

When Abused Women Get Away with Murder: Law, Justice and Truth in three English-language Malaysian Novels by Women

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(First published in *Asiatic*, Journal of Department of English, International Islamic University Malaysia, Vol. 7, No. 1, June 2013, pp 134-153)

The figure of the girl or woman subjected to gender-based social pressure and discrimination appears frequently in Malaysian literature in English. In the novels published between 1963 (when Malaysia was formed) and 1993 – all by men – most socially oppressed women are portrayed as being from the lower social strata, poorly educated, and victims of their own internalisation of the roles and positions imposed on them by their patriarchal traditions. Physical forms of domestic violence are almost absent: there is parental oppression but no brutality, suggestions of spousal battering are muted, and there is complete silence on the subject of incestuous sexual assaults. It is only after Malaysian women novelists made their debut, that we find portrayals of women from higher social strata subjected to parental brutality, wife-battering and incestuous rape – and who commit murder to change the trajectory of their fate.

Between 1994 and 2000, three novels by women were published: Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* in 1994, Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* in 1998 and Marie Gerrina Louis' *The Eleventh Finger* in 2000. In each novel is a woman who has been a victim of domestic violence, who kills and who later confesses. Significantly, only one is charged with murder, and none is brought to trial. To date, these three novels are the only Malaysian examples of what may be considered a sub-genre of crime fiction.

The novels were published in a period when the discourse on women in relation to domestic violence, crime and crime fiction was particularly lively. In Malaysia, the publication dates of *Echoes of Silence* and *The Eleventh Finger* coincide with the tabling and passing of two major laws protecting victims of abuse: the Domestic Violence Act

(1994) passed in 1996 after much debate, and the Child Act (2001). Outside Malaysia, scholars in sociology, gender studies, law and literature were publishing (and continue to publish) groundbreaking studies of the representation of homicidal women, of justice for battered women who kill, and of gender-related issues in the representation of women – as detectives and criminals – in crime fiction by women. Scholarly interest in the crime fiction genre resulted in studies of its literary and historical significance, its sociological importance, and its manifestations in China and Japan.¹ Yet, in Malaysia, *Echoes of Silence* has been studied mainly as a postcolonial novel², and *The Flame Tree* and *The Eleventh Finger* have been largely neglected. Even though all the novels have been labelled by reviewers and critics as “murder mysteries” (Dorall 32) and “crime thrillers” and “detective stories” (Wagner 68), scholars have paid scant attention to their crime fiction elements, the sociological significance of their primary wrongdoers being female victims of past abuse, and the moral and societal implications of the fact that they all get away with murder.

The novels are undoubtedly “crime novels” in that they deal with crime and the causes and effects of criminal behaviour, but they lack the signature feature of the conventional, popular detective story, namely, the schematic progression “from the crime to the discovery and the resolution through a chain of deductions” (Eco 118). Instead, the murderers remain unsuspected and their crimes either undetected or unsolved until they voluntarily tell the truth in catharsis-like confessions. This seems to indicate that in the novels’ moral schemes, truth telling (a psychologically satisfying act of social communication) is more important than truth seeking (an act of personal intellectual or moral satisfaction) as the means of resolving conflicts. We might then expect the

¹ For studies of women in crime and in crime fiction, see Birch 1994, Munt 1994, Jones 1996 and Kim 2012. For studies of the literary, historical, and sociological significance of crime fiction, see Kaemmel 1983, Mandel 1984, Moretti 1988 and Symons 1992. For studies of modern crime fiction in China and Japan, see Kinkley 2000, Seaman 2004 and Saito 2007.

² See for instance Chin 2001, Perera 2008 and Sim 2012.

women's confessions to be followed by a reinstatement of law and justice and a restoration of the psychological and societal order and balance that have been disturbed by their criminal acts.

This expectation is met in *The Flame Tree*. Once Mrs. Fung, the guilty woman, tells the truth, the law steps in and sets the wheels of justice in motion, she can die in peace, and her daughter, Jasmine, can look forward to a happy future with the man she loves. It is not the case, however, in *The Eleventh Finger* and *Echoes of Silence*. In these two novels, those to whom the guilty women confess are moved by compassion, love, or loyalty to re-conceal the truth, thereby becoming themselves lawbreakers, guilty of obstructing justice. This reversal to the conflict and guilt of hidden crimes is especially problematic because in the novels, the confession is made either directly to or in the presence of a lawyer. It gives rise to the question that this paper seeks to answer: How are law, justice and truth conceptualised, and their interrelationships configured, in the moral universes of the novels?

This paper examines the three novels' moral universes as reflected in their treatment of concepts and perceptions of law, justice and truth in the context of violence done to and by women. This examination is part of a larger, sociology-of-literature research project aimed at determining how social, political, institutional and traditional structures peculiar to Malaysia's ethnically and culturally diverse society find expression in literary works.³ It has to be emphasised here that the aim in this paper is to uncover the novels' "philosophical frameworks"; it is *not* – as is the more usual practice – to determine whether and how the novels fit into any of the existing theoretical frameworks offered by western thinkers and scholars in their discourses on postcolonialism, gender- and race-based social injustices and crime fiction. To achieve the defined aim, an "insider" and broadly narratological close-reading procedure is used to identify and describe the philosophical underpinnings embedded in the narrative strategies used in the novels. The purpose in taking this approach is – to borrow Philip Holden's words – "to

³ The research was funded by University Putra Malaysia under the Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Scheme.

make a critical intervention into doxological postcolonial readings that are not historically or socially informed” (65).

