Masculinities and the Brunei Chinese "Problem": The Ambivalence of Race, Gender, and Class in Norsiah Haji Abd Gapar's *Pengabdian*

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Abstract

Using Connell's theory of masculinities in relation to the strategies of stereotyping and idealising, this article examines how the representations of Chinese masculinities in the Bruneian Malay novel *Pengabdian* (*Submission*, 1987) engage with the intersections of race, gender, and class that undergird social identities and interethnic relations in Brunei Darussalam. The identity and position of the Chinese are problematic in Brunei, where the primary identity of the Malays as "authentic" natives and citizens is upheld by the state ideology of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy; henceforth MIB). The Chinese, however, are positioned as racialised Other through citizenship controls, even as their contributions to social and economic development are recognised by the state. Brunei's ambivalent treatment of the Chinese Other is reflected in *Pengabdian*, which employs the strategies of stereotyping and idealising to produce a MIB-compliant narrative in which the dangers posed by difference, specifically represented by Chinese masculinity, are symbolically erased while Malay masculinity is defended as the hegemonic ideal through the trope of conversion.

Keywords: Brunei Chinese, Race, Gender, Class, Interethnic relations, Citizenship

Introduction

Historical sources reveal that the Chinese have had a long presence in Brunei Darussalam, dating as far back as the 10th to 13th centuries (de Vienne, "The Chinese in Brunei" 27-31). Archaeological excavations have, for instance, unearthed Song dynasty ceramics and Chinese brass coins, while historical texts speak of Chinese Muslims in 13th-century Brunei. There are also the legends and tales of interethnic marriages, the most famous of which is that of Ong

Sum Ping, a Chinese official who married Sultan Muhammad Shah's daughter and became Sultan Ahmad. Indeed, the diverse images of the Chinese in traditional Bruneian texts (Ampuan Haji Brahim 27-35) not only highlight the relations between the Chinese and indigenous people of Brunei but also the fluidity and hybridity of identity. In contemporary Brunei, however, race and ethnicity are regulated according to the tripartite state ideology of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy; henceforth MIB), which promotes Malay dominance by subordinating the minority ethnic groups, comprising indigenous groups like the Dusun and Murut as well as the Chinese (Deterding and Ho 1). Stereotypes are, moreover, used to great effect to control the MIB narrative, with the Malays subjected to "cultural stereotypes" that define their identity as indigenous subjects and Muslims, while the non-Malays are assigned "restrictive stereotypes" that "limit and damage their sense of self" (Ho, "Chinese Bruneian Identity" 7). Notably, the use of such restrictive stereotypes can be found in the characterisation of Chinese male characters in *Pengabdian* (*Submission*, 1987), a Malay novel authored by a well-known Brunei Malay woman writer, Norsiah Haji Abd Gapar.[1]

Taking up Kathrina Mohd Daud's observation of the "racial anxiety" (50) at work in *Pengabdian*, this article examines the novel's problematic representations of Brunei Chinese men and masculinities, how they are used to articulate racial, gender, and class anxieties, and what they suggest about Malay-Chinese relations in contemporary Brunei. Written from a Malay perspective, *Pengabdian* was published with the intention of "commemorat[ing] Brunei's independence" (Kathrina 47) in 1984, and thus bears nationalistic themes and messages. Not only does the novel support the state narrative on race and ethnicity, but it also

contains stereotypes that construct for its readers a distorted and damaging image of the Brunei Chinese. These stereotypes are all the more troubling as *Pengabdian* has been incorporated into the national curriculum as one of the textbooks for Malay literature at the secondary level (Kathrina et al. 243), and thus studied by generations of Bruneian students taking the subject.

