

DRAMATIZING HISTORY

Reading Bakhtin's Carnival in Kee Thuan Chye's Plays

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Abstract

This paper explores the representations of Bakhtin's notion of the Carnival in two revised historical plays of Kee Thuan Chye. As a firm believer of freedom of expression, Kee Thuan Chye employs his plays as a medium to express his criticism towards and resistance against authority. His plays *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* (1994) and *Swordfish, then the Concubine* (2009) form the corpus of this study. This study investigates how Bakhtin's notion of the Carnival is represented in the plays which are reconstructions of history. Specifically, the constructs of the Carnival like the reversal of social hierarchy, grotesque realism, ambivalent laughter as a form of mockery, and self-fashioning from New Historicism are used to frame the analyses of the plays. The discussion reveals that those who were in power, namely the rulers and aristocrats of the periods evident in the plays, were guilty of various follies and flaws. The constructs of the Carnival also illustrate how historical truths can be questionable and identities can be re-fashioned by disregarding boundaries, structures, and hierarchies.

Keywords

Bakhtin; carnival; Kee Thuan Chye; new historicism; resistance; revisioning

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INTRODUCTION

Kee Thuan Chye, a Malaysian playwright, is well known for his vocal and fearless criticisms of vital socio-political issues in his plays. A leading figure in Malaysian literary works in English (MLE), he actively addresses the need for a reformed nation and national identity. His writings are largely motivated by his need to assert his Malaysian identity as well as to speak from his own “diaphragm” (Kee, “Digging into the Diaphragm” 314). His plays often convey his thoughts on issues pertinent to power, voice, and race relations. In the plays selected for this research, Kee Thuan Chye deals with certain historical events from the time of the ancient rule of the Malay Kings to the colonial and modern era in which he re-appropriates history and reinvents them according to his personal lens. Within the layers of his revisionist works, he has featured provoking issues such as power abuse and racial discrimination. Kee Thuan Chye (henceforth referred to as Kee) employs theater as his medium of expression and as an outlet to demand for a “more democratic and participatory political life” (Lo, *Staging Nation* 1). Due to the tendency of theatrical performances to be provocative at times, and also due to the function of theater as a “contested site of social imaginings,” the ruling elites have imposed strict control on the networks of information and have demanded for the producers of theater to abide by guidelines and censorship rules in their effort to curb “political expressions in the arts” (Lo, *Staging Nation* 2-4). However, regardless of such restrictions, Malaysian theaters have continued to become an arena for political commentaries as dramatists continuously test their boundaries with the authorities. The staging of plays like K.S Maniam’s *The Cord*, Kee’s 1984: *Here and Now* and Stella Kon’s *Emily of Emerald Hill*, to name a few, featured notions of appropriation and abrogation by dismantling and contesting common social and political perspectives and assumptions (Lo, *Staging Nation* 115).

Much of Kee’s political voice in his plays is expressed through the reconstruction of history. History is argued to be a mere representation of the past that was narrated from the perspectives of those in power. It is written based on a specific point of view concealed in the narrative, thus, inadvertently or otherwise, suppressing and veiling other perceptions and voices (Widdowson 500). In Kee’s plays, historical accounts are contested through the reconstruction of certain events according to various re-visioning strategies with the intention of foregrounding the suppressed voices or identities.

This study focuses on how Kee has reconstructed selected episodes from Malaysian historiography in his plays and how within these layers of reconstruction, certain significant characters are given impactful voice and agency in order for them to resist hegemonic power and authoritative discourse. In expressing his criticism, Kee uses the element of humor as one of his tools of resistance in his

plays like *We Could **** you, Mr. Birch* and *Swordfish, then the Concubine*. However, this element of humor is not presented for its typical comedic effect; instead Kee's humor is ambivalent in nature and carries covert meanings. This study attempts to examine the representation of "carnival" and "ambivalent laughter" in Kee's reconstructions of history in his plays. The theory of New Historicism and Bakhtin's constructs of the Carnival are employed as the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis.

THE PLAYS

The corpus for the current study comprises two of Kee's plays, *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* (1994) and *Swordfish, then the Concubine* (2009) (henceforth the plays will be called as *Birch* and *Swordfish*, respectively). In *Birch*, which was staged in the same year in Kuala Lumpur, Kee reconstructs a significant event in Malaysian history. The play depicting the events leading to the killing of the first British Resident to Perak, J.W.W Birch, and juxtaposed between the present and the past, was presented with a two-fold meaning within its narrative: to resist colonialist rule and to question the validity of history. The play moves between historical accounts and theatrical performances and the audience is made aware that the idea of chronicles and reality is merely a matter of perception (Phillip 98). *Birch* weaves together historical events with humor and irony in dealing with various issues that were of concern to Malaysians; for example, the abuse of power, the pursuit of self-interest and the clash between modernity and tradition.