The study begins by identifying the defining features of the three women who kill, after which the novels are analysed individually. As this is a narratological and philosophical study, the novels are not discussed in the chronological order of their first publications, but according to the degree to which they conform to the narratological and philosophical conventions of popular crime fiction. Using this criterion, *The Flame Tree* is discussed first, followed by *The Eleventh Finger* and finally *Echoes of Silence*. To avoid repetition, the relevant conventions are explained in the course of the analyses. The term “Malaysian novels in English” is used here to mean novels with a local setting, originally written in English by current and former Malaysian citizens.⁴

Portrayal of Abused Women Who Kill: Defining Features

In the novels being examined, the abused women who kill have three defining features that set them apart from abused women portrayed in English-language Malaysian novels published before 1994. The first is that they are victims of physical forms of domestic violence, not just social pressure or emotional abuse; and they come from a broad spectrum of social classes and historical times. However, the abuses are set in the years before the Malaysian Domestic Violence Act (1994) came into effect. The novels therefore reveal a society where domestic violence is a widespread social evil that dares not speak its name. Known to exist but having no “legal reality,” it is considered a private family matter, which no one wants to talk about and against which the police and the courts are unwilling to take action, leaving the victims with little recourse beyond the provisions in existing penal codes.⁵ In *Echoes of Silence*, Puteh, raped by her eldest half-brother in the 1930s, is from the privileged class of local tin magnates in British Malaya. In *The Flame Tree*, Mrs. Fung, a battered wife, is from the post-Independence upper

⁴ Malaysian-born Yang-May Ooi resides in Britain.

⁵ See Abdullah et al and the Malaysian Women’s Aid Organisation website.

middle class. In *The Eleventh Finger*, Li Lian, a victim of her sadistically violent father, is from the post-Independence lower middle class.

The women's second defining feature is their successful survival of the violence suffered. When we first meet them, they are leading ostensibly normal, respectable lives; but through their recollections and the other characters' narratives, we are given detailed accounts of how they have escaped their abusers, reinvented themselves, and taken steps to change the circumstances and directions of their lives. These steps include killing people perceived to be standing in their way; and as killers, they are extraordinarily successful. Together, they are responsible for five homicides: two by Puteh, two by Mrs. Fung and one by Li Lian. Of these, four are "perfect murders," either undiscovered or unsolved until the women choose to confess.

Related to their successful survival is their third defining feature. They exert a remarkable influence on others, often shaping or changing the self-perceptions and worldviews of family members and outsiders who are drawn into their lives. As noted earlier, Puteh and Li Lian cause those to whom they confess to become lawbreakers. They influence not only by telling the truth, but also by withholding the truth about their own acts of violence and the violence once done to them. Their secrecy is not just a device to create suspense; it lies at the root of the disquiet that sets the other characters on the quests that form the stories. Although the women are not always the main characters, they are the hubs where the novels' main plots and subplots meet – and a vital part of the novels' moral and social discourses.

The Flame Tree: Law, Justice and Truth in a Truth-loving Universe

This study of moral universes begins with *The Flame Tree* because it is closest in form, structure and plot to the popular crime fiction genre, and its moral scheme complies with the conventional expectation that truth uncovered leads inevitably to the restoration of law and justice. The story is narrated by a traditional, epic-style, omniscient author, whom readers are expected to accept as reliable. Partly inspired by the collapse of the

Highland Towers apartment building in Malaysia on 11 December 1993⁶, the novel has a clear moral lesson: despite humanity's best (or worst) efforts, in the end, truth will out and the truth will set us free. Implicit in the lesson is a concept of a universe that is moral in its essence, governed by a force that abhors deceit and that will eventually drive humanity through punitive means towards truthfulness. The theme of deceit underlies the three intertwined stories: guilty secrets in Mrs. Fung's life (the "murder mystery"), inauthenticity in Jasmine's life (the "romance"), and criminal cover-ups in the corporate world (the "thriller"). The plot moves from the characters' erroneous understanding of the nature of the moral universe to their final correct understanding. This discussion centres on the nature of Mrs. Fung's error.

In Mrs. Fung's family, the universe is also conceptualised as being moral in essence, but it is a Confucian morality. The highest good is not truthfulness but family stability; and righteousness is the maintenance of that stability, achieved through the members knowing what is customarily expected of them given their positions in the family hierarchy. Failure to conform is viewed as an overturning of the cosmic order, which can then only be restored through swift and terrible retributive justice. When Mrs. Fung, at the age of sixteen, marries the profligate Tommy Fung against her father's wishes, the latter disowns her and curses her to "live in hell with that bastard" for that, according to him, "will be justice" (141).

While married to Tommy, Mrs. Fung endures his drinking, gambling, pimping and his battering, but when she comes upon him attempting to rape their eight-year old daughter, Jasmine, she kills him – not in the heat of passion and anger, but with premeditation, executioner-like preparation, and a consciousness that she is meting out both punitive and preventive justice:

The line was crossed. The next time I might not be near to stop him....

I got the sharp long knife from the kitchen. I cleared the furniture aside

⁶ This information was confirmed by Ooi in a personal email to me on 3 April 2012.

and laid out the old tarpaulin sheets from the garden. And I... waited for him. (447)

The severity of the punishment suggests that the “line” Tommy has crossed is the incest taboo, which is taken seriously by Chinese Malaysians; even today, the discouragement or forbidding of marriage between two people with the same surname is part of the Chinese Malaysian’s undocumented but experienced reality. After killing Tommy, Mrs. Fung buries his body in the garden, plants a flame tree sapling over the grave, and tells everyone including Jasmine that Tommy has left them. Then, because her moral universe is not limited to the world of the living, she sets up a shrine under the tree before which she performs rituals of appeasement to discourage the dead man’s spirit from taking retributive action and, when necessary, to negotiate whose life should be taken in retribution (259).