The familiar stereotypes of the wealthy, greedy, materialistic, capitalistic, and/or mercantile Chinese have been found in modern Bruneian texts, such as the tycoon in Anglophone drama (Chin, *In the Spotlight* 69) and the moneylender in Malay drama (Haji Abdul Hakim 49-77, 93-116). Literary works authored by Bruneian Chinese have attempted to redress these stereotypes, including Chong Ah Fok's novel *Angin Pagi* (*Morning Wind*, 1990), K.H. Lim's novel *Written in Black* (2014), and Sally Chin's play, "The Reunion Dinner" (2012). Moreover, two biographies about Brunei Chinese entrepreneurs were recently published (Deterding and Ho 10). Despite these literary interventions, the reality is that the Brunei Chinese are still subjected to racial discrimination on the ground, and generally stereotyped as "money-minded and *karit* (stingy)" as well as being smart (Nur Shawatriqah and Hoon 24). Past literary studies have examined Bruneian Chinese identity in terms of negotiation (Ho, "Chinese Bruneian Identity" 1-34), assimilation (Ho, "Localisation of Malay Muslim identity" 138-139), and the marginality and disenfranchisement of Chinese women (Boonchutima et al. 63-66; Chin, "Bruneian Women's Writing" 595-598). However, these studies have not considered how the strategies of stereotyping and idealising are deployed to produce a state-compliant narrative about the Brunei Chinese, and the kind of "messages, morals and values" (Kathrina et al. 243) that are possibly being disseminated to the reading public—a relevant

point given *Pengabdian*'s inclusion as a textbook in the curriculum. Significantly, these strategies operate through the textual depictions of men and masculinities, revealing in the process how the stereotype is invariably gendered. As this article contends, it is the very maleness of the Chinese characters that represents an explicit threat to the MIB nation.

Connell's seminal work on masculinities, specifically hegemonic masculinity and marginalised masculinity, is used here to shed light on the contextual ways in which Bruneian masculinities are constructed, especially in relation to MIB discourses of race and ethnicity. Initially understood as the normative against which all other masculinities are positioned, hegemonic masculinity is defined as a system of gendered practice that validates patriarchal dominance over women (Connell 77); this system is maintained through "culture, institutions, and persuasion" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Influenced by Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony in relation to social and class dynamics, Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity—which sits at the apex of the gender order—is tied to cultural ascendancy, in which "one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted" (77). However, Connell also emphasises the mobility and changeability of hegemonic masculinity, noting that its definition depends on a "'currently accepted' strategy" (77). Hegemonic masculinity aside, there are the other non-hegemonic forms: marginalised, complicit, and subordinate masculinities (Connell 78-81). Marginalised masculinity is defined by difference due to race, class, or disability, while subordinate masculinity is based on qualities disassociated with the hegemonic ideal, including "emotional" (or feminine) behaviour and homosexuality. Complicit

masculinity refers to men who do not practise the hegemonic ideal but still gain in terms of "patriarchal dividend" (Connell 79) through complicity.

Although an imperfect system of gender classification, Connell's theory nonetheless enables me to examine how race, gender, and class are negotiated and articulated in *Pengabdian*, as well as the ideological motivations underlining these representations. Upholding the principles and core values of MIB, the novel emphasises the heterosexual Malay Muslim man as the hegemonic ideal, while marginalised masculinity describes the Chinese male Other in MIB-bound Brunei. Hence, the relations between hegemonic and marginalised masculinities in *Pengabdian* play out according to the racial polemics between the Malay and Chinese. These polemics are, moreover, reinforced by the use of two important narrative strategies observed earlier: stereotyping and idealising.

Defined as an act that serves to fix a person to a type or a set of characteristics, stereotyping is rarely harmless as it can adversely affect the way we view a person and characterise him/her. Hall, in fact, argues that stereotyping is "a powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited range of definitions of who people can be, of what they can do, what are the possibilities in life, what are the natures of the constraints on them" (20). An ideal is just as problematic as it adheres to a strict set of unrealistic or imaginary qualities that can be equally reductive. Either way, both perform a kind of "closure in representation" (Hall 21) that can be damaging to the subject of representation, whose self-image is distorted in the public eye and whose identity and potential have been fixed or essentialised. Both the acts of stereotyping and idealising should be seen as effective strategies of power that engage specific

ideologies and discourses about race, gender, and class. As Gilman argues, stereotyping serves to differentiate "self" from the "object", which then "becomes the 'Other'" (284). The act of idealising masculinity similarly taps into the discourses of dominance and inequality, for it upholds specific "models of admired masculine conduct" that "contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole" (Connell and Messerschmidt 838). As socially constituted practices, both the acts of stereotyping and idealising are not only embedded in the epistemological systems of representation and meaning that construct and regulate identities and subjects, but also reflect deeply held fantasies and desires as well as fears and anxieties.

