

Malaysia's Development Success Story: Critical Responses in Contemporary Malaysian Novels in English

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Abstract

Malaysia is often hailed as a development success story. However, one criticism of this success story is the over-emphasis on the ideology of economic and capitalist growth by the state in its setting, determining and directing of development. This paper looks into some of the most interesting and critical reflections on development. Representing prominent voices in Malaysian literature in English, K. S. Maniam, Chuah Guat Eng and Yang-May Ooi delve into Malaysia's development success story through *Between Lives* (2003), *Days of Change* (2010) and *The Flame Tree* (1998), respectively. Through textual analysis, I examine how these writers treat the state's prevailing ideology of development. Through their creative responses to the rapid development that has occurred in Malaysia, Maniam, Chuah and Ooi offer individual expression and powerful critiques of development, not merely reflecting on the ideology of economic and capitalist growth but also illustrating different perspectives on development based on notions of social justice, democracy and cultural sustainability. That is not to say that they reject development. On the contrary, they acknowledge that development is part and parcel of social, economic and political processes. However, through their treatment of development, they bring to light other equally important issues, thus emphasizing the flaws in adopting a development model that is essentially based on economic and capitalist growth.

Keywords: Malaysia, development, Malaysian literature, critique

1. Introduction

Development in Malaysia has its roots in the former British colonial administration. Under British colonial rule (1824-1957), development concerns were largely economic and revolved around capitalist accumulation meant to serve British business interests in Malaya, as well as the need to industrialize Europe. As Jomo and Wee (2013) explain, "colonial bias for these interests was reflected in public development expenditure that prioritized economic infrastructure to service the primary commodity export economy" (p. 50). When Malaya gained independence in 1957, it inherited this colonial economic system. Back then, poverty prevailed and the identification of race with economic function was rampant. The Malays, who were the majority, were identified with rural peasantry. The Chinese were associated with urban and capitalist businesses. The Indians were identified with rural rubber estates. To end these social and economic disparities, economic development took precedence over other things as it was believed that this would increase the people's quality of life, which in turn would lead to political stability, racial equality and national unity. Development therefore, implemented mainly through economic and political measures taken by the government, became the nation's overriding priority and ideology. Like most Third World countries, the state plays the dual role of developer and protector of the natural environment (Bryant & Bailey, 1997, p. 48). In the same context, development in Malaysia is largely state-led and state-facilitated (Smeltzer, 2009, p. 97). And over the years, development efforts in Malaysia have seen "greater state intervention" (Jomo & Wee, 2013, p. 4).

Indeed, the ideological underpinnings of development in Malaysia seem to revolve around the nation's economic goals and achievements, which are not that different from the colonialist goals of development. In the wake of decolonization, the state concentrated on economic methods and schemes to catch up with the already advanced and industrialized West. Many policies were devised and implemented. The period between 1970 and 1990, when the New Economic Policy (NEP) was fully enforced, became a most important period in the country's development. This was further reinforced by the Vision 2020 mission, introduced in 1991, which aimed, and

aims, to elevate Malaysia to a fully developed country by 2020. Other equally important policy instruments and ideological apparatuses included control over the media and prohibitive laws such as the Internal Security Act (now replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act), the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Emergency Ordinance, the Official Secrets Act and the Sedition Act, which legitimate the state's ideology of development, and thus restrict ideas that could challenge the state (Humphreys, 2010, p. 25). Malaysia's economy accelerated tremendously from the 1970s to the 1990s, and this tremendous growth was often linked to development. By the mid-1990s, Malaysia had experienced rapid tremendous economic growth, equitable distribution of income and dramatic improvements in human welfare, thus epitomizing the "miracle thesis", "paragon of development" and "newly industrializing country" that have often been associated with other nation-states in South-East Asia (Rigg, 1997, p. 3; Dixon & Smith, 1997, p. 1).

Rapid development during the period of the NEP and subsequent decades has undoubtedly resulted in a tremendously improved economy. Described by Pereira and Chee (2005) as an "interventionist developmental regime", the state through its power has "delivered" development for the people and has shown "positive prospects" for further development (p. 142). This unprecedented growth is usually attributed to the state's adoption of free market and neo-liberal development principles and the inculcation of unique Asian cultural values, as well as a strong interventionist role to improve the domestic economy (McGregor, 2008, p. 55). However, this success story of development has attracted much criticism. One criticism of this success story is the authoritarian/paternalistic role of the state in setting, determining and directing the economy, to the extent that it became a problem to question the "received" doctrine of development, which saw economic and capitalist priorities prevail over other equally important development concerns, such as poverty alleviation and national unity (Lee, 2004, pp. 66-67). To complicate matters further, a politics of "developmentalism" was also seen in the 1990s, especially among the business and middle classes. Loh (2002) describes this as a "cultural consequence" of a dirigiste developmentalist state that valorises economic growth and political stability, attributable to none other than the state (p. 21). In the words of Saravanamuttu and Loh (2006), "Developmentalism has affected all ethnic communities and tends to create a quiescent political culture in which people see the state as the guarantor of a modern livelihood and lifestyle" (p. 30). To some extent, it is this politics that severely curtails democratic discourse in Malaysia (Loh, 2002, p. 21).