The validity of Mrs. Fung’s concept of a moral universe is interrogated through Jasmine’s life, which is shaped by her mother’s values and governed by her own belief that she must be good – “good” in the sense of always knowing her position and doing whatever is expected of her in any given hierarchy. As a good daughter, she obeys Mrs. Fung’s injunction to put the past behind her. She takes her mother’s surname and goes to England, where she creates a new persona for herself and keeps the truth of her background a secret, even from Harry Taunton, the wealthy man she later marries. As a good student, she works hard, does well and eventually becomes a lawyer. As a good lawyer, she is a well-regarded partner and team player in a reputable London law firm representing Jordan Cardale plc, a London-based property development firm planning to construct “the tallest tower built on the highest site in the world” (80) in Malaysia. Her new life is, however, one of deception and inauthenticity; while her public image speaks of unruffled success, her private life is burdened with guilty secrets. She is troubled by bad dreams and guilt because, kept ignorant of her father’s death by her mother and having no conscious memory of his attempt to rape her, she believes she is responsible for his walking out on the family. Like her mother, she is a battered wife; but being a good wife, she keeps the battering a well-guarded secret.

Deception in the corporate world is represented by Cardale, Jasmine's client. The firm is involved in criminal acts – bribery, intimidation and murder – aimed at covering up a serious flaw in the design of the tower. In the novel's truth-loving moral universe, so much subterfuge cannot be tolerated and retribution comes in a series of tumultuous events involving not only human beings but also the physical world. Unusually heavy rains bring down the tower while it is under construction, causing death and destruction. Harry Taunton, having found out about Jasmine's past, tracks her down to her mother's house, where he gets into a rage and rapes her. For the second time, Mrs. Fung witnesses her daughter being raped and is compelled to kill the rapist, only this time in mid-rape and with a gun so that there is no possibility of hiding her crime. Realising then the harm she has done Jasmine by lying about Tommy Fung, she finally tells the truth. The law steps in, in the shape of Inspector Tiong, who charges Mrs. Fung with two counts of murder but delays making the final arrest because she is dying of cancer and he is "a compassionate man" (485).

A philosophical, and therefore more significant, challenge to Mrs. Fung's concept of a moral universe is presented through the character of Ronnie Tan. Like Mrs. Fung, Tan kills two people, but unlike her, he gets clean away by fleeing the country. Tan is the head of a local, family-owned security business contracted to facilitate Cardale's operations by bribing and intimidating into silence those who either know of the tower's design flaw or oppose the tower project for ecological reasons. In the course of his work, he kills an influential activist opposed to the tower project. The question that springs to mind is: why is this morally dubious killer of a blameless man allowed to get away scot-free, when Mrs. Fung, the caring mother who has killed two wife beaters and rapists, is charged with two counts of murder? Close examination of the text shows that Tan's concept of a moral universe differs from Mrs. Fung's in fundamental ways that have an impact on the novel's representation of law, justice and truth.

As an ethnic Chinese, Tan is personally family-oriented, but his concept of a moral universe is not family-centred. Being an "intensely religious" man with an affinity for popular Chinese Buddhism, he believes in a universe where all debts and dues must be repaid and all favours paid for (36), where there is "an inherent order of things," and

where the greatest good is the “containment of disharmony” (61). He is profoundly averse to killing, which he considers as coming “close to the line” (60) – we shall see later what that “line” is. He agrees to carry out his first murder only after he has persuaded himself that the pro-ecology activist is endangering the “principle of harmony” and that killing him would be “justice” (234-35). When he later realises that he has killed the one man who might have prevented the construction of the tower and the subsequent loss of many lives, he is filled with such remorse that he decides to “stop the madness” (389).

This moment of insight marks his moral transformation from a family-oriented to a socially conscious man. As “an offering to save them all” (389), he provides the police with several notebooks of confessed crimes that incriminate Cardale. Later, to save the life of a police officer, he kills his own brother. To Tan, brought up in the family-first culture of the ethnic Chinese, fratricide is an act as abominable as incestuous rape is to Mrs. Fung. He has thus crossed his “line.” However, he does it neither for selfish reasons nor to save his family name, but for what he perceives as justice for Cardale’s innocent victims and as salvation for society. This, perhaps, is the extenuating circumstance that explains his successful evasion of the law.⁷

Although a relatively minor character, Tan plays a key role in bringing the dimension of altruism into the novel’s moral universe. The importance of altruism is underscored at the end of the novel, when Jasmine decides to work with a small local firm specialising in family law, “especially domestic violence cases” (484). In the moral universe of *The Flame Tree*, then, truth must be revealed so that law and justice may be reinstated, and psychological and social order and balance restored; but escape from the full force of retributive justice is possible only when self-centred interests and family ties are sacrificed for the greater good.

⁷ This interpretation was confirmed by the novelist, who had been sent an early draft of the paper. In an email to me, dated 27 July 2012, Ooi wrote: “As for Ronnie Tan, the original manuscript has him arrested. But in discussions with my editor, she felt that he needed to be saved in some way given the sacrifices he has made as you point out in your paper. So I changed his fate.”