A similar treatment of history is reflected in the play *Swordfish*. The play was staged in Singapore in 2011 by the Wild Rice theater group and was staged more recently in KLPAC (The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre) in November 2017. The Kuala Lumpur staging was directed by the playwright himself. The play is presented with the same cynical flair and humor as *Birch*. *Swordfish* deals mainly with the issues of power manipulation, greed, and extremism. Through his play, Kee even questions the validity of the decisions made in the Malaysian High Court in relation to the trials of several high-profile cases. Based on the depiction of some of the characters in this play, it would appear that the characters were inspired by real-life political figures in Malaysia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

New Historicism and the Re-visioning of History

It is viable for history to be re-visioned due to the awareness that history is not a coherent body of knowledge and it does not represent the “real” or only truth of the past. History is both elusive and subjective, thus, writers take the liberty to revise history according to their own lens and purpose. The re-visioning of history is motivated by the following factors: first is to “correct” history that could have been wrongly represented, and second is to resist history that oppresses by suppressing certain voices and identities in its discourse (Brantly 13). Since Kee’s plays appear to be consistent with the second factor, this study will focus on the emergence of new voices that resist oppression and authority. This aim is also driven by the claim that the representation of history is a deliberate political act to uphold an ideological positioning which is reflected in the manner a historian asserts his or her own point of view (Eagleton and Watkins 116). Therefore, it is imperative for a revisionist to contest such a view. The past needs to be revisited and reviewed from a different perspective to foreground different issues and voices. In addition, the act of re-visioning is also supported by Eagleton and Watkins’s claim that history is an open canvas, which entitles it to be revisited from the perspective of the present (117). Re-visioning allows for new history to emerge which may require a drastic change of perspective. New history will not only feature contradicting perspectives, but also show cultural differences and the relativity of truth (Bertens 148).

In another perspective, history and power share a close relationship. To determine the influence of power in historical accounts, New Historicism reverts to Foucault’s notion of power. When those in power present their version of history, it could be manipulated to block, to suppress, and to marginalize rival stories and discourses. History is therefore claimed to contain “discursive manifestations” that reveal the power relations and forces operating in a certain culture (Bertens 143). As proponents of New Historicism explore the past, they are likely to discover that the past is incomplete and even flawed. The existence of such flaws is evidence that we have been using a discourse that was shaped by our predecessors. To address these concerns, contemporary dramatists feel the urgent need to rewrite and reclaim history, as a tool of empowerment to represent alternative voices. Authors may return to history in order to develop historical fiction which presents an “alternative form of figural representations” (Aparna Dharwadker 43). Historical fiction should focus on the “inherited problems of historical representation” with an aim “to neutralise or repudiate the figurations of institutional history” (Aparna Dharwadker 44). Such fiction is perceived to represent an alternative source of historical knowledge to those who may be ideologically resistant to dominant narratives.

Another crucial concept in re-visioning history is “self-fashioning,” which allows for subversion of identities, and as a means to correct biased and narrow historical representations. It is also a method of challenging those in positions of authority. Authority is challenged when authors produce alternative narratives against biased historical accounts (Spivak 27). “To subvert” is a necessary expression, as we define our identities according to what we are not, hence the need to demonize or objectify what we are not as “others” (Selden and Widdowson 183). In the current study, the analysis will reveal “self-fashioning” as being evident in the character of Kuntum in the play *Birch*.

History is written with a specific agenda by the victors of history. This agenda is perceived to be political and ideological in nature. Through re-visioning, a “new” history that is more contemporary in nature emerges. Re-visioning features a new reality that has been re-situated (Schmitz 162). The borders of history are readjusted, hence, a New Historicist reading of a re-visioned play allows one to “track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margins of the text” (Greenblatt 4). A New Historicist critic believes that the past is not a constraint to an archives’ collection; instead it is a construct of textualized traces that are assembled in various configurations by the historian (Pieters 241). Moreover, history is also argued to be a temporary activity of narrating or representing the past (Montrose 781; Holderness 12). Therefore, it is almost impossible for us to experience the authentic past without the surviving textual traces.