In some contemporary Malaysian novels in English, I find some of the most interesting and critical reflections on development. Representing prominent voices in Malaysian literature in English, K. S. Maniam, Chuah Guat Eng and Yang-May Ooi delve into Malaysia's development success story through *Between Lives* (2003), *Days of Change* (2010) and Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998), respectively. In this paper, I analyse how these writers treat the state's prevailing ideology of development, with the understanding that development is the array of measures, plans and policies that are introduced at many levels in society with the aim of improving the quality of people's lives. Borrowing from Lee's deliberation on the state of development in Malaysia (pp. 66-67), I understand the state's prevailing ideology of development to be development measures that focus on economic and capitalist priorities. Maniam, Chuah and Ooi, through their creative responses to the rapid development that has occurred in Malaysia, offer individual expression and powerful critiques on development, not merely reflecting on this ideology but also illustrating different perspectives on development based on notions of social justice, democracy and cultural sustainability. That is not to say that they reject development. On the contrary, they acknowledge that development is part and parcel of social, economic and political processes. However, through their treatment of development, they bring to light other equally important issues, thus emphasizing the flaws in adopting a development model that is essentially based on economic and capitalist growth.

2. K. S. Maniam's *Between Lives*

Between Lives (henceforth, *BL*) spans significant phases in Malaysia's history: from British colonization to contemporary Malaysia. These phases chart the various phases of Malaysia's economic development which, Jomo and Wee argue, are underpinned by "appropriate government interventions and reforms" (1). These phases too, as depicted in *BL*, chart the various social realities experienced by the Indian diaspora in Malaysia. Although the Indian community in Malaysia today, once largely a community of poor rubber plantation workers, has become diversified economically, they are still perceived as being "marginalized" in socio-economic and political terms (Muzaffar, 1993, p. 21; Appudurai & Dass, 2008, pp. 8-12; Tate, 2008, p. 179; Manickam, 2009, p. 379). Political representations during and after independence were generally weak and ineffectual, on the sidelines and failing to lobby the powers that be to address the marginalization of the Indians (Tate, 2008, p. 180). The NEP, implemented in the aftermath of the 13 May 1969 riot, sought to redress the then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's laissez-faire attitude towards development which continued the economic pattern initiated by the British and neglected some pertinent social issues, such as poverty, landlessness and income

disparity between the races in Malaysia. This action policy, however, is said to have been oblivious to the plight of the Indians, especially those plantation workers who make up the bulk of the Indian population. For many decades after independence, Indian plantation workers have been subjected to displacement from their dwellings on the plantation estates due to development efforts that saw most plantations disintegrate to make way for housing and industrial estates (Govindasamy, 2010, pp. 95-96). As Govindasamy (2010) has noted, deprived of the place where they have lived for generations, and with which they have cultural links, emotional ties and dependency, these Indians have suffered from a lack of clear state policies to resettle and empower them (p. 102). In short, the NEP has helped to elevate the economic status of the other predominant races but not the Indians, thus contributing further to their marginalization (Manickam, 2009, p. 146).

In *BL*, Maniam acknowledges the progress resulting from the state's developmental efforts. Sumitra's father, for instance, epitomizes the Malaysian Indian man who has worked hard to achieve a good social standing in Malaysian society: "retired from a fourth or fifth ranking job in the local branch of some ministry – a job that brought him a substantial gratuity and a comfortable pension" (9). Sumitra herself has assimilated into multicultural Malaysia. She makes friends with people from other races, receives a good education and epitomises the modern Malaysian woman. Sumitra and her father, in some ways, represent the socio-economic success of Indians in post-independence Malaysia.

Through Sellamma, Maniam represents the 'other' facade of development in Malaysia. Following the disintegration of her family after the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), Sellamma lives by herself on land that was given to her father by his white, rubber-estate employer. After the death of her youngest brother, she disappears for many years and then comes back, doing some odd jobs before taking up subsistence farming on her land, at the same time becoming a recluse. This voluntary exile from the multicultural community surrounding her land goes on for many years until Sumitra comes into the picture. Through Sellamma, Maniam makes a moving statement about how the state's development ideology and subsequent policies have historically and politically overlooked and alienated the Indians. Left to fend for herself, Sellamma remains cocooned on her land for many years. This, relatively, alludes to the majority of Indian communities which had remained cocooned on the rural plantations, especially in the early decades following independence, with scant regard by the state for their socio-economic mobility (Govindasamy, 2010, p. 96). Sellamma's isolation attests to the failure of the state to integrate effectively all the races in the mainstream socio-economic development.

In *BL*, Maniam highlights many of the downsides of development. One of these is the involuntary displacement of people from their land, commonly referred to as 'land grab'. Indeed, since independence, development projects that include dams, roads, housing and commercial and industrial uses have resulted in the acquisition of land and the displacement of politically and economically weaker communities and individuals. Since land is a state matter, the state has the incontestable power to designate land for agriculture, building and industry, to impose and alter conditions and restrictions on interest, and to reserve State land by notification in the Gazette for any public purpose, such as recreation parks (Abdul Kader, 2000, p. 14). With this power assumed by the state, it can also seize private land for development by private companies and individuals. In the same context, any piece of land that it has acquired for a public purpose can also be used for private development. In recent decades, state governments have been the subject of public complaints and criticisms for abusing their powers in relation to the acquisition, use and disposal of land. There have been too many cases of power abuse, such as: land being given to individuals or companies based on favouritism or cronyism; reserve land being alienated without revocation of the reservation; public ground, open spaces, hill lands and water catchment areas being given away for housing or commercial development (Abdul Kader, p. 15). Indeed, the perils of land grab have been going on for decades, resulting in serious threats, from loss of biodiversity to the displacement of humans from their land.