In *Pengabdian*, stereotyping is used to great effect to devalue the Brunei Chinese man whose marginalised masculinity is reified by racialised weaknesses that include individualistic greed, materialism, selfishness, and egocentrism, among others. Conversely, idealising is used to elevate hegemonic Malay masculinity. In this way, *Pengabdian* carves out the politics of identity premised on the hierarchy between Malay hegemonic masculinity and Chinese marginalised masculinity. However, this hierarchy is complicated by class relations, for the Malays are portrayed as an underprivileged group compared to the wealthy Chinese. As the following discussion of the Brunei Chinese will show, the problem posed by Chinese economic power is that it not only potentially undercuts the race and gender discourses upheld by MIB, but also touches a nerve in relation to Malay anxiety and fear over the sensitive issues of land, property, and wealth. Hence the novel's troubling treatment of the Brunei Chinese can be said to mirror, to an extent, the state's own uneasy handling of the non-Malay community, especially the Brunei Chinese, in the kingdom.[2]

The Brunei Chinese: Citizenship and Identity

MIB forms the cornerstone of Brunei's identity politics. Implemented in 1984, the year of Brunei's independence from the British, MIB espouses three key organising principles that make up the kingdom's national identity as a Malay Muslim monarchy: 1) Malay cultural traditions and values; 2) Islamic laws; and 3) a monarchical government. Institutionalised through state policies and apparatuses throughout the country, MIB constructs and regulates social identities and their place in the monarchy by safeguarding and privileging a monocultural Malay Muslim identity; by extension of this logic, MIB eschews the concept of multiculturalism and plurality.

According to Haji Md Zain, the author of the state-published book, *The Malay Islamic Monarchy: A Closer Understanding* (2013), Brunei "has not accepted and practised the multi-racial and multi-religious concept" (85); however, he cautions, the "dominant position of the Malays must not be interpreted as anti-non-Malays" (49). Representing the official MIB position, Haji Md Zain further alerts the reader to the perils of multiculturalism, since "dangers [. . .] come from external influences towards the patterns and the way we live" (45). Referring to the collectivist Malay way of life known as "*cara* Brunei" (the Brunei way), this author also calls upon the reader to be "open to the possibility of adopting new values" as the monarchy "must be dynamic, not static" (46). Moreover, any inclusion of "new values" must be done with the nation's future and prosperity in mind: "In the sense of responsibility and integrity towards our nation, we have allowed some of these non-Malay persons to represent their communities in the socio-cultural affairs of this nation" (49).

As illuminating as these statements are, what I find interesting are the conflicting and ambiguous views perpetuated about the kinds of identities and influences that are acceptable, or not. On one hand, multiculturalism is rejected; on the other, this rejection does not mean anti-non-Malay sentiment. Furthermore, Brunei must be careful of the dangers of "external influences" or difference (Chin and Kathrina 105-106)—significantly embodied by the non-Malay—while staying "open" to "new values". This tenuous and somewhat uneasy negotiation with the threatening yet possibly useful figure of the non-Malay not only reflects the ambivalence and anxiety with which the Brunei Chinese are viewed, but is also one that correspondingly shapes their ambivalent identity as racialised Other in the Sultanate.