Bakhtin’s Carnival and Ambivalent Laughter

The concept of Carnival or Carnavalesque by Bakhtin is one of the pivotal notions to be applied in this study as it helps to disclose the manner in which Kee portrays the reversal of social hierarchies as one of the means to deliver the themes in his plays. Carnival is one of Bakhtin’s most influential formulations in opposing monologic discourse, which he developed in *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Carnavalesque is a term used to describe “otherness” or literally to make “familiar relations strange” (Holquist 89). Bakhtin’s analysis shows how medieval carnivalesque festivals held an eminent place in the lives of medieval people. They participated in two contrasting worlds: the official or the serious, and the carnival life or the laughter. These two worlds co-existed in what Bakhtin refers to as a carnivalization of human consciousness. Bruner states that the construct of carnival is associated with civil disobedience and “democratic rebellion” (138), where protest is used to oppose oppressive political culture. In general, carnival has a close connection with a way of life:

Carnival belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play. In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (Bakhtin 124)

Bakhtin's Carnival is the "antinomies of life and death" which suggests renewal and regeneration (Knowles 4). Bakhtin states that during a carnival, all hierarchies and inequalities are suspended and consecrated (315). In the hype of the carnival, all are considered as equal. Its equality is reflected through "participative celebration," where there are no active or passive participants (McCaw 52). Carnival opposes all forms of authority and celebrates the joyful relativity of order. Moreover, carnival demonstrates "positive degradation and humiliation" through "creative disrespect" (Stallybrass and White 26). The construct helps the readers to value the "liberating energy" of the carnivalesque (Bernstein 100). Bruner asserts that the liberating energy is channeled to criticize government officials as a means to demand significant political reform. A similar view is asserted by Tam who states that a carnival is a "playful approach or a comic art form of social, political and cultural protest and resistance" against authoritative and regimented structures (177). Carnival resistance can be detected through frank and free speeches, enclosed social distance, and adjourned norms of etiquette and decency (Tam 180).

Another crucial construct in the notion of Carnival is the element of laughter. Laughter in carnival is another agent of resistance as it indicates "victory over fear" (Morris 209). The ability to laugh shows defeat of power as "praise, flattery and hypocrisy" are resisted (Morris 210). Bakhtin has categorized carnival laughter into three categories: continuous festive laughter, universal laughter, and ambivalent laughter that both "mock and triumph" and "praise and abuse" (Schmidt 73; Morris 211). These three types of laughter demolish hierarchies, end fear, unmask ideologies, and enable creativity. Bakhtin argues that everything that is great must have an element of laughter, a genuine laugh that is "joyful, open and festive" (202), in contrast to satirical, negative and closed laughter. In addition, laughter is also perceived to be uplifting and liberating as it clears the paths toward multilateral relationships (Hwa Yol Jung 86). The current study looks at ambivalent laughter that mocks in Kee's *Birch* to determine and identify evidence of incompetent leaders (in this case, Raja Abdullah) and the manner in which hierarchies are dismissed.

In addition, Carnival also aids in multivoiced or polyphonic resistance to hierarchies as it "laughs" at authority. The laughter does not indicate joy, but it is ambivalent in nature. This ambivalent laughter is dialogic because it carries the binary opposition of being cheerful and annihilating, festive and mocking. The

laughter is a mockery of those in power and those subjected to it. Bakhtin calls it carnival laughter because it opposes the official as it celebrates a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (284). Knowles further asserts that the carnival’s “egalitarian and derisive” nature enables social hierarchies to be suspended during a carnival (6).

With the suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions during a carnival, fear and piety are demolished, which is the prerequisite component that one would need to approach or resist the world realistically (Bakhtin 303). The binary division between “official and unofficial, low and high” reflects Bakhtin’s resistance towards “principles of structuralism” (Knowles 6). Resistance to hierarchy and carnival laughter can be achieved due to the polyphonic feature of a text as it strives to prove that the hierarchies are mistaken. Carnival embodies a folk wisdom that celebrates the body and opposes all forms of authority. Bakhtin derives this notion from various medieval celebrations in which “licensed misrule” was practiced, usually through mockery directed towards the authority (310). The mighty was ridiculed, and a fool was crowned and uncrowned. It was a display of subversion and embodiment of the “reversible world” (Bakhtin 310). Due to its eccentric nature, carnival is meant to draw attention to its variety and to indicate that our social roles are culturally made and produced rather than given or “naturally mandated” (Holquist 89). Hwa Yol Jung concurs with this view, that carnivalization is specifically aimed to transform, transgress, and subvert the established order of society and history (92).

Bakhtin also emphasizes on “carnival misalliances” that promote familiar contact among people regardless of their hierarchies (Morris 192). The free and familiar contact among people will juxtapose and reconcile persons and things that are normally separate. Carnival brings the opposites together by unifying “the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, and the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin 123). This misalliance violates and ridicules everything that is sublime, powerful, and sacred by combining it with the obscene or the scatological. The effect of this misalliance is a topsy-turvy world in which the logic of normal life is no longer valid.