The Eleventh Finger: Law, Justice and Truth in a Benevolent Universe

The Eleventh Finger is discussed next because although in terms of plot and structure it does not conform to the conventions of popular crime fiction to the extent that *The Flame Tree* does, the philosophical assumptions underlying its fictional world and moral universe are comparable to those in Ooi's novel. At first reading, *The Eleventh Finger* may come across as a feminist affirmation of a child-abuse victim's right to retributive justice. The central character is Li Lian. Throughout her childhood, she, her mother, and her two older sisters have been brutally abused by her father because he thinks females are useless and he badly wants a son. At the age of 12, she manages to get rid of her father by tampering with evidence to make her mother's suicide look like homicide, for which he is wrongfully charged and imprisoned. When adult, she sets out to take revenge on her piano teacher, her father's mistress and the woman she blames for her mother's suicide. Along the way she kills Martin Lopez, a widower she barely knows but suspects of abusing his two young daughters – and she gets away with it.

A closer reading suggests that the novel has a more socially conscious agenda. Although the story centres on Li Lian, nearly all the characters, major and minor – including Lopez – have suffered some form of physical or emotional parental abuse. This suggests that domestic child abuse is not being dealt with merely as the tragic circumstance of one character's life, but as a social – and therefore legal – problem. In Malaysia today, even after the implementation of the Child Act in 2001, domestic child abuse is a social problem because it is often regarded as a private family matter related to child discipline, not as a crime; and it is a legal problem because although abusers can be charged under the penal code, judicial concerns about child witnesses' reliability and credibility make conviction difficult. In Malaysian law,

... even though a child may understand the question put to him and may be in a position to give rational answers to it, the Court cannot convict the accused unless the child's testimony is corroborated by other material evidence implicating the accused. (Tengku Muda and Engku Alwi 207)

The risk of injustice to abused children lies, therefore, not in the absence of laws to protect them, but in the presence of a law that rejects as “unreliable” what children know from direct, subjective experience to be true.

The following analysis is an exploratory reading of *The Eleventh Finger* as a discourse on different ways of knowing that indirectly interrogates the adequacy of the law’s concept of truth in delivering justice to abused children.⁸ Four narrative components – Lopez’ murder, the narrative structure, the first-person narratives and a set of semiological codes from popular Chinese culture – are problematised and analysed to uncover the nature of the discourse and its implied moral universe.

The difficulty in reading the novel as a vindication of victim’s revenge is that Lopez’ murder presents more problems than it does solutions. In terms of the plot, it is unrelated to Li Lian’s quest for vengeance, and its occurrence is remote in time and circumstance from her childhood abuse. As an act of punitive or preventive justice, it is problematic because it is committed not on the strength of Li Lian’s direct knowledge of Lopez’ abusive acts (cf. Mrs. Fung’s murders in *The Flame Tree*) but purely on her decision to believe two sources of unverifiable information about Lopez: her instincts, and the words of one of his pre-teen daughters. In her confession, Li Lian writes that moments before she killed him, Lopez had boasted of murdering his wife and making it look like suicide (358-61). While the poetic justice in this information may be pleasing to the reader, from a judicial standpoint, it does not absolve Li Lian from guilt; first, because Lopez’ words “didn’t incriminate him” and secondly, because she had decided to kill him well before that: “I had nothing worked out before going there that night.... Knew only that I would do it somehow” (360). The information merely draws attention to aspects of Li Lian’s character – her contriving to have her father wrongfully sent to prison, her cheating at school (258), and her referring to Lopez’ murder as “a twisted sort of bonus” (358) – that suggest she is more the subject of sociopathic tendencies than a virtuous agent of preventive justice.

⁸ In taking this approach, I assume that the novelist, Louis, has an in-depth understanding of the law and its practices since she has been engaged in legal work since 1991. See Quayum 261.

Li Lian is vindicated in only one respect: her intuition about Lopez' abusive nature is correct – but only partially, because she fails to recognise him as a fellow victim of paternal abuse (295). This failure, together with the murderous outcome of her unquestioned faith in her intuition and a child's words, places before the reader the problem faced by judges in cases of suspected child abuse: how reliable is intuition as a means of knowledge and should it be allowed to influence judgments?

If the Lopez case presents the problem from the judge's perspective, the novel's unusual structure presents it from the standpoint of the victim (or the defendant of a victim) of suspected child abuse, who knows intuitively that wrong is being done but can provide no incriminating evidence. The novel's structure is an incomplete frame. The story begins with the third-person indirect discourse of an unnamed woman in February 2000, switches to three characters' first-person narratives variously dated between August 1987 and December 1988, and ends there without returning to events in February 2000. The woman's identity and the legal outcome of Li Lian's confession are not definitively disclosed. The reader may make educated guesses, but he (or she) is denied the certainty of authorial validation required for satisfactory closure.

By conventional standards, the incomplete frame may be judged an artistic failure, or understood as a ruse to entice the curious reader to read the novel to the end. In this discussion, the only matter of significance is that it has the effect (on this reader, at least) of forcing a comparison – in kind, by no means in degree – between the reader's frustration at knowing intuitively who the unnamed woman is but being unable to identify her definitively for lack of authorial corroboration, and the despair felt by abused children (and their defendants) unable to furnish the courts with the requisite material evidence to justify conviction. Both situations beg the question: what, exactly, constitutes "truth" if it is not what one knows to be "true" either intuitively from observation of signs or from subjective experience? One may thus argue that the novel's incomplete frame is integral to the novel's discourse on ways of knowing and the nature of truth, which is developed in the first-person narrations of three characters: Li Lian; Bee Chin, her closest friend at school; and Jeffrey Lee, a lawyer in the legal firm where Li Lian is a secretary, and younger brother of her lover, Bram, the firm's senior partner.