The problematic handling of the Brunei Chinese is best demonstrated by the state's discursive construction of "citizen" and "stateless" (non-citizen). Generally defined as an individual's membership and place within the larger collective or community known as the nation, citizenship confers upon the individual "the rights and obligations that flow from that membership and equality" (Lister 14). Although heavily contested as a concept in contemporary studies (Lister 14), citizenship generally signifies the legal status "bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed" (Marshall 28-29). Citizenship is therefore vital to one's sense of identity and place of belonging.

Within the context of Brunei, citizenship is defined by the tenets of MIB, with the key stipulation being Malay ethnicity (see Salbrina and Shaikh 52-53). According to the Brunei Nationality Act of 1961, "Any person born in Brunei Darussalam before, on or after the

appointed day who is commonly accepted as belonging to one of the following indigenous groups of the Malay race, namely Belait, Bisaya, Brunei, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut, or Tutong [. . .]," is a subject of the Sultan by "operation of law" (Brunei Nationality Act, Chapter 15, section 4 (1)(a)). Crucially, no such explicit statement is made with regards to the non-Malay position in the Act, only that a person who is not a Bruneian subject can apply for nationality via "registration" (Chapter 15, section 5) or "naturalisation" (Chapter 15, section 8). Studies of Malayness as an identity category (de Vienne, *Brunei* 205-219; Hussainmiya 67-71; Salbrina and Shaikh 45-66) have shown how Malay heterogeneity has narrowed as a result of the "homogenising and unifying imperatives of monoculturalism" (Chin, "Counter-Narratives of the Nation" 134). Equally noteworthy is that the state conflates Malayness with indigeneity, and identifies the Malays as Muslims (Hussainmiya 69). Hence, citizenship for the Malays presents a double-edged paradox: while reinforcing the homogeneity of Malayness and its prescribed limits, the state at the same time hails the superior status and "authenticity of the Brunei Malays [who] are 'citizens of the Sultan by the absolute force of law'" (Haji Md Zain 85). By both mandating and circulating the popular view of Brunei Malays as the "authentic" natives or *puak jati*, the enactment also champions them as the natural inheritors of the kingdom, with land as a key symbol of their territorial claim and status.

Bruneian citizenship is primarily determined by the principle of descent, or *jus sanguinis*, rather than the principle of birthright, or *jus soli*, while the nation is conceived as a "community of descent" (FitzGerald 135). That the MIB nation is based on the "community of descent" is given further weight by the historicised figure of the current Sultan, the direct

descendant of an illustrious line of Malay monarchs whose rule goes back to the 14th century. Hence any claim to citizenship is clearly legitimised not merely by birthright but also lineage and descent. In other words, indigeneity is key to citizenship claims. Recognised as *pribumi* (indigenous or native), *bumiputera* (sons of the soil), or *anak Brunei* (child of Brunei), Brunei Malays have been accorded the right of citizenship since Brunei's independence. As such, the form of citizenship that is practised in Brunei can be more accurately defined as "racialised citizenship", a centuries-old practice that "may consist of negative discrimination against a particular group and/or a positive preference that favours a particular group" (FitzGerald 130).

As noted earlier, however, Chinese economic clout has the potential to undermine the dominant position of the Brunei Malays. The Chinese dominate the private financial sector and include well-known business and community leaders such as Ong Kim Kee and Timothy Ong Teck Mong (Hoon 845-847) as well as entrepreneurs like Lau Gim Kok (Deterding and Ho 10). The threat posed by the Chinese was seen when, in 1996, the then Minister of Education called for "Malay business leaders to make the 'bumiputera' dominant in the private (i.e., non-hydrocarbon) sector" (de Vienne, "The Chinese in Brunei" 40), although this has yet to materialise. To keep them under state purview (and scrutiny), important Chinese leaders have been given official posts with the government, including as permanent secretaries (de Vienne, "The Chinese in Brunei" 41), while traditional titles are conferred on those who have "done good deeds and services to the Sultan and Brunei" (Haji Abdul Latif 179). The prestigious title of "Pehin" or "Dato" has also been bestowed on the prominent few, but they must first swear an oath of loyalty and allegiance to the Sultan. In return, the Sultan recognises the contributions

of the Chinese community by attending Chinese New Year celebrations and permitting the building of Chinese-medium schools and temples. His favour also helps the growth of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Chinese Clan/Dialect Associations.