Carnival is certainly a show, but it is a show without a division between performers and spectators. It plays with everything that is sacred and sublime by making a parody out of it. It abolishes the distinctions between participant and viewer as carnival is not to be seen, instead, its spirit of universality allows everyone to embrace and participate in the idea (Bakhtin 303). Furthermore, the carnival not only gives room to the society that is confined to customs and hierarchies to break free from the rigid rules of everyday life but also it symbolizes “the moment of transition” that is essential to the society (Schmitz 70). The temporary suspension

of the norms and hierarchic distinctions among men is known as a “second life outside officialdom” which co-exists with the serious and feudal cultural forms (Morris 197). Carnival then becomes a tool for resistance or an alternative strategy to shift power from the authority to a new agent.

Therefore, one might consider Carnival as being marked by the eccentricity of life that has been turned inside out. One playful event that is especially characteristic of the carnivalesque spirit is “the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king”—it provides a vivid and impressive staging of death and rebirth (Schmitz 72). The juxtaposition between death and rebirth reflects the “joyful relativity” of all structures and orders (Kershner 25; Schmitz 71). As the world is turned upside down during a carnival, two occurrences can be seen: the process of “degradation” and “grotesque realism.” According to Bakhtin, to degrade refers to the act of “to bury, to sow and to kill simultaneously” in order to produce or to regenerate “something more and better” (21), while the notion of grotesque realism is a body in becoming and “occluded by the aesthetics of neoclassical beauty” (Knowles 5). These two occurrences are interlinked as during the course of grotesque realism; everything that is high is lowered and leveled to the earth. In the current study, these processes will be evident in the analyses of the characters of Maharaja (the king) and Iskandar (the prince) in the play, *Swordfish* (2009).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Carnival – The Reversal of Social Hierarchies

Both *Birch* and *Swordfish* adopt a carnivalesque resistance strategy. The notion of power vested in the leaders of the state is mocked and resisted in the plays. The flexibility of Carnival in which it can be both “the subject and the method of study” (Hiebert 114) is evident in the plays when the characters of the monarch and aristocrats are mocked and degraded in an apparent attempt to illustrate their follies.

The carnivalesque attitude of the play *Swordfish* is represented through its treatment of the characters of Maharaja (the king) and Iskandar (the prince). The complex power operation is revealed through the forced obligation of the masses to adhere strictly to the command of the ruling elite which is “yours is not to reason why, yours is but to do and die” (Kee, *Swordfish* 10). The Maharaja seems to be ignorant of and oblivious to the calamity that has encroached into his kingdom. While his people are killed by the sudden and unprecedented attack of schools of swordfish, the Maharaja’s selfishness and unconcerned and nonchalant attitude

are mocked openly. He is portrayed to be more interested in collecting the fish which “tore the man’s back” (Kee, *Swordfish* 10) for display on his palace wall. His leadership is questionable when he weighs the life and death of Hang Nadim, the boy who rescued Singapura. The Maharaja asserts that the boy “means nothing to me” (Kee, *Swordfish* 14), thus allowing the palace officials to proceed with their malicious plan to sentence Nadim to death. In a monologue, the Maharaja claims that he lacks the energy to discuss further Hang Nadim’s fate, therefore, his minister receives the mandate to do “what you think is best, I’m going to bed” (Kee, *Swordfish* 14). Through this monologue, the flaw of the Maharaja is made evident as he does not possess the qualities of a Sultan as outlined in “Undang-undang Melaka” (*The Laws of Malacca*) (1415) which state that the Sultan is to be merciful, generous, courageous, and just (Liaw 177). The denigration of the Maharaja highlights Bakhtin’s concept of the Carnival, as the presence of Carnival is indicated by the suspension of hierarchy and established order. Apart from that, it also reflects the time for “becoming, change and renewal” (Bakhtin 10). This parallels Kee’s own aspiration who insists on “change” and “reform” in order to build a “better Malaysia” (Kee 289). The Maharaja represents a corrupted and parasitic system which should not be tolerated (Yao 71). His imprudence reflects his unworthiness of loyalty and submission from his *rakyat* (subjects).