The first-person narrations are presented in a framework of what may be termed “judicial truth” in that they meet the average judge’s criteria for reliability and credibility: they are independently obtained, relevant and corroborative, and supported by documentary proofs. The place-names and dates of the chapter headings establish the impossibility of collusion among the narrators. Bee Chin’s narration takes place on 31 December 1988 while she is alone on a train to Kuala Lumpur to meet Jeffrey for the first time in her life. Li Lian’s and Jeffrey’s narrations begin in August 1987 and cover the years before they first meet in September 1987. Li Lian’s accounts of her childhood abuse are corroborated by Bee Chin’s eyewitness account of an abusive episode; and her accounts of her affair with Bram are corroborated in part by Jeffrey, the resentful observer of the affair and its consequences. Lastly, Li Lian provides Bee Chin with documentary evidence of her wrongdoings – a written confession and her mother’s suicide note – to be given to Jeffrey. This framework of judicial truth serves two functions. First, it establishes that the narrators – however subjective they may be – are referring to facts that can be corroborated. Secondly, it throws into relief the uncorroborated nature of the various “truths” found in the individual narrations.

The individual narrations record the narrators’ experiences from early childhood to maturity and therefore contain many, often conflicting, “truths” that influence their moral codes and sense of justice. These “truths” include: the traditional Chinese belief that females are useless; that mothers nurture and fathers protect (302); that friendship has its obligations (16); that honesty is the best policy (275, 279); and that “God will help” (239). There is also “legal truth,” which rules that self-incriminating facts disclosed by clients to their lawyers may not be used against the former in court (286). Then there are the truths of personal experience, known firsthand through both sensory and extra-sensory perceptions such as instinct, intuition and the ability to see ghosts. As children, Li Lian and Jeffrey know instinctively that their over-controlling fathers’ actions are morally unacceptable. As adults, they know intuitively that the suave Lopez is an abusive husband and father. After Jeffrey, then 17, learns of his mother’s suicide, he begins to see her ghost.

An important aspect of the novel's presentation of the characters' different ways of knowing what they hold as "truth" is that no two people respond to, or even perceive, the same set of circumstances in the same way. Jeffrey and Li Lian respond differently to their intuitive knowledge of Lopez; Jeffrey tries to catch him out in a lie, while Li Lian acts on her urge to kill him. They respond differently, too, to the discovery of their mothers' suicides. Li Lian acts with great presence of mind to get rid of her father and then plots vengeance on the piano teacher (who later marries Bram); Jeffrey has difficulty coming to terms with his mother's death. Most significantly, Li Lian's sisters and Bram are unscathed by their childhood experiences of their fathers' abuses and their mothers' suicides.

Another important aspect is that these diverse, complex, paradoxical, inexplicable ways of knowing are not evaluated for their comparative truth-value, verifiability, or suitability to be used as the bases of moral or legal codes. They are presented as they are: tacit reminders of the limitations of "judicial truth," which demands eyewitness corroboration of abuses that are usually inflicted in secrecy, and material evidence of abusive acts that often leave no visible trace. The problem posed to the reader is thus not simply whether Li Lian should be allowed to go unpunished; it is whether justice can ever be served when truth is both so plural and so elusive.

The novel's solution to the problem is another "truth": the existence of a powerful, benign force in the universe transcending all human perceptions of truth and concepts of justice. This transcendent force is encoded in sub-textual allusions to the Chinese Dragon. In popular Chinese culture, the Dragon symbolises good fortune, power, and new beginnings. Believed to control the element of water, it is often depicted wreathed in rainclouds to suggest its benevolent nature. As one of the 12 signs of the Chinese zodiac, it is supposed to influence worldly affairs for one lunar year out of every 12, and to endow those born in Dragon years with its essence. We shall now consider how this cultural symbol is crafted into the narrative.

In terms of the plot, there is consistently a 12-year interval between the important events, which all occur in Dragon years. Jeffrey is born in 1952, and Li Lian and Bee Chin in 1964; Li Lian's mother's suicide and her father's imprisonment occur in 1976; Li

Lian starts her affair with Bram and bears him a son in 1988; and the novel begins in 2000. Li Lian's connection to the symbolic Dragon is suggested in her love of railway trains, which she refers to as "her dragon protector" (380), and in her description of the reason she gives Bee Chin for not turning herself in: "To not be able to feel the heat of the sun under my feet or feel the sting of raindrops on my scalp would be the ultimate punishment" (365-66). The Dragon's benevolent influence is suggested in the rain that falls on the day Li Lian discovers she is pregnant with Bram's child, drenching her as she walks around aimlessly, struggling with her uncertainties. She emerges from the experience a more caring person. She decides to confide in Bee Chin, avoids stepping on snails, and makes her first meaningful contact with her neighbour, Mala. On learning that Mala, too, has had an abusive father, Li Lian realises that to be truly free of the past they have to forgive themselves for having been abused (273). She later decides to give the baby to Bram for adoption, and to end their relationship.

Perhaps because of this redemptive moment, Li Lian's vengeful plan to punish her former piano teacher by breaking up her marriage to Bram has the opposite effect. When her newborn son is brought home to the Lee household, Bram's wife, initially hostile, suddenly makes the connection between her husband's mistress and her former piano pupil, and magnanimously chooses to welcome the baby as Li Lian's gift of gratitude to her (347). Harmony is thus restored to the troubled Lee family. Should we attribute this happy outcome entirely to the influence of the Dragon? Perhaps. On the other hand, the characters that have influenced Li Lian, Bee Chin and Jeffrey most with their kindness and good sense are not identified as having been born in Dragon years: Bee Chin's father, the nun at her school, the police officer investigating Li Lian's mother's suicide who decides to accept the young girl's version of events despite his doubts about the evidence (225), and Bram, who reminds Jeffrey that all human beings, including lawyers, "suffer from the usual prejudices and biases" (236). Perhaps the moral of the story is that even the celestial Dragon needs the agency of ordinary human kindness and good sense its wonders to perform.