Such displacement is often justified by the need to make sacrifices for public purposes and/or the national interest and the exclusive right (or, in some cases, abuse) of the state to acquire land that it deems necessary for public purposes. In order to emphasize the pervasiveness of this involuntary displacement, Maniam focuses on the plight of an Indian woman who happens to be living in the wrong place. The beautiful piece of land that Sellamma owns becomes an attractive site for the proposed construction of a condominium block and theme park. Her picturesque land is "valuable land ... stretching from the laterite trail to the river and on to the fringes of a jungle ... a bit of scenic country..." (1). Facing eviction from her land, Sellamma confronts the same problem faced by other invisible and powerless victims who bear the brunt of environmental crises that are intricately connected with the state's ongoing processes of development. Maniam seems to suggest that people like Sellamma – female, old, Indian and living by herself – are the ones most vulnerable to displacement caused by the state's ruthless developmental efforts.

Sellamma's refusal to be evicted from her land poses a problem for the state and the developer, whose parts in the effort to wrestle Sellamma's land away from her allude to the inextricable link between business interests and political elites that make up the state. Sellamma therefore is perceived as obstructing the national need for development. Sellamma's "Obstructive Occupation of Land" is described as "deviation" and a "social ill", a challenge to the grand project of nation-building and what Loh (2002) describes as the new political culture of developmentalism which valorises rapid economic growth (p. 21). The land rightfully belongs to Sellamma as she has the proper papers proving ownership, but due to plans to develop the land and build condominiums and a theme park, and Sellamma's stubbornness in clinging onto it, the Social Reconstruction Department (SRD) is roped in to persuade her to give up her land. In this sense, the SRD – a "discreet and sympathetic organization" (12) – also serves as a 'special task force', given a primary role to support, realize and enforce the ideology of economic prosperity, which requires total conformity from the 'subjects', or citizens, to the state's patronizing, know-it-all development policy and projects. When other state departments have not emerged victorious from the task of persuading Sellamma to give up her land, the SRD steps in to shoulder the responsibility, assured that the 'subject' can be brought onto the right path, if only a well-trained counsellor is assigned the task of 'persuading' Sellamma. To this end, the SRD assigns Sumitra, a young, urban professional of Indian descent. There is no specific plan, however, for how to compensate Sellamma for eviction from her land, except that she will be sent to an old folks' home. In discussing the displacement of Indians, Govindasamy (2010) notes that "there have never been any clear policies to resettle the displaced Indians ... despite official vision statements about equity and balanced development, in practice the Malaysian government's region building does not include the poorer members of this ethnic minority" (p. 102). By establishing Sellamma's 'unlikely' compensation, Maniam seems to draw attention to the plight of the Indians who, when displaced from their land, receive little or no compensation that befits their loss.

While some critics have lamented the portrayal of Hinduism in Maniam's work, particularly how it has derisively precluded the Indians from assimilating into the multicultural society of Malaysia, Ng (2011) has applauded his use of Hinduism, particularly how Hindu thoughts are used to address the variety of issues pertaining to the diaspora and how they have played the dual role of establishing its identity yet obstructing attempts to belong in the new adopted land (p. 107). In *BL*, Maniam deploys Hinduism again, but this time with a slightly different agenda. Hinduism in *BL* plays the role of a saviour, which keeps Sellamma attached to the land and her ancestral heritage, and which, in the end, helps to save the land from the malevolent forces of unscrupulous development practices.

Maniam's *BL* elevates Malaysian land to be sacred. To "be part of the earth" (62) seems to be Sellamma's mantra. Working on the land tirelessly, she reinstates the personal relationship one establishes with the land through one's own labour, "Appa always said be part of the handle, and you'll be part of the earth" (62). Sellamma's relationship with the land is elevated to something sacred, as the land links her personal identity to her ancestral history and traditions. As first- and second-generation Indian migrants in Malaya, Sellamma's family retain their Indian identity by practising integral parts of the motherland culture, such as the Tamil language and the Hindu religion. The Hindu religion, especially, plays a defining role in governing the norms, values and rituals practised by the family. The family spends most evenings reading the Ramayana: an epic, canonical Hindu scripture central to Hinduism that teaches the duties of relationships and the ideal characters for father, servant, brother, wife and king. The Ramayana, according to Arokian, should be read so that they "feel the magical plentifulness of the land, and to treat everything that grew (on the land) with the greatest respect" (108). The Ramayana song also becomes the family's anthem. Sellamma's father is even likened to Rama, while her mother is likened to Sita. The allegorical reference to Rama and Sita also serves to foreground Sellamma's family's origins and ancestral ties to the motherland. Rama, Lord Vishnu incarnate and heir to the throne of King Dasrath, and his wife, Sita, were exiled to a forest as a result of her stepmother's greed in installing her son, Bharat, as King. Without complaining, Rama and Sita live in the forest for fourteen years. Similarly, Sellamma's father and mother were exiled, albeit voluntarily – separated and distanced from the homeland. For many years, they make a living out of the piece of land they settled on in Malaya.

Many aspects of Sellamma's land are ascribed with religious identities and rituals. The sacred Rama-Sita grove that sprawls on her land serves to highlight one of the important aspects of the traditions of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia: creating and/or building sacred places of worship similar to the ones found in their ancestral land, so that ties with the ancestral land are maintained. Sellamma's family is no different. According to Malhotra, Gokhale, Chatterjee and Srivastava (2001), sacred groves, such as the one that sprawls over Sellamma's land, have their origins in India and date back to the pre-agrarian hunter-gatherer stage, before humans settled down to raise livestock or till the land (p. 6). A traditional means of biodiversity conservation, sacred groves serve

religious, sociocultural, economic and political functions, and are invaluable in lessening the human impact on the environment and ensuring uninterrupted ecological processes (Malhotra et al., p. 18). By ascribing a religious identity to the grove on her land, Sellamma maintains the ties to the land, her family and Indian cultural traditions.