A powerful strategy used to mitigate potential problems arising from Chinese wealth is the control of citizenship. While the Malays are automatically embraced as full citizens of the state, the Chinese occupy a much more ambiguous position. According to Sidhu, this ambiguity can be traced to the pre-independence period of the early 1980s, when "the position of the Chinese in Brunei remained unclear, since most of them were categorized as British protected persons" (106). When Brunei gained independence, only a third of the Chinese were given citizenship while the rest "became stateless" (Ho, "Chinese Bruneian identity" 8). To qualify for citizenship in post-independence Brunei, the stateless Chinese have had to fulfil stringent criteria that include "proof of residence for 20 of the last 25 years of living in the country and passing a Malay-language test" (Sidhu 106). Known to be notoriously difficult, the test forms the main barrier that prevents many stateless Chinese from attaining citizenship; and even when one has passed it, the road to actually becoming a citizen is a long and protracted one (Chin, "Citizenship Applicants" A2). As a result, scholars have estimated that up to 90% of Brunei Chinese belong to the "stateless" category (Loo 151; Maxwell 194; Sidhu 106). Currently, the Chinese account for 10.3% of the total population (Ho, "Chinese Bruneian Identity" 7), with many belonging to the second- or third-generation local-born families (Loo 146-157).

The category of "stateless" generates conflicting meanings in Brunei. Based on the criteria of exclusion and marginality, the "stateless" are classified as "persons who are citizens

of no country" (Maxwell 173). In Brunei, however, the stateless are also identified as "permanent residents". Issued with a purple-coloured identity card, the stateless resident has permission to reside in the country on a permanent basis but is denied the rights and privileges given to citizens or "nationals", such as a passport. More crucially, the stateless can only purchase land and property ownership by proxy, which is a highly risky act; they are thus prohibited from any kind of territorial stake. The yellow-coloured identity card denoting Bruneian citizenship is thus coveted by the stateless who see it as a "golden ticket" (Tolman) since it allows them full entry into the Sultanate and a better way of life. As Bruneian citizens, the Chinese can access benefits such as the right to a passport, property and land ownership, as well as "fully subsidised health care and free university education" (Loo 151; see also Deterding and Ho 13). Denied this access, the stateless Chinese are caught in the liminal space of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, and can only experience their identity and place through ambiguity and ambivalence.

However, the attainment of citizenship may not mean an end to their ambivalent identity, for the Brunei Chinese citizen is "not necessarily called a 'Bruneian native', because other than conversion to Islam [. . .], s/he must also know other components in relation to our motherland" (Haji Hashim 97), including customary law, Islamic teachings, and Jawi. Interestingly, the descendants of a fully converted and assimilated Chinese can be regarded as *orang Melayu Brunei* (Brunei Malay) or *anak Brunei* (Haji Hashim 96). In contrast, a Chinese who has become a Bruneian citizen but has not converted to Islam should be differentiated as *Cina Brunei* or *Cina Kitani* (Brunei Chinese). There are thus distinctions in the way the Chinese

are viewed and treated in Brunei, even after being accorded citizenship. For instance, the "government generously provides land and houses to poor Malays (for a token payment) under the *Rakyat Jati* (native people) land resettlement programme, but not as generously to poor non-Malay citizens" (Loo 151). While the above classifications of race and ethnicity are unofficial, they nonetheless reflect a socially prevalent viewpoint that is instructive to my analysis. As de Vienne astutely observes, "the Chinese are considered as first-grade mercenaries and experts as long as they remain loyal to the Crown, but even those who have managed to obtain citizenship remain more or less second grade citizens" ("The Chinese in Brunei" 44).

