rural areas is often ignored. Such "statist development," to use Watson's phrase, "retains much of the colonial regime's instrumentalist view of cities and populations" (129). By exploring the narratives of educated, upwardly mobile, and relatively affluent Malaysian Chinese women, *Echoes* and *The Flame Tree* foreground the structural embeddedness of coloniality, race, and gender that continues to affect women despite the state's development policies. Literature provides a glimpse

of these deeper problems that call for a shift in the aims of development—from a prescription for women to considerations of national and global institutions that shape developmental agendas and limit women's agency. The two novels reveal how development in the postcolonial world is often forged in the crucible of colonialism and continues to kindle older exploitative racial and gendered identities that undercut narratives of progress. The intergenerational continuities of the novels' mother-daughter plots reveal the continuities of the colonial and patriarchal structures that contemporary generations are supposed to have overcome. Suppressed violence hints at the cycles of abuse that continue to keep women in the shadows, despite any educational or economic success. These issues trouble developmental agendas related to women and call for a closer look at configurations of gender and race in relation to development.

Acknowledgement

The study was supported by the seed grant given by the Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Malaya (UMG003J-2022). I would like to thank Dr. Vilashini Somiah for her comments on the initial drafts. I also acknowledge the two anonymous reviewers of the article whose comments have strengthened the essay.

Notes

1 Chin and Daud point out the rise of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia that boast several male autocratic leaders, including Mahathir Mohammad in Malaysia (4). This trend, according to Chin and Daud, is rooted in the paternalistic and patriarchal forms of leadership and culture in the region. In this milieu, the construction of the new woman as a social phenomenon and a literary construct is a projection of a non-Western modernity, a modernity that critiques Eurocentric visions and grounds its version in tradition and culture (Izharuddin 60).

2 Majumdar uses the term postcolonial to "characterize the contemporary historical phase in global economic and political relations" (xi), in which the older discourses of capitalist imperialism have taken new forms. Jomo and Wee note the change from the welfare bias of post-independence Malaysia to the liberal capitalism of the last decades of the twentieth century. According to Jomo and Wee, the welfare bias in the decades following independence, especially in terms of poverty-reduction, export-oriented growth, and industrialization generated employment, especially for women; this welfare bias existed alongside ethnic

tensions in Malaysia (51). They argue that liberalization and the growing influence of political elites and business interests after the 1990s have undermined the government's role in the nation's development (51–52). Mohamad refers to these stages as "nationalism, developmentalism, and post-developmentalism" (81).

3 By coloniality, I refer to the longstanding power dynamics that emerged in the wake of colonialism, as discussed by theorists like Quijano and Lugones. These dynamics continue to shape the relations between the colonies and the metropole, postcolonial nationalisms, state and institutional authority as well as the economic and developmental trajectories of former colonies.

4 Alloula's collection of picture postcards of Algerian women exploited by the French colonizers reveals the French preoccupation with the veiled female body. The collection illustrates the denigrating effects of colonization for women. Similarly, my article "Afterlives of Colonialism," on the popularity of historical colonial romance, highlights the hypersexualization of the colonial woman's body as a part of the exoticization of the colony. This form of colonial discourse, as my analysis of the readers' reviews of historical romance shows, continues to circulate in popular literary genres.

5 This is not to falsely idealize the condition of women in precolonial societies. In my discussion of Chuah's novel in this essay, I analyze the oppressive gender structures in migrant Chinese households in Malaysia, which shaped women into an economic asset. However, the imposition of Western ideas of gender and work exacerbated pre-existing patriarchal structures and worsened the condition of women.

6 After the abolition of slavery in 1833, the labour requirements in the colonies, including the plantations and mines in Malaya, were met by indentured labour, whereby hundreds of thousands of Indians were sent to work in other British colonies. In 1870, there were thirty thousand Indians in Malaysia mainly around Penang Island; by 1911, the number had increased to 275,000 (Innes and Poutney qtd. in Amrith 235). Migration to Malaya was the major circuit of migration from colonial Madras (now Chennai) to the east, involving nearly four million journeys between 1840 and 1938 (Amrith 235).

7 Lugones uses an intersectional lens to look at liberal feminism. Given the position of feminist scholars in the Euro-American-centric white world, she points out their inability to see their understanding of gender as Eurocentric and geographically specific.

8 The British in Malaya made treaties with Malay rulers to assist them in governing Malay subjects. To expand commercial projects, particularly tin mining and plantation agriculture, Chinese and Indian immigrants were brought to Malaya, as discussed in a note above. The Malays felt threatened by the growing immigrant population, a fear that allowed the British to further assume the role of the protectors of Malays' interests and society. Thus, the colonial system reinforced interethnic divisions and prevented any kind of solidarity (Haque 244).

9 Mohamad defines hyperethnicity as an "all-encompassing ethnicization" that tries to subsume any politics outside of the goal of the preservation of ethnic particularities. In Malaysia's developmental phase, there was a "heightening of identity politics, which marked off the Malay from the non-Malay" (87).

10 Peranakan Chinese refers to the ethnic group that traces its descent from the first wave of Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia.

11 Charbo is encouraged to learn piano and dance and allowed to frequent recreational clubs. At home, she often dances with the friends of her brother (Chuah 22).

12 Chinese Amahs in Malaya were paid well and often sent money to their families back home. They were taken care of by the employees, even after retirement (K. G. Ooi 65). Although the novel does not discuss Mary's salary, one can assume that Mary is paid well at the Templeton estate, especially because her work included not just cleaning but looking after Jonathan Templeton's "more personal needs" (Chuah 163).

13 In her study of the politics of morality and race in colonial cultures, Stoler insists that because "colonial authority and racial distinctions were fundamentally structured in gendered terms" (635), concubinage was accepted because it stabilized the colonial social order: it "kept men in their barracks and bungalows, out of brothels and less inclined to perverse liaisons with one another" (Stoler 637).

14 Despite coming to understand her place in relation to Malaysia's past and present, Ah Lian notes that she had "no time" to explore Malaysia in her hurry to return to her world (Chuah 335). However, the story of the nation and its development continues in the novel's sequel, *Days of Change*, which explores Hafiz and his fight against the forces of modernization.

15 These include the Highland Towers incident in Kuala Lumpur in 1993 and the Genting Highland landslides in 1995.

16 Spivak refers to the vested interests in trademarks and copyrights that have become a mode of exploitation of subaltern populations, for instance in the areas of biopiracy and human genome engineering ("The New Subaltern" 326). In the two novels I consider, neoliberal multinational organizations are interested in the amenable colonialized subject, who provides access to developing economies.

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