The moral universe in *The Eleventh Finger* is thus spiritually informed by benevolence. Whether benevolence emanates from a cosmic force that intervenes in

human affairs one year out of every 12 or from ordinary people every day, it makes its influence felt by correcting the injustices caused by overvaluing punitive and retributive justice. In the novel's kindly universe, justice for oneself and others is best served with compassion, and redemption is achieved by connecting with and caring for others.⁹

Echoes of Silence: Law, Justice and Truth without a Moral Universe¹⁰

The earliest of the novels examined here, *Echoes of Silence* is discussed last because it deviates most from the conventions of popular crime fiction. Although a murder occurs early in the narrative, and the narrator's desire for truth and justice propels the story to a confession at the end, no detective work is done. More significantly, the novel dispenses with three of the genre's narrative devices identified above as crucial to the plots of *The Flame Tree* and *The Eleventh Finger*: repentant wrongdoers, reliable narrators and a universe governed by a virtuous force that rewards repentance with redemption.

The absence of these devices is attributable to the novel's Zen philosophical underpinnings, signalled by its epigraph, "Not in form, not in sound/ Is true enlightenment to be found."¹¹ Derived from the *Diamond Sutra*, the epigraph expresses

⁹ This inference from the textual analysis is confirmed by Louis' statement in an interview: "How can we believe in God? How can we afford not to? What we really need, more than food and clothes and shelter, is more kindness" (Quayum 272).

¹⁰ Although I am discussing my own novel here, I have chosen to write as if it were written by someone else. This choice reflects the fact that 18 years ago, I could not have analysed the novel as I do now. While writing the novel, my grasp of Zen and the reality around me was intuitive; today I have a more intellectual understanding of Zen philosophy as well as recourse to current, fact-based studies by historians of Malaysian politics between 1969 and 1994.

¹¹ The couplet is my rendering of the lines in the *Diamond Sutra*. A more traditional translation reads: "He who seeks me by outward appearance/ (And) seeks me in sound/ Treads the heterodox path/ (And) cannot perceive the *Tathagata*" (Lu 21). *Note*: "Tathagata" ("Thus-come One") is an epithet for Buddhas or "Awakened Ones."

the main purpose of Zen teachings: to expose the socially determined, fabricated nature of language and its “products” – concepts, views, rationalisations, ideologies and narratives – so that reality may be perceived without the preconceptions of received ideas.¹² The epigraph thus points to the novel’s use of metafictional strategies to deconstruct the ideological and other “fictional” prisms through which reality is perceived in the empirical world. This discussion examines how the novel’s negation of the literary conventions of the reliable narrator, the repentant wrongdoer and an inherently moral universe exposes the absurdity of the dominant ideology underlying the perception of law, justice and truth in Malaysian society.

The story is told mainly, and in the first person, by Lim Ai Lian, whose reliability as a narrator is made questionable from the outset by her background of English-educated, middle-class snobbery (12, 22-23) and her emotional attachment to her prime murder suspects. Her narrative begins in 1994, when she receives news that Michael Templeton, once her lover and later her stepson, has died. The news evokes memories of the unsolved murder in 1974 of a young woman named Cynthia Wickham, lingering suspicions of Michael’s and his father’s (i.e. her husband’s) guilt; and a new resolve to discover the truth. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear there is more at stake than a murder mystery; the novel is about silences, misinformation and disinformation about past acts of violence and violations of justice, which reverberate in the lives of present-day Malaysians.

At the centre of the vortex of hidden truths, and yet very much on the periphery of Lim’s quest, is Puteh, the victim-turned-murderer, who differs from her counterparts in *The Flame Tree* and *The Eleventh Finger* in several ways. Significant aspects of her character – her mutable ethnicity, her loss of the faculty of speech while in the care of British colonial characters, the territorial nature of her motive for murder and her

¹² It lies beyond the scope of this paper to explain Zen philosophy because it involves a discussion of Buddhist critiques of perception and language as reliable means of knowledge. The fundamental concern in the Mahayana (Zen) tradition is the deconstruction of concepts formed by faulty perceptions and language use, in order that reality may be known as it really is. As K. V. Ramanan (1978: 317) puts it, “With the rejection of the falsely imagined nature, the true nature of things comes to light.”

successful reinstatement in the post-Independence upper class – suggest she is conceived as an allegorical figure of the post-colonial “mother/motherland” (Chin 9) rather than as a unique individual.

Unlike Mrs. Fung and Li Lian, who are undoubtedly ethnic Chinese, Puteh’s ethnicity is both ambiguous and mutable. The daughter of a wealthy Chinese man by his Eurasian bondmaid, her first identity is Chinese. Struck dumb by her brother’s sexual assault, she finds refuge in a convent where the nuns take her for a Eurasian and later send her to work in the Templeton Estate, where she becomes the mistress of the owner, Jonathan Templeton. Soon after the Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941, she is given in marriage to Jonathan’s Malay chauffeur, Yusuf, for her own safety. From then on, her identity is Malay, and it is as Puteh, the Malay woman, that she regains her speech after the birth of her first child.

Like all conversions, Puteh’s signifies rebirth; and her successful reinvention of herself parallels that of post-Independence Malaya/Malaysia. When we first meet her, she is a member of the local elite. She has two grown sons, Michael by Jonathan, and Hafiz by Yusuf; and she and Yusuf own most of the Templeton Estate. Her motive for murder is property-related. Her victims are Esther, Jonathan’s wife, killed in 1949, and Cynthia, Jonathan’s fiancée-to-be, killed in 1974 – women whose pregnancies pose a threat to Michael’s sole inheritance of the Estate. In her confession to Lim (330-331), she expresses no remorse, and she makes no causal connection between the murders she has committed and the sexual assault she has suffered. Instead, she excuses the offending brother, also on property-related grounds, explaining he had been enraged by her refusal to comply with his plan to save the family’s depleted fortune by marrying her off to a wealthy old man.