Norsiah Haji Abd Gapar's *Pengabdian*: Narrating the MIB nation

Our understanding of how the Brunei Chinese characters are viewed and represented has to be considered within the context of MIB, which informs the characterisation and themes of the novel. Despite the lack of direct reference to MIB, the novel nonetheless effectively conveys its ideology via the dominant position and viewpoint of the Malay female protagonist, Siti Nur. Set in 1983, when Brunei was on the cusp of achieving independence, *Pengabdian* focuses on the developing needs of the country, including medicine and security forces; these areas are respectively represented by Siti Nur and Sam who are doctors at a local hospital, and Syukri, a police officer and Siti Nur's minor love interest. The hospital in which Siti Nur and Sam respectively work as paediatrician and surgeon powerfully symbolises the country's state of health and future well-being—represented by new generations of Bruneians that are being birthed and cared for under the watchful eye of Siti Nur.

Groomed as medical experts in the expatriate-dominated hospital, both Siti Nur and Sam represent highly educated and privileged locals in a country where many of the citizens—embodied by the patients, the majority of whom are Brunei Malays—constitute the underprivileged class. The darker aspects of Brunei's social reality are exposed through Siti Nur's impoverished childhood. She recalls how her family could only afford to eat rice for weeks and that, rain or shine, she had to walk half a mile to school and back; she also never had any pocket money to spend. Her family's fortunes only improved when her father, Marof, was given a government job with the road works department. As a grown-up, Siti Nur appreciates her stable job as it allows her to provide financial help to her relatives, who eke out a difficult living through paddy farming. It is through Siti Nur's many charitable deeds that we are given a glimpse of the economic struggles of ordinary Brunei Malays in rural areas.

In line with its ideological advocacy of MIB, the novel suggests that the solution to the country's social issues lies with the socially responsible government, which is led by the caring paternalistic figure of the Sultan (Chin and Kathrina 105). An instructive example of this key point is seen when the government lifts Siti Nur's family out of poverty by giving Marof a stable job and income; it also bestows scholarships to Siti Nur and her four brothers so that they in turn may live better lives and contribute to the nation's well-being. Although in its developmental phase, Brunei is portrayed as a fine nation-to-be; it is "*honest, clean and capable*"[3] (Norsiah, original italics, 112) and promises a good life where peace and prosperity rule while the people's needs are cared for. This utopic vision is expressed by Siti Nur, who emphasises that a "good" citizen should give back to the country and people (see also Ho,

"Beyond Intractability" 244-249)—a concept premised on the analogy of filial relations between parent/state and children/subjects (Chin and Kathrina 105). Siti Nur, for example, enters the medical profession to help her fellow Bruneians. Her four brothers are also studying in fields deemed useful and practical to the country's developing needs and sectors: Zul takes up a technical course; Zain is in engineering; Hadi specialises in law; and the youngest, Zamri, is studying to be a doctor. Through the example of Siti Nur's family, who are contributing in one way or another to the country's progress and prosperity, the novel suggests that the citizen who enjoys the rights and privileges provided by the state should also play an active role in the building of the nation. Furthermore, the novel upholds the collectivist spirit of "*cara* Brunei" through the social scenes that celebrate unity and harmony, notably seen in Sam's conversion to Islam and Zul's wedding.

It is through the dominant Brunei Malay voice and viewpoint that the novel champions the official discourse of MIB, and shapes the ideological narrative against which the dynamics of race, gender, and class as well as interethnic relations come into play. An idealised Bruneian female citizen, Siti Nur embodies the guiding voice and light in the novel; she is that "rare individual" whose "essential values [are] rooted in Islam even after all the time she has spent in the hedonistic, decadent West" (Kathrina 49). Additionally, Siti Nur has a male counterpart in Syukri, who fulfils the right requirements of hegemonic masculinity: Brunei Malay, heterosexual, disciplined, polite, and morally scrupulous. A police superintendent who is rising up the ranks, Syukri is in love with Siti Nur, who does not return his affection; she is instead in love with Sam, who is not yet worthy of her, with the primary obstacles presented by his

ethnicity (Chinese) and religious background (a lapsed Christian turned atheist). To pave the way for their eventual union, the novel has to first tackle the thorny issue of Brunei Chinese identity and its ambivalent place in the kingdom through the characters of Sam and his father, Peter, if only to highlight their difference, and otherness.