The river that runs through her land is also sacred to Sellamma, just as water is considered sacred in Hinduism. Water is of special significance in Hinduism because it is related to physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being. Bathing in rivers is considered sacred for it is believed to cleanse the bather off his or her sins. The river that runs through Sellamma's land is given the same religious significance. In swimming with Sumitra, Sellamma reinforces the importance of the river to her family, "We always come here after working in the Rama-Sita grove. And after family quarrels or celebrations. More after the quarrels" (64). The river therefore 'cleanses' the whole family from both physical and spiritual impurities.

Throughout the different phases of Malaysian history, from being colonized to the present day, the land remains particularly relevant to Sellamma as a meaningful source of self-identity, as well as spiritual strength and cultural continuity. Sumitra does not see this in the beginning, but the more she spends time with Sellamma, the more she is pulled into the old woman's memory and valorisation of a forgotten culture and past. Photographs, stories and religious rituals performed together with Sumitra, and later with Sumitra's family members – mother, father, grandmother, brothers, sisters-in-law, nephews and nieces, bring Sellamma and Sumitra back to events revolving around the first- and second-generation Indian migrants working as rubber-tappers and farmers, and how they grapple with the issue of belonging to the new adopted land. The family history and religious traditions that Sellamma shares with Sumitra divulge the sacrosanctity of the land, which prompts Sumitra to question her part in the state's attempts to evict the old woman from her land.

In *BL*, Maniam underscores the consequences of a development ideology that rests on economic and capitalist priorities. Closely related to these priorities is the view that land is a commodity for economic exploitation and profit, instead of a resource to be nurtured, respected and passed down from generation to generation. In such an ideology, costs are imposed, and as Sellamma's plight in *BL* reveals, these costs are borne by the most marginalized and vulnerable members of society, attesting to the strong elements of neocolonisation that persist between the state and its marginalised citizen(s). Maniam suggests that Indians like Sellamma are victimised when there is no particular obligation on the part of the state to understand and respect their sacrosanct realm and their special dependency on and attachment to the land. To the Indians, land comes with a long-established identity, family and religious traditions. Through Sellamma's attachment to and reverence for the land, Maniam illustrates how divinity prevails in the land. Thus, developmental efforts that induce displacement must take into account this reverential aspect, which is the sacrosanct realm of the Indians.

Maniam also implies that as much as people have rights or access to development, these rights also entail the right to be protected from the negative effects of development. He seems to foreground Sellamma's forced eviction as being incompatible with the goals and ideology of development promoted by the state. The overriding ideology that economic progress would ensure racial equality, political stability and national unity, however, seems to distance the state from the costs borne by the more marginalized sections of society. Ideally, the development that the state aims and works for should cover the basic life requirements that humanity is entitled to, including their spiritual and cultural needs. Maniam's idea of development is development that does not infringe on social justice and human rights, one that does not threaten the sustainability of cultural and religious traditions. Development, in Maniam's view, entails one's right to the land and the environment around one, which resonates with one's right to make life worth living, materially, culturally and spiritually.

3. Chuah Guat Eng's *Days of Change*

Chuah's *Days of Change* (henceforth, *DOC*) spans the different phases of development that Malaysia has gone through, from colonial to contemporary times. Her focus, however, seems to revolve around the Malays, who have been a fundamental target of the state's development ideology and policies, beginning in the 1970s. The different phases of development and how the Malays struggle to catch up with the state's prevailing ideology and plans, geared mostly to promoting Malay interests, are depicted in *DOC* through Hafiz and his family's history. Hafiz's father, Dato' Yusof, is a well-known figure in Banir Valley. During colonial times, Yusof served the Templetons as a driver. With some working capital handed out by Jonathan Templeton, Yusof begins a motor-workshop repair business shortly after independence. He then gradually buys the Templeton Estate from Jonathan, using Jonathan's influence to obtain loans from the state, which at that time is keen to promote Malay participation and ownership of plantations. This keenness parallels what Saravanamuttu and Loh (2006) have noted as a political patronage system that saw business licenses, government projects and soft loans made easily

available to the Malays in accordance with the quotas set by the NEP (p. 5). Yusof represents the Malays who have benefitted under the policy. When times are hard in the late 1970s and 80s, Yusof and Hafiz, who had by then returned from his studies overseas, move into the construction business, which eventually thrives and receives support in the form of loans from the state. Yusof builds the Seri Kota Golf Club on the plantation, which does well and becomes the social hub of the elite in Banir Valley. He also builds affordable homes for lower-income groups in Banir Valley. He is remembered as “a good man and as a representative of that rare breed: the self-made, successful, socially-conscious Malay entrepreneur” (150). Hafiz continues with his father’s legacy, becoming a wealthy property developer.