When Iskandar succeeds the throne after his father, the Maharaja, his image too is ridiculed and denigrated through what Bakhtin calls the process of “grotesque realism” (19). In Bakhtin’s *Rabaleis and His World*, the grotesque involves taking that which is sublime, spiritual, noble, honourable, and then undermining it to make it appear revolting, degraded, and disgusting. Essentially, grotesque realism involves the process of degradation which is “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” and reduced to the “material level, to the sphere of earth” (Bakhtin 19-20). Bakhtin further elucidates that the idea of degradation connotes “to bury, to sow, and to kill” (21) in order to produce something better. Despite occupying the peak of social hierarchy and being “glorified” by his people, Iskandar is portrayed to be only at par with, if not below, his people.

The process of grotesque realism begins by illuminating Iskandar’s main folly, cowardice. He fears his own ministers, whom he equates to thugs with the ability to terminate him. He admits that he is “weak” and “isolated” and unable to execute his ministers for “they have grassroots support” (Kee, *Swordfish* 33). This episode also reinforces the idea of invisible power. The complex and opaque power network within the palace itself shows that true power does not rest entirely on the leaders of the hierarchy; instead it lies within the invisible hands that dictate the movements and decisions of these leaders. This power operation is closely related to the ideological standing of the dominating institutions. The dominant nature of ideology, which is integrated within the system of monarchy and the

concepts of *daulat*¹ (sovereignty), *derhaka*² (treason) and blind obedience are the state apparatuses that legitimize power abuse by the dominant groups in the process of pursuing or fulfilling their personal agenda or objectives (Ganakumaran Subramaniam 35).

When Singapura is under siege, Iskandar, who is the Commander in Chief, fails to protect his *rakyat* who rely on and believe in him as their Sultan. Iskandar, in his state of denial, blames his ministers for not resolving the issue for “it’s their job to handle such problems” (Kee, *Swordfish* 82). He is reduced to being a victim of war and realizes the possibility of him being killed and his body mutilated by the enemy. The final step in the process of grotesque realism is completed when Iskandar flees to Johor leaving his people behind. Despite its notorious reputation, Johor is deemed a better choice since “Singapura is so small” (Kee, *Swordfish* 80). It is said that soon after Iskandar left Singapura, the monarchy system was abolished. Ironically, despite its geographical size, Singapura survives the attack and it rebuilds its empire to eventually become a successful international port (Abshire 22). Iskandar’s degradation or grotesque realism as he was metaphorically purged or “killed” by his kingdom illustrates that the dominance asserted by the authority can be challenged and subverted.

In addition, the drastic shift in Iskandar’s image indicates an “artistic and ideological expression of a mighty awareness of history” (Bakhtin 25). It is a deliberate move to emasculate Iskandar of his royal traits. Kee’s re-visioning of the historical episodes is reflective of his aspiration for a better Malaysia, which requires the people to speak up and take the bold action of bringing about change in the government, so that “real reform” could be realized (Jee 2010).

In the other play, *Birch*, the monarch is featured and represented by Sultan Abdullah. Cheah exposes Sultan Abdullah as being at fault for consulting the British to resolve the political conflicts in Perak (80). Abdullah is depicted as being desperate to succeed the throne to preserve his privileges and status. His agreement to allow the British intervention angers the Malay chiefs who label him unworthy of the throne for the British seem to have overpowered him. Realizing that he was powerless to resist the British, he agrees to collaborate in the conspiracy to assassinate Birch. Based on his folly as recorded in history, *Birch*’s Abdullah is given a comical and carnivalesque portrayal.

Abdullah’s contemptible and insignificant role as a ruler is mocked substantially in the play. He only makes his appearance in the play after the forty-first page. He is known to be a man who yearns for “100 percent freedom” (Kee, *We Could **** You, Mr Birch* 65) and desperately tries to hold on to his slipping power as a Sultan. Being the Sultan does not necessarily mean that he is above the system. According

to Abdul Aziz Bari, the common view that the Sultan is an “oriental or benevolent despot” is erroneous (84). He elaborates that the power of the Sultan is not total and absolute as the Sultan, being a Muslim, is limited by the rules dictated by Islam. Therefore, it can be deduced that despite the Sultan being the supreme symbol of authority for the Malays, as well as being the “unifying force preventing the state from disintegrating” (Abdul Aziz Bari 84), the Sultan is susceptible to committing mistakes and can be ineffective in his rule. In this case, the Sultan’s power was diminished by colonial intervention in the administration of the state.

The appalling idea of allowing a foreigner to interfere with the affairs of the state is responded to with a cynical remark by Abdullah in *Birch* who states his intention to implement a policy “to buy British last!” (Kee “We Could **** You Mr Birch” 72). This statement obviously alludes to the former (and now the current) Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir, who adopted a *Look East* policy after a brief confrontation with the British government. Bakhtin argues that such parodic discourse may use someone else’s voice or intention to hint of a subverted purpose, ultimately resulting in a clash of ideologies (75). *Birch* not only criticizes the folly of the Malay Sultanate, but also Malaysia’s diplomatic policy.