Brunei Chinese Masculinity: Marginalised and Stereotyped

The son of an immigrant from China, Peter is a locally-born Brunei Chinese who has found financial success through the accumulation of properties and clever investments. For all his success however, Peter is an egocentric and materialistic man who only looks after his own self-interests. Despite holding a steady job as an X-ray technician and receiving lucrative rental income, Peter is not content with what he has. He desires to illegally lease Marof's TOL (Temporary Occupation Licensed) land so he can build the biggest private hospital for Sam to manage. Peter is moreover "famous for his greed" (Norsiah 13) and stinginess. For the sake of money, he lives a frugal life with his wife on a rent-free government property and leases out the amah's room; he drives an old Mini Austin and refuses to buy his own furniture or get an air-conditioning unit despite the overwhelming heat. Even Sam accuses Peter of not allowing Nyonya Peter (Peter's wife and Sam's mother) to stop working as a midwife, all because Peter "still needs mama's salary of 800 ringgit" (51).

Operating almost entirely on a racial stereotype, the characterisation of Peter reflects unfavourably on his marginalised masculinity in terms of race and gender, as the novel paints Siti Nur—a Malay woman—as superior to him in every way. If Siti Nur is the idealised caring citizen, Peter is represented as a somewhat failed Bruneian citizen and subject as he only knows

how to take from the country that has given him so much. While Siti Nur generously gives her time and money to those who need it, Peter hoards his wealth. The novel's criticism of Peter is clear: he is so focused on advancing his family's wealth and social standing that he loses sight of the more important priorities of family, community, and nation that are upheld by the hegemonic ideal. Worse still, in his single-minded pursuit of money and status, Peter has become corrupted by greed even though he is a Christian. Through Peter's lack of moral fibre, Chinese economic strength is thus criticised, and its threat mitigated. Peter may be a citizen of the country, but he is still excluded from the imagined community of MIB by default of race and the critical weaknesses that it carries, including individualism, avidity, selfishness, materialism, opportunism, and stinginess.

Espousing an ambivalent identity premised on his position as both insider and outsider, Peter is nevertheless stigmatised as the non-Malay Other whose racial difference and foreignness cannot be overlooked. It is not only Peter's migrant background that is the problem; more crucially, it is because he refuses to adapt to the collectivist ways of Bruneian society: "We are immigrants in this country! We must also protect our interests and rights!" (49). While this defensive stance can be read as the viewpoint of a fringe and minority group fighting to protect its own ethno-cultural identity, the novel's criticism of Peter—seen in Sam's argument below—reveals that it is unwelcome:

> Until when will our race stay divided from the locals? [. . .] We want a united Bruneian people standing shoulder to shoulder in one economy, language, even culture. You and I were born here. Our lineage has been established here since grandfather left mainland China [. . .]. Look, now you already have your real estate. Isn't that enough?" (50).

Representing the voice and viewpoint of the third-generation local-born Brunei Chinese, the good-looking and charming Sam is a major character whose emotional and spiritual development is vital to the key ideological concerns of *Pengabdian*. Initially, Sam is depicted as a stereotypical Chinese: he is practical-minded and concerned only about money. This can be seen when Sam agrees with the expatriate Dr Jones that it is more pragmatic to stop treatment on six-year-old Junaidah who has Thalassaemia Beta (a common genetic disease among the Malays), so that the spread of the disease among Bruneians can be curbed; he even argues that the economy will suffer due to the high cost of treating the disease. By weighing the patient's worth in terms of dollars and cents, Sam disappoints Siti Nur, who retorts that he "cares more about financial problems" (20) than about human life.