Yusof and Hafiz’s economic ventures reflect to some extent the state’s massive, affirmative policy and plans that favour the Malays, which are welcomed by them, in view of their poverty and economic backwardness, and which propelled the emergence of a Malay hegemony in socio-economic and political aspects. However, it is the dark side of this ideology that Chuah delineates in *DOC*. The proliferation of public Malay enterprises and companies has often involved the ruling party, which holds stakes in many business enterprises since it has the leverage to set up policies, institutional bodies, corporations and the like that will generate economic wealth. As a result of these close ties, business corporations usually gain the upper hand in influencing the state’s decisions and enforcement of law and regulations related to land. In this symbiotic relationship, the state serves to facilitate businesses so that the latter will be able to pursue their own interests. In other words, the state and businesses are often beholden to each other’s interests. As Beeson (2000) has noted, “conventional distinctions between the political and economic spheres are simply not applicable” in Malaysia (p. 340). The development project set to take place in Banir Valley in *DOC* serves as a testament to these inextricably linked interests of the state and the capitalists, which rule out any hope of saving Banir Valley from the menace of an environmentally destructive development project. When Yew Chuan reveals Hartindah as the property-developer behind the cartoon theme park, Hafiz’s immediate response is “Untouchable”, referring to Hartindah’s close connection to a leading member of the ruling party (32). To Hafiz, the close rapport between a state leader and Hartindah excludes the possibility of protesting against the project proposed for Banir Valley.

Abu Bakar, the CEO of Hartindah, the country’s largest property-developer, is interested in acquiring Hafiz’s Jock’s Hill, and in exchange offers a piece of land northwest of Bukit Keramat, most of which is a mangrove swamp; the rest is part of a forest reserve (68). How Abu Bakar manages to offer land that is a forest reserve (and by law belongs to the state) alludes to his political connections. It also alludes to one of the most prevalent issues regarding the power of business to influence the state to de-gazette forest reserves to accommodate the profit agenda of its business allies. Through Abu Bakar and his scheming project, Chuah unveils an ideology prevalent among Malays. Abu Bakar is quick to remind Hafiz of the ‘Malay Agenda’ – an ideological apparatus having its roots in the Malay hegemony predominantly solidified by the NEP, carried out for decades to eradicate poverty and correct economic imbalances amongst the races. The Malay Agenda, an offshoot of the ideal of Malay supremacy as stipulated in the Malaysian Constitution, has been propagated and taken advantage of by Malay politicians to advance special privileges and preferences to the Malays in both the government and private sectors. Institutions, policies, administration and mind-sets have been geared to see the Malay race gain an important economic edge over other races. This ethnicised policy has resulted, among others, in the awarding of denationalized public assets and ventures to state-linked contractors, cronies and siblings, and the creation of a small section of elite, Malay capitalists with close ties to those in political power (George, 2005, “Renationalise”). As noted by Leigh (2002), this deliberate process of allocating wealth and power to Malays is often legitimized by employing the ideology of the NEP (p. 93). With ‘cables’ in the ruling party, Abu Bakar represents this elite group, “Bumiputera capitalists” or ‘sons of the soil’, who have “achieved considerable economic achievement – primarily as a direct consequence of their political connections” (Beeson, 2000, p. 340).

Abu Bakar plays out the rhetoric of the Malay Agenda to persuade Hafiz to give up his land, making it seem like it is Hafiz’s ‘obligation’ to his race. “Think it over carefully. At stake is the Malay agenda” (69). This rhetoric articulates a central dilemma in Malay thought towards the Malays’ economic predicament, what started off as the “dilemmas of development and the shaping of a bumiputera ideology that was to underpin the political economy of independent Malaya” (Harper, 1999, p. 258). As Harper (1999) has noted, “It recognized the need for the community to strengthen itself internally by its own efforts, but, at the same time, the leaders immersed in these debates were seduced by the promise of the resources of the state that soon would be at their disposal to assist them to achieve this end” (p. 261). Years after the NEP was terminated and replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP), the ideology that the Malays were still far behind economically and that the state was therefore obligated to help the Malay business community still prevailed in the Malays’ psyche.

Abu Bakar uses the Malay agenda to advance his case, gravitating towards what Loh has noted as “developmentalism” (21), which has nurtured the ideology that development is the work of politicians and the public, in return, have to be grateful for these ‘supplied goods’. Because Hafiz is a Malay, and the development that is supposedly being brought to Banir Valley is Malay-initiated, both at economic and political levels, he is expected to agree with the project, not to question it, and does what is within his capacity to facilitate it. Hafiz, however, knows better than to subscribe to this doctrine. After being approached by Abu Bakar, he begins to question whether this is the kind of property development he could proudly be a part of. Knowing that part of the Malaysian-Disneyland theme park involves an artificial lake constructed by building a dam at the confluence of the Berintik and Banir rivers, Hafiz knows only too well that a dam would inundate large parts of the surrounding forest and valley in Ulu Banir.

Through *DOC*, Chuah questions the growing influence of the capitalists and political elites that are overshadowing the state’s role in development. She underscores the importance of differentiating between development plans that are economically driven and those that are politically motivated, the former with the intention of improving the economy and the latter with the intention of gaining political leverage and advancing the political agendas of leaders. At the same time, Chuah also highlights the blurred line between the two. The development project proposed by Hartindah in *DOC* is politically motivated, hiding behind so-called economic improvement, with capitalists and political leaders having vested interests, backing each other to maintain their privileged positions. Chuah shapes the conflict to revolve around the proposed project of Hartindah, primarily to expose the manipulation of the NEP by Malay elites, in particular how it has penetrated the Malay psyche and been adopted by Malay capitalists to advance their own interests. As Abu Bakar has demonstrated, he is ready to fight doggedly at the expense of Kota Banir and its community, with the Malay Agenda providing a convenient pretext for development.