Another key aspect of Carnival apparent within the play *Birch* is the feminist angle in relation to the dominance of patriarchy. In fact, Bakhtin is argued to be a feminist (Halasek 68) as his notions are also found to address feminist concerns: “power relations, social and cultural marginalization and political subversion” (Halasek 65). Within the construct of Carnival “rebellion and subversion” are parallel with the agenda of feminism that reflect “social, linguistic and political rebellion” (Halasek 67). The construct of Carnival, therefore, is not restricted to merely being a tool for resisting the establishment. In *Birch*, Carnival is also used to study the resistance against another type of authority, i.e. patriarchy. Resistance against patriarchy is reflected through a fictitious female character, Kuntum. She is portrayed as another carnivalesque character who does not belong to any “neat, ethical, social or historiographical category” (Watt 98). Initially, Kuntum is positioned as a typical colonized woman entrapped in a stern patriarchal society which objectifies her as a sex object. She is lusted after by Dato Sagor, whose character has been reconstructed to appear as a “lovesick fool” (Kee, *We Could **** You, Mr Birch* 79) rather than as an honorable nobleman as reported in history. He unashamedly pursues Kuntum despite her status as a slave and a married woman. In the play, Sagor declares his need for Kuntum to bear sons for him. He openly expresses his disappointment towards his own wife by cursing her for bearing him only daughters. In Sagor’s eyes, Kuntum’s worth is measured only by her reproductive ability rather than her resilience and strength in enduring hardship. Fathering a son is a mark of a man’s masculinity and virility. Liliequist asserts that in the nineteenth century, sexual behavior and desire of men revolved around

domination and demonstration of social power (63). Dato Sagor shifts the blame or rather his inability to father sons onto his wife as a form of denial of his emasculated masculinity. In his desperate attempt to redeem his masculinity, Dato Sagor turns to Kuntum whom he perceives as capable of bearing him the sons he has been longing for. Women's reproductive capacities have been identified as the root cause of oppression due to the value that men place on those capacities and the power they derive from their control of them (Beechey 78). Such objectification further degrades Kuntum's position from the perspective of Sagor. However, Sagor's lust for Kuntum, despite her status as a slave, eventually prompts Kuntum to transform herself by utilizing her feminine power.

Kuntum's degradation and debasement actually become the catalyst for her reformation and self-fashioning as she transforms herself into an empowered and liberated woman. This newfound power reflects New Historicism's notion of self-fashioning. Kuntum's refusal to be objectified and to be a victim of patriarchy empowers her and enables her to resist Sagor's sexual advances upon her. This agency within Kuntum projects her as a woman who is well ahead of her time. Kuntum's self-fashioning dimension actually enhances her carnivalesque attitude as her actions are revealed to defy both authority and hierarchy. After resisting Sagor's sexual advances for so long, she defies her tradition and even religion by surrendering to Birch's gentle treatment. In the play, Birch is seen to seduce her by acknowledging her as a woman whose eyes are radiant and is able to "think for herself" and "has more strength than some of the chiefs" (Kee, *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* 58). Philips argues that Kuntum is a woman who is unafraid to articulate her own desire and needs (92). She openly acknowledges her sexuality after being forced to be apart from her husband by Sagor. Her surrender to Birch is less likely an act of promiscuity and more likely "a carefully calculated decision and a manipulative act" (Bakar, Yusof, and Vengadasamy 101).

In the play, Kuntum manipulates both Birch and Dato Sagor for her own advantage. Birch, a white colonialist, was more powerful than Dato Sagor, a powerless Malay elite. Therefore, Kuntum relies on Birch to rescue her from the clutches of Dato Sagor. The self-fashioned Kuntum openly mocks and rejects Sagor over a "Mat Salleh" who is not necessarily sexually superior (Bakar, Yusof, and Vengadasamy 102). Her dominant feminine trait has the ability to emasculate and reduce the power of both Sagor and Birch. Both of them feel frustrated upon their failure to "derive pleasure from the woman who is supposed to be...subordinate to both of them" (Phillip 94). Kuntum's controversial act is consistent with a feminist dialogics trait which identifies women like Kuntum as a carnivalesque character. According to Bauer, women who are entrapped in patriarchal communities are considered as "other to the norms of their community" (11). Through her empowerment, Kuntum

achieves her state of ideological becoming after she successfully exposes the dominant codes, which reveal the chauvinism of her male counterparts.