The absence of remorse negates the possibility of explaining Puteh’s getting away with murder in terms of a theologically or metaphysically inspired redemption. We are forced to find a “secular” explanation in the fictional society’s perceptions of law, justice and truth; and because of Puteh’s allegorical portraiture, the real-world nation is implicated in the scrutiny. The historical events and topical issues mentioned in Lim’s narrative contextualise the novel’s discourse in the years following the 1969 inter-ethnic

riots up to 1994. Factually, during that 25-year period, the Malaysian government's professed aims of national unity and economic prosperity led to new policies that encouraged the mixing of politics and business, amendments to pre-existing repressive laws that severely limited freedom of expression and information, and Constitutional changes that undermined the independence of the judiciary.¹³

These historical realities are reflected in Lim's narrative, which portrays a society with a continuous tradition of subordinating law, justice and truth to the interests of the economically, and therefore politically, powerful. A fictitious but typical Malay legend of cosmic justice recounted by Hafiz to Lim sites the local origin of this tradition in the pre-colonial past: a court maiden is falsely accused of infidelity and sentenced to death, but on the day and at the place of her execution, a large tree miraculously falls over and kills the unjust ruler and his retinue (113). The tradition's colonial-era aspect is revealed in Jonathan's "insider" account of the investigation of Esther's murder. When the investigating officer, Sergeant Wickham (Cynthia's father), proves too zealous in performing his duty, Jonathan uses his position as an important producer of rubber, a commodity vital to Britain's post-war economy, to stop the investigation and have Wickham recalled to England (257). Its post-colonial aspect is presented in Lim's "outsider" account of the investigation of Cynthia's murder. Inspector Tajuddin, the officer in charge, is portrayed as one whose operational mode is marked (or marred) by his oft-expressed desire to avoid scandal and by his friendly and deferential attitude towards the prime suspects (76-77, 101, 108), who happen to be members of the two families that jointly own the Templeton Estate – one of whom, Hafiz, has once been his junior officer in the police force.

The tradition's resilience through time and through changes in political systems is emphasised by parallels drawn between colonial and post-colonial operational and attitudinal approaches to law, justice and truth. Like Wickham, Tajuddin is transferred to another state before he can complete his investigation (316). Both Tajuddin and Jonathan use victim-blaming narratives to shift the responsibility for the murders and the subsequent failure of justice from the murderer and themselves to the Wickham family,

¹³ See Wain 2009.

which they characterise as dysfunctional (257, 318). Both advise against digging up the past, and advocate forgetfulness as the way to deal with the unsolved crimes (248, 258, 319).

The critical focus of the novel's discourse is not, however, the morality of individual human behaviour (cf. *The Flame Tree*) or specific aspects of the law (cf. *The Eleventh Finger*), but the causes for the resilience of this attitude towards law, justice and truth, and its effects on individuals and on the society. Although Lim is disturbed by Jonathan's and Tajuddin's disclosures and attitude, the issue that dominates her narrative is her own moral unease as she realises that if Jonathan and Tajuddin are guilty of safeguarding a faulty justice system, it is ordinary people like Michael and herself who are responsible for keeping it intact – for face-saving, familial reasons. Initially eager to identify and bring Cynthia's murderer to justice, they, too, set justice aside when they learn, at different times, that the murderer is Michael's birth mother and Lim's long-lost aunt. The moral discourse in *Echoes of Silence* thus differs significantly from the discourses in *The Flame Tree* and *The Eleventh Finger*; its main concern is not the morality of the wrongdoers, but the moral confusion of innocent bystanders drawn willy-nilly into conspiracies of silence by the dominance of the culturally, politically and legislatively sanctioned ideology that the imperatives of group solidarity and material success override the imperative of impartiality in law, justice and truth.

From the discourse on moral confusion emerges a two-part theme. The first part is crystallised in the Malay legend of cosmic justice already mentioned: people deprived of truth and justice by autocratic rulers or customary laws will create narratives of a moral universe informed by metaphysical forces, onto which they project their own concepts of truth (however ill conceived) and justice (however misguided). It is developed in Lim's account of how she and Michael¹⁴ revise their moral codes and concepts of a moral universe to cope with their own suppression of truth and justice. The second, contrapuntal, part of the theme – that one must see through the fabricated nature of all concepts and

¹⁴ How Puteh's son, Hafiz, a former police officer and lawyer, deals with the knowledge of her crimes is the subject of a sequel, *Days of Change* (2010).

narratives to be enlightened – is articulated only in the epigraph. In the rest of the novel, it is embedded in the discordance between the verbal and non-verbal aspects of Michael's and Lim's narratives, which further undermines their reliability as narrators.

At the verbal level, they perceive and present themselves as willing accomplices in the communal conspiracy of silence, moving voluntarily towards kinship solidarity. At the level of the unsaid (or unsayable), however, their actions and the elegiac tone of their narratives reveal involuntary movements in the opposite direction, towards group dispersal. In 1974, Michael uses situation ethics to rationalise his concealment of Puteh's guilt, declaring that when protecting loved ones, "there is no right and wrong" (240). Yet, he leaves for England shortly thereafter, and never returns to see Puteh. The moral judgment implied in his self-estrangement echoes Lim's father's attitude toward his own mother, whose deference to the authority of his eldest half-brother many years earlier had led to Puteh's rape. Further, Michael's code of situation ethics evolves later into anomie, expressed in his concept of the universe as amoral and purposeless, where life is "really nothing but a series of accidents" (266).