Like Maniam, Chuah also highlights the downside of development in Malaysia. When Hafiz falls into a ravine that eventually takes him to a village called Kampung Basoh, he is taken care of by Pak Endot and Mak Soh, an old couple who are the village-healers. Looking at the poverty-stricken people in the village, Hafiz wonders why development has not reached the people there. He is appalled by the poor conditions in which the people live and exasperated at their placid acceptance of abject poverty (103). The ideology of development as material prosperity, economic restructuring and poverty eradication has not translated into the sharing of wealth in an equitable manner. This impact is seen and experienced by Hafiz during his stint in Kampung Basoh. Chuah seems to suggest that the ideology of development propagated and implemented by the state has not tackled the much broader issue of social equity within the country, or within the Malay community for that matter. As Jomo and Tan (2009) have noted, the state’s developmental ideology and efforts have expanded and consolidated the Malay middle class, with Malay capitalists acquiring tremendous wealth, ostensibly on behalf of the larger Malay community (p. 3). Chuah implies that social equity is the cornerstone of society, which cannot be maintained for a few at the expense of many.

What is particularly striking about Chuah’s treatment of development is how she offers an alternative approach to development, with an emphasis on the eradication of poverty. Although this has been relatively successful in Malaysia, there still remains a considerable number of people experiencing poverty for one reason or another (Hatta & Ali, 2013, p. 48). This micro-approach to development is inspired by Hafiz’s stay in Kampung Basoh, following his fall from the ravine in the jungle of Ulu Banir. Kampung Basoh and its people’s rootedness in their land and the “unhurried rhythm of their quiet lives” gives Hafiz an “almost mystical tranquillity” (152), to the point that he mulls over the concepts of progress and development and how these have not alleviated the abject poverty in Kampung Basoh. He is appalled by the poor conditions in which the people live and irritated at their placid acceptance of those conditions (103). Pak Endot and Mak Soh, for instance, support themselves by providing traditional cures and healing services. Pak Endot’s knowledge of the bountiful jungle and martial arts amazes Hafiz. He also recalls what Maniam (his gardener) had to endure in the name of progress and development. Maniam had to leave the squatter area where he lived to make way for another prestigious office block and shopping mall in the city. Prior to that, he was forced to quit his quarters on an oil-palm estate. These recollections make Hafiz realize that development affects people’s relationship with the land. In Maniam’s case, the land not only provides a dwelling but also the freedom to labour on the land, to grow vegetables, rear chickens and cultivate other sources of food. In a similar context, Pak Endot and Mak Soh and the people of Kampung Basoh also thrive on their land, surviving on what it has to offer. It is at this point that Hafiz understands how development affects people’s relationship to the land, “not as in nation, but as in the earth on which we stand” (157).

To this end, Hafiz is determined to bring development to Kampung Basoh, what he refers to as “the mid-point between tradition and modernity” (170). Thus, Hafiz plans to turn his father’s dream of establishing a science college into a reality. In addition to this college, Hafiz also plans to develop Kampung Basoh into a traditional health village, whereby non-disruptive tourism will thrive. Hafiz’s plan to bring development to Kampung Basoh resonates with the concept of sustainable livelihoods first introduced by the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development, which advocates the achievement of sustainable livelihoods as a broad goal for poverty eradication. Applied most commonly at the household level, a sustainable rural livelihood is defined as:

A livelihood [that] comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term (Chambers & Gordon, as cited in Krantz, 2001, p. 1).

Since the introduction of this concept in 1987, having a sustainable livelihood has been approached, discussed and redefined differently by many scholars. Krantz (2001), however, has identified three basic features which most approaches share (p. 11). The first is that an approach focuses on the livelihoods of the poor, since poverty reduction is at its core. The second is that it begins with an analysis of people’s current livelihood systems in order to identify an appropriate intervention. The final feature is an emphasis on involving people in the identification and implementation of activities where appropriate. Hafiz’s plan to bring development to Kampung Basoh seems to encompass all three features.

Hafiz identifies with the close relationship that the people of Kampung Basoh have with their land, and how their traditional, conservative lifestyles and knowledge revolve around it. He is also aware of how Kampung Basoh seems to lack young people, probably driven to work in the towns and cities due to the prevalent poverty (99). To Hafiz, the couple’s rich knowledge and skills in traditional medicine, health practices and the forests around them are not being renewed and developed enough to ensure that these can be utilized and passed down to future generations. The villagers’ nature-culture link needs an intervention that is effective enough to reduce poverty, upgrade the people’s quality of life and sustain future generations. The college he plans to establish would be a centre for the study of alternative medicines. Hafiz plans to bring in botanists and biochemists and get them to work with Pak Endot and Mak Soh so that their knowledge is not wasted but can rather be tested, documented and systematised. The whole idea of preserving Pak Endot and Mak Soh’s knowledge and expertise in traditional healing bears resemblance to current environmental efforts to preserve traditional ecology, which is largely believed to be capable of contributing to ecological sustainability and environmental decision-making processes. For Hafiz, preserving traditional knowledge means sharing Pak Endot and Mak Soh’s knowledge of the environment around them with the world outside of Kampung Basoh, hence the college and the plan to promote Kampung Basoh as a traditional health village. By developing Kampung Basoh in that way, the villagers could identify with their strengths in traditional knowledge and medicine, and thus become involved in the implementation of activities to help reduce their poverty. In this way, Chuah suggests, villages and rural communities whose lifestyles are based upon indigenous knowledge and skills will develop much greater cultural pride as well as environmental sustainability. Through Hafiz’s proposal to develop Kampung Basoh, Chuah is also criticizing the state’s ideology of development that has not really taken into account the best interests of rural communities. Future development that concerns rural areas, Chuah contends, must enrich rather than dispossess or destroy their cultural wealth. The proposed theme park at Banir Valley also serves as a reminder that if development serves the vested interests of politicians and capitalists alike, then traditional Malay society culture will be a thing of the past, to the point that it would just be a cultural memory and a long-gone narrative. Hafiz’s insomnia and Kampung Basoh’s non-existence serve as metaphors for this impending loss.