Though Kuntum is empowered, she is painted to be a morally ambiguous character. Kuntum participates in the play's alienating effect, which is part of Kee's use of Brecht's dramatic techniques when she drops out of character to justify her actions. As a woman who was born into "communities that valorised the patriachs," Kuntum has to fight the "inherited social discourse" to refashion herself and "rearticulate her intentions" (Bauer and McKinstry 2). Kuntum's justification as observed by Watt throws readers into an "ethically grey territory" as they speculate if Kuntum's surrender to Birch is one way to assert her independence, rather than as an act of being unscrupulous (99). Kuntum's multi-level representations cannot be classified as belonging to a simplistic good or evil category. Watt further asserts that Kuntum does not leave the readers with the option to place her within "the banalities of dichotomies" (99) that limit the reach of both postcolonial and feminist criticism. Kuntum is the representative of the downtrodden people who would take action for the sake of survival. She is not armed with privileges and is triple colonized by colonial forces, the patriarchal structure and class division. Any judgement of her actions must take into consideration the complex intersections within which she had to function. Therefore her character does not adhere to simple and conventional moral traits (Watt 100).

Kuntum's decision to provide sexual favor to Birch in return for protection is portrayed with cynical humor, and demonstrates her standing as a carnivalesque character who dares to challenge or to an extreme extent, even mock her religion by openly committing adultery, which is strictly forbidden in Islam. Analyzing Kuntum's character from the lens of Bakhtin's notion of Carnival, Kuntum's mocking of authority (i.e. patriarchy, class, and religion) reflects her rejection of boundaries, while she was en route to becoming a liberated woman by resisting and refusing to acknowledge Sagor and Birch's authority over her.

Thus far, the representations of history in *Birch* and *Swordfish* have shown how history can be manipulated to reveal significant issues. Despite being at the top of a society's hierarchical structure, a leader may fail to embrace the qualities of a just and wise leader. In fact, Kee in his re-visioning of history has shown that these leaders are susceptible to abuse of power, thus illustrating their unworthiness. Furthermore, the plays also expose the struggle of the less powerful, for example, the positioning and roles of women during the colonial and feudalistic era. In order to highlight this struggle, there is a need to perceive history from fresh perspectives, by addressing the needs of the marginalized groups from the perspectives of the present. Through the constructs of reversal of social hierarchy, grotesque realism,

and self-fashioning, the plays project forms of resistance against the authority of the establishment and the patriarchal system.

Ambivalent Laughter as an Element of Mockery

Within the construct of Carnival, there is also the notion of ambivalent laughter. The play *Birch* within its parody contains many instances that ignite laughter. However, this laughter does not embody joy. Instead it is ambivalent in nature. Bakhtin states that “the people’s festive laughter is also directed at those who laugh” (12). In *Birch*, the object of laughter is Sultan Abdullah. He is openly mocked as he is depicted as a comic relief in the play, rather than a respectable and honorable Sultan. The laughter that is generated by Abdullah is more ambivalent than humorous. Ambivalent laughter is a significant construct of the Carnival, that both “mocks and triumphs” and “praises and abuses” (Schmitz 200; Morris 181). Abdullah is shown to be squeamish and even has a girlish scream. Abdullah’s scream could invite laughter from the audience, however, the triggered laughter is not meant to be comical but a cynical one. Apart from that, the element of Carnival is also evident in the speech patterns of Raja Yusuf who, in response to Abdullah’s formal and verbose speech, criticizes Abdullah with his short, cynical, and blunt remarks:

- SULTAN: We are happy that you have answered our summons to gather here, the chiefs upriver and the chiefs downriver putting aside differences to discuss an issue of great concern. Since the beginning of time, we have had our own civilisation, our own customs and beliefs, our own culture. We have lived peacefully and harmoniously according to our ways. We –
- YUSUF: Tuanku, please get to the point.
- SULTAN: Now, the white man Birch is causing us grief. He wants to subvert our tradition by taking away our customary function of collecting revenue.
- YUSUF: You mean he wants to take away our means to get filthy rich.
- SULTAN: He wants us to take advice from him on everything we do.
- YUSUF: Except anything to do with custom and religion.
- SULTAN: Raja Yusuf, if you want to talk so much, why don’t you be a Sultan?
- YUSUF: Do you really mean that, Tuanku?
- SULTAN: Er...no.
- YUSUF: Please carry on. (Kee, *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* 66)

Yusuf’s cynical remarks in response to Abdullah indicate the carnival speech pattern as explained by that with the suspension of and disregard for hierarchy, the “verbal etiquette and discipline” originally shared among the carnival participants are replaced by “indecent words and expressions” (Bakhtin 16). Abdullah’s opening

speech is meant to assert his regal position, while Yusuf's impatient remarks are targeted to expose Abdullah's weakness. Bakhtin also elaborates that such temporary suspension of hierarchical rank leads to "special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free" with no distance between the participants because they are being liberated "from norms of etiquette and decency" (Bakhtin 10).