Lim's moral confusion, presented in more detail, is linked explicitly to national events. Because of the official "blanket of silence cast over the nation" (56) during and after the 1969 riots, she has a strong desire for truth and justice, which she conceptualises respectively as total honesty and the principle of "*quid pro quo*" (241). In 1974, because Michael refuses to disclose the murderer's identity to her, she refuses to marry him (241). In later years, she invests in international money markets and not in domestic development projects, in tacit retaliation against the "equally... opportunistic and uncommitted" people who run the country (285). In 1994, her unquenched desire for truth and justice compels her to renew her quest for Cynthia's murderer (292). Yet, on learning that the murderer, Puteh, is not only her father's much-loved sister but also the victim of an unknown uncle's rape, she spontaneously adopts a code of familial and gender solidarity: "I take her hands in mine and kiss them. My daughter's grandmother. My aunt. My sister in womanhood. My guru" (331). To rationalise her new moral position, she resorts to a moral book balancing, cancelling out the injustice done by Puteh with the injustice once done to her: "Was there ever a murderer or thief who was not also

a victim?” (336). However, while driving home after the confession, she is overwhelmed by a feeling of being “out of tune” and, in a symbolic gesture of disengagement, asks her daughter to take over the wheel (337). On that note of resignation, the novel ends. Just as there is no theological doctrine of remorse and redemption to explain Puteh’s getting away with murder, there is no heaven-sent intervention to alleviate Lim’s and Michael’s anomie.

The absence of a concept of an inherently moral universe like those in *The Flame Tree* and *The Eleventh Finger*, which might conceivably nudge the plot to a happier end, is explainable in terms of a Zen critical method known in Sanskrit as *prasanga*. A non-polemical form of *reductio ad absurdum*, it proceeds by assuming a particular view is right, following the consequences of the view to its conclusion, and allowing the conclusion to reveal the view’s soundness or absurdity, without prescribing an alternative view (see Mookerjee 401). In *Echoes of Silence*, the view assumed as right is the socially dominant ideology that group solidarity and economic success take precedence over impartiality in law, justice and truth. The fictional world depicts the consequences of the ideology: those who subscribe to it may feel entitled to kill and claim what is not theirs to claim (Puteh), rape (Puteh’s brother) and manipulate facts (Jonathan and Tajuddin), causing those forced into compliance to distance themselves from the group through flight (Puteh), self-estrangement (Lim’s father and Michael), retaliatory non-participation (Lim) – or escape into wishful narratives about cosmic justice (the fictive author of the Malay legend). Since all such actions undermine rather than promote group solidarity and economic prosperity, the logical conclusion is that the ideology is self-defeating and therefore absurd. The novel may thus be read as a criticism of the prevailing cultural, political and legislative systems that promote and sustain a disregard for law, justice and truth in Malaysian society.

So why do they get away with murder?

It may be useful at this point to compare how the three novels deal with the issue of unpunished crimes. In *The Flame Tree* and *The Eleventh Finger*, personal redemption is offered as a way out, whereby the primary requisite is the wrongdoers’ realisation of

their connectedness to society and their willingness to act for the sake of others: Tan kills his own brother to save the life of a police officer and Li Lian gives up her baby to Bram. The second requisite is that the wrongdoers confess their guilt. However, the two novels differ in their concepts of the redemptive function of truth telling. In *The Flame Tree*, Tan's confession is directly instrumental in restoring law and justice. In *The Eleventh Finger*, Li Lian's confession does not have the same legal outcome. A close study of the various forms of truth telling in this multi-voiced novel shows that they function as rites of passage in a socially-oriented redemptive process: the first-person narrations signify readiness for self-examination, confessions the willingness to face the consequences of wrongdoings, and confiding in others the ability to trust. In *Echoes of Silence*, the option of personal redemption is not offered; the unrepentant Puteh gets away with murder because society's disregard for law, justice and truth allows her to. Her confession has redemptive value only in the eyes of the other characters in the fictional world; in the novel's Zen philosophical scheme, it is – like all narratives in the fictional and real worlds – just another fabrication in need of deconstruction.

Conclusion

This study of novelistic portrayals of abused women who get away with murder sheds light on an aspect of Malaysian crime fiction ignored until now: the depiction of moral universes in relation to social perceptions of law, justice and truth. Noted here are the novels' salient features. The past violence done to the women is not used to excuse their crimes, but to expose and criticise aspects of Malaysian society that encourage concealment of truth and obstruction of justice. The novels' resemblance to popular, western crime fiction is superficial; the narratives are informed by local cultural beliefs and philosophies, and some of the genre's conventions are either ignored or negated when the problematisation of local moral, legal, judicial and political ideologies, systems and practices so demands. All three novels suggest that psychological and societal problems are rooted in erroneous concepts of a moral universe. However, only *The Flame Tree* and *The Eleventh Finger* bring concepts of a virtuous, problem-solving universe to bear on the fictional world. In Zen-influenced *Echoes of Silence*, fictional events serve

only to expose the self-defeating consequences of a problematic ideology. This study thus shows that these novels by women about women criminals are not merely entertaining stories, but complex, philosophically grounded critiques of the moral implications of attitudes to law, justice and truth in contemporary Malaysia. It is hoped that this exploratory exposition of their philosophical frameworks will encourage other scholars of Malaysian literature in English to study the novels more closely, and from other theoretical perspectives.

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