4. Yang-May Ooi’s *The Flame Tree*

Ooi’s *The Flame Tree* (henceforth, *TFT*) is set in the 1990s and marked by the interplay of many concurrent events that took place at that time in Malaysia. There was rapid and tremendous economic growth, especially in the private sector, as a result of the economic liberalization policy, which involved a lot of privatization and new, foreign investment (Jomo & Wee, 2013, p. 8). In addition, striking changes to the physical landscape, costly construction of mega-projects and growing consciousness of globalization, as well as mounting local and international criticism of the destruction of the natural environment and the sacrificing of environmental sustainability, characterised the 1990s in Malaysia. These are captured by Ooi in *TFT*, through the futuristic Titiwangsa University Town, a mega-project that embodies Malaysia’s remarkable economic and technological growth. Set to become the envy of its Asian neighbours and the West, the site for the university is located 400 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur, up in the hills of Titiwangsa Range. The Titiwangsa Tower, part of the proposed

design for the university town, would be the tallest tower built on the highest site in the world. This development project is set to bring economic wonders to two towns: Ranjing, in the foothills; and Kampung Tanah, up on the slopes. As Ronnie Tan has proclaimed, the development will put the people of Kampung Tanah “on the path to a better state of existence” (11).

Despite these enticing promises of development, Titiwangsa University Town also symbolises the environmental challenges and problems associated with Malaysia’s rapid development ethos. Ooi highlights these through the Kampung Tanah people’s concerns regarding the proposed university town. Dr Kenneth Chan, Horatio Sarojaya and Abdul Ibrahim, the ‘informal’ leaders in Kampung Tanah, a town located in the Titiwangsa mountain range which would be the one most affected by the megaproject, are suspicious about the extent of the environmental impact of the proposed project. They then hire Luke, a white who regards himself as a Malaysian, and whose expertise in environmental impact studies is often sought by government bodies and Third World development agencies.

Luke’s preliminary investigations reveal that Jordan’s proposed design would have disastrous environmental consequences. First, the people of Kampung Tanah would have to be relocated to a proposed New Kampung Tanah, ten miles away from the university town. This means they would not be involved in the economy of the new town. Access to this new location would only be possible via a circuitous detour from a proposed new highway. Second, the design of the university tower would be damaging to the environment. Luke discovers that the height and style of the building are not compatible with the slopes and the natural environment surrounding them, which might result in “a major landslide of colossal proportions” which would wipe out the New Kampung Tanah (203).

Through Luke, Ooi delves into the question of livelihoods, which are inextricably linked to development. The people of Kampung Tanah, comprising mainly farmers and Orang Asli (indigenous people), depend totally on their land for survival. The land provides the community with food, water and spiritual life. Luke reminds them of their need for survival in the long term, that they do not want progress at the expense of their livelihood. When asked by Ibrahim what kind of development is right for them, Luke emphasises the need for the people to be involved in the new economy, that everyone has a stake and should not be alienated, and that the new economy should be sustainable enough for future generations (117). He stresses the importance of proper land management in Kampung Tanah and that the development project should also take into account environmental sustainability and imminent environmental problems, such as soil erosion and air pollution (116). The community play a part in ensuring that their livelihoods, dependent on the land, are not compromised. The farmers, for instance, need to safeguard the quality of the soil and the elements (115). The Orang Asli, on the other hand, can use their long-acquired forest skills to help maintain the forest and contribute to house-building and furniture-making (115). With his knowledge, Luke shows the people “how development and local concerns could work together” (116).

Luke’s advice about the impending development at Kampung Tanah illuminates Ooi’s idea of development which promotes democratic participation, social justice and the local control of resources. The people’s participation in the development project seems to be crucial in order to give them a voice and the chance to participate in the local economy without coercion and lead lives that allow for the preservation of culture, history and tradition. Grassroots actors like the people of Kampung Tanah should not accept development passively; rather they should strike out to defend their livelihoods and interests. However, overt attempts to resist environmentally-destructive development projects like those proposed by Dr Chan, who leaks part of Luke’s report to the media, are rarely sufficient due to political and economic oppression by the more powerful Jordan and his accomplice, Kidd Tan. Tan gives money to Wong, a well-known businessman in Kampung Tanah, and intimidates him into becoming the “representative” of the Kampung Tanah Development Committee, which will be given the task of networking and persuading the townspeople to embrace the rewards of progress and the rich prospects that Jordan’s proposed development project would bring. Jordan also establishes the International Development Foundation, with Tan as the Vice-President, to ‘disseminate’ funds to all eight members of the Kampung Tanah Development Committee, on the pretext that it is not important who wins the project, only that “the local community and international business interests can build a successful local economy if we all work together” (172). When Dr Kenneth Chan, who is adamant that the Committee is trying to buy the whole town, leaks part of Luke’s report to the media, Tan intensifies his intimidation by kidnapping Wong’s son and threatening Sarojaya and Ibrahim, members of the Committee. Luke’s office on campus is also burnt down, thus destroying the data he has gathered for Jordan’s proposed design. Dr Tan dies in a car accident staged by Tan.