Further into this scene, while discussing the fate of Birch, Kee shows how power within the monarchy is easily manipulated by Abdullah:

SULTAN: O.K! Datuk Maharaja Lela has proposed what could be a workable solution. What do you all think?

YUSUF: I disagree with it.

SULTAN: Why?

YUSUF: It is against the laws of God and man to take a person's life.

CHIEF 1: But we are only thinking of the people. They will be confused and without direction if our customs are not protected.

YUSUF: You are only thinking of your self-interest.

SULTAN: Er...why don't we all vote on it? After all, we are a democracy.

YUSUF: Are we?

CHIEF 3: Tuanku, by the power vested in you as Sultan, Tuanku can declare this a democracy.

SULTAN: That is a good idea. I declare this a democracy. Now let's vote.

CHIEF 1: I agree with Datuk Maharaja Lela.

CHIEF 3: I too.

CHIEF 2: I am not so sure of it but as the Sultan is my leader I will follow what he decides.

YUSUF: Yaaa, the leader is always right. (Kee, *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* 69)

The above scene reflects two primary purposes of Kee's re-visioning of history: to redefine the role and function of power as dictated in history and to project competing discourses or interests as outlined in New Historicism. The Sultan's credibility as a leader is ridiculed by Yusuf who cynically comments that a leader is in no position to commit mistakes. At the end of the play, Abdullah's carnivalesque portrayal is subverted into a strategic player within the play's notion of fictionalized history:

SULTAN: I was exiled to the Seychelles. Where I frolicked in the sand and basked in the sun, and in the days before Safe Sex fathered many children and faced dozens of paternity suits. If you believe that, you will believe anything. (Kee, *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* 82)

CONCLUSION

As the analysis demonstrates, the follies and flaws of leaders in *Birch* and *Swordfish* are aptly illustrated through the constructs of Bakhtin's Carnival. The leaders are depicted to be carnivalesque, which is a deliberate move to emasculate the leaders of their high and powerful positions and royal traits. The mockery of their power dispels the ideology that leaders are indispensable. In order to represent the past and contest history, this study also reveals the use of several dramatic tools in the selected plays, namely assimilation of contemporary elements, and juxtaposition between the past and the present. By applying the constructs of Carnival like the reversal of social hierarchy, grotesque realism, ambivalent laughter as a form of mockery, and self-fashioning from New Historicism, the study reveals the weaknesses and flaws of those who were in power or those who wielded authority. These elements of the Carnival and the fictitious elements of history employed in the plays illustrate a subversion of power, and a disassociation with our perceived historical "truths" as the leaders in the plays are depicted as being power-hungry, yet weak and unwise. By rejecting and mocking hierarchy and authority through historical re-visioning and carnivalesque portrayals, readers and audiences of the plays may feel compelled to review historical narratives and ponder on what "historical truths" really mean.

Notes

1. The term *daulat* (sovereignty) as asserted by Zainal Abidin Abdul Wahid endows a Sultan with absolute rights and privileges that place him above his society, invincible against reproach and criticism and entails unquestioning loyalty from his subjects (*Sejarah Melayu* 98).
2. Zainal Abidin Abdul Wahid further remarks on the notion of *derhaka* (treason) as a concept related to *daulat*. It could for convenience be translated as “disobedience” though in actuality, *derhaka* has a wider meaning. If one were disobedient to his ruler, one could be regarded as *derhaka*, if one were to rebel against him, one could be considered as *derhaka*, or if one’s father ordered to be killed by a sultan for unjustifiable reasons, one would still be regarded as being *derhaka*, if one were to keep his parents from being killed (*Sejarah Melayu* 102).
3. Ideological becoming is one of the constructs from Bakhtin’s Dialogism. Bakhtin argued that authoritative discourse can be subjugated by the internally persuasive. To resist authoritative discourse mark one’s ideological becoming in which one transforms an authoritative discourse into “internally persuasive” that enables them to be critical in forming new knowledge or perspective. This process happens when we digest others’ words from our own perspective. When we merge our own words with the words of others, it creates creative, productive, new and independent words which do not remain in isolation. These new discourse would be applied to new contexts and contribute to one’s ideological development as they also participate in intense interaction with other hegemonic discourses and ideological points of view.

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