Ooi seems to imply that grassroots actors like Dr Chan and Luke play an equally important role in promoting and ensuring that development projects take into account the people’s access to information and participation in decision-making, as well as justice. She seems to question the state’s developmental role, which is greatly undermined by its own policy of economic liberalization and the overpowering influence of business interests,

both local and international. The state's role in the megaproject is not clearly defined, except for approving the reports and data forwarded by tenderers, in order to decide which tenderer should be awarded the project. This executive role also seems to limit the participation of the people of Kampung Tanah in the planning and decision-making that involves their land and livelihoods. It demonstrates the state's physical and emotional distancing from the immediate 'object' of development that they purport to serve. The collapse of the university tower, within a year of the project beginning, attests to the state's ineffectual role in making sound decisions as well as taking proper actions that will ensure the sustainability of the environment. The state's lack of involvement in the mega-project suggests that it lacks true political power, in comparison to the powerful interests and influence of the capitalists. Until the university tower collapses, and claims many lives, the state remains 'behind the scenes', playing an ineffectual role. Dr Chan and Luke's failures to overcome the political obstacles that accompany the Titiwangsa development project illustrate the lack of democracy in environmental planning. Their failures also reflect Ooi's understanding that development cannot be imposed as a lasting benefit without taking into consideration the inextricable link between the land and its entire ecosystems, and also public opposition/participation and other factors related to the community itself. In other words, the sustainability of the land and the community must be integral parts of the development ideology, planning and decision-making.

5. Development: Effects and Implications

Maniam, Chuah and Ooi delve into the issue of land which is threatened by plans to develop it. At the crux of this problem is the inextricable relationship between people in Malaysia and the land and environment around them. While Maniam concentrates on the significance of the land as a source of cultural identity, ancestral history and spiritual strength for the Indians, Chuah focuses on how the Malays depend on the land as the bastion of their livelihoods and cultural pride. Ooi, however, goes beyond these communal concerns and takes a holistic approach by incorporating the concerns of the heterogeneous Malaysian community toward the land and its ecosystems. Though these writers differ in their focus on the 'victims' and the effects of development, they convey the message that the relationship of the people in Malaysia to the environment around them is indeed intricate and multifaceted. The common, pervasive ideological underpinnings of development in Malaysia that are revealed by the writers – over-emphasis on economic and capitalist growth – have insurmountable costs; the ones highlighted by all three writers are the involuntary displacement of people from their land and destruction of the environment. What these writers illustrate in their works implies that the costs of development are primarily borne by the people, especially those who are powerless and defenceless against the malevolent execution of this ideology, both by the state and capitalist business interests.

While Maniam, Chuah and Ooi delve into the effects on land which is threatened by plans to develop it, they also advocate forms of resistance through local environmental activism. Maniam and Chuah elevate individual struggle as an environmental mantle. In *BL*, Sellamma defies countless orders to vacate her dwelling and clings to her land stubbornly. The value derived from her attachment to the land plays a key role in influencing Sumitra to see things differently and to take action to save the land in the end. In *DOC*, Chuah highlights how a privileged individual attempts to bring development that could empower a poor rural community, instead of dispossessing or destroying the cultural wealth that comes with the land. Ooi, on the other hand, believes in community-based solidarity. She advocates a community-based group taking action and challenging the moral character of the state and business corporations. Ooi suggests that if those in the public sphere realize their unique potential to work together, irrespective of ethnicity, race or religion, to shape the course of actions and decisions related to the land, this would be able to put pressure on the state and business corporations to modify or cease practices that contribute to land and community degradation. A striking similarity between Maniam, Chuah and Ooi's works is the advocacy for active environmentalism. Resistance (at individual and community levels) against unscrupulous development projects that threaten people's livelihoods and environmental sustainability is a priority in the fight against social and environmental injustice caused by development.

The writers' treatment of development also has profound implications for future development. The 'supposedly' dual role of the state as developer and protector of the environment is interrogated by all three writers. In all three works, the state's role in delivering development to its people is marred by its inextricable link to the interests of capitalists. Maniam and Chuah concentrate on the coercive power that the state and capitalists seem to have over the planning and implementation of development projects, to the point that the state becomes beholden to the interests of capitalists and thus overlooks many aspects of people's relationship with the land. Ooi, on the other hand, criticizes the seeming lack of power that the state has in comparison to the powerful interests and influences of capitalists. There seems to be a consensus among Maniam, Chuah and Ooi, however, that the state is accountable for its decisions in adopting a development model that is essentially based on economic and capitalist growth. Such a policy has many downsides and implies that social justice, democracy

and cultural sustainability should also be treated with the utmost seriousness in planning and decision-making that involves the land, the people and their livelihoods.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the state's development ideology, which rests on economic and capitalist priorities, is reflected and deliberated upon by Maniam, Chuah and Ooi. Development is acknowledged by the writers as part and parcel of social, economic and political processes. However, through their treatment of development, they bring to light other equally important issues, thus emphasizing the flaws in adopting a development model that is essentially based on economic and capitalist growth. In a postcolonial nation that is not homogeneous, delivering development proves to be challenging, as many aspects need to be looked into. In *BL*, Maniam highlights the costs borne by the most marginalized and vulnerable members of society and yearns for development that takes into account spiritual and cultural needs. Chuah, through *DOC*, implies that development should also take into account the best interests of rural communities, that it should enrich them rather than dispossess them of or destroy their cultural wealth. In *TFT*, Ooi contends that development should take into account the inextricable link between the land and all its ecosystems, with democratic participation of grassroots actors in order to improve accountability. Indeed, through notions of social justice, democracy and cultural sustainability, which resonate with current environmental concerns, the writers raise questions and issues central to the state's ideology of development, thus contributing rich insights into the critical debate on development in Malaysia.

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