In subtle ways, Sam is likened to his father in that he, too, is a morally flawed character. This perception is confirmed when the reader finds out that Sam is a Christian in name as he has never really been "serious about religion" (42). Influenced by faithless westerners while studying in the UK, Sam became an atheist who thought little of religion; for him, it was just "a tool for people to look after their own self-interests" (42). Indeed, Sam's initial motive for converting to Islam is not because he believes in it, but because it will help him be with Siti Nur. Sam's intelligence and enduring love for Siti Nur may be his saving qualities, but his utilitarian outlook towards religion and overall lack of a spiritual life are nonetheless frowned upon.

This is not the first time Siti Nur has been disappointed by Sam, who also benefitted from the generosity of the Bruneian government when he obtained a scholarship to study

medicine in the UK. Instead of being grateful to the government, however, Sam felt discriminated against as a non-Malay at the hospital, and wished to get out of the government bond and open his own clinic. For Siti Nur, however, this decision reveals Sam as an egocentric, self-serving person who has "prioritised his own needs and status more than the needs of the country and his own people" (43). She also criticises him in her letter: "*You're proving everyone's expectations right that your race only prioritises itself; you only know how to accumulate wealth*" (original italics, 43).

Significantly, Siti Nur's rant against Sam also reveals her own racial bias when she tars the Brunei Chinese community with the same brush—a point repeatedly raised in the novel. The perception of the Chinese individual representing the entire ethnic community appears to be commonly espoused by the Malay characters in *Pengabdian*. While criticising Peter, Fatimah says that "his race is like that Siti. Clever to find money" (25). Siti Nur's uncle Khalid "didn't believe that Faisal's race is prepared to help a Malay" (169). By essentialising Chineseness through the reductive lens of a racial stereotype, such statements not only tap into the divide between the two ethnic groups, but also betray an underlying anxiety and distrust that reflects the nation's own deep-rooted unease and ambivalence with difference and its potentially corrupting (yet useful) influence, notably embodied by the very maleness of the Chinese characters. The strategy of stereotyping thus works to reinforce the marginalised masculinity of Brunei Chinese men while maintaining the hegemony of the Malay masculine self in terms of race, gender, and religion, if not class. As for the difficult issues of Chinese economic strength and class dominance, the novel proposes an extreme solution through the

symbolic erasure of Chineseness, seen in Sam's conversion and subsequent assimilation into the Brunei Malay community.

Conversion and Transformation: Becoming the Hegemonic Ideal

The conversion of Sam to Islam carries profound implications for Malay-Chinese relations and identities for it underscores the state's inability to accommodate the undesirable "external influences" embodied by the marginalised masculinity of Chinese men, seen in the negative racialised traits borne by the stereotype. In becoming Faisal, who represents hegemonic masculinity, Sam sheds his individualistic and self-centred ways—and correspondingly the critical weaknesses of his race—as he begins to change from within. Sam's transformation is attributed mainly to Siti Nur's influence, as she passionately defends Islam. When he returns to the UK for further study, Sam begins socialising with Muslim youths from Malaysia and observes how they live according to Islamic principles in a country "full of temptations" (54). In this manner, Sam begins to experience the life and ways of a Muslim, including the practice of avoiding non-halal meat. Slowly but surely, he begins to believe that Islam is the holiest of faiths.

The seismic change within Sam invariably reshapes the way he thinks of and sees the world. Whereas previously he had only selfishly thought of his own needs and desires, he now becomes more socially responsible and collectivist-minded as he advocates the idea of "one Bruneian people" (50). If the Sam of the past wanted a clinic of his own, the present Sam does not even want to be in charge of a private hospital. If the Sam of the past begrudged the hospital higher-ups for overlooking his talents due to his ethnicity, the present Sam no longer thinks in

such small, petty ways. Sam even contests Peter's views about the "importance and rights" (49) of the Chinese by considering social reality from the perspective of the Malays: "This is their country, let them do business. [. . .] They should have been involved in the world of business ages ago. Perhaps our people did not give them the opportunity" (49). In fact, Sam criticises Peter for going too far with his greed and opportunism, and for failing to think of the poor and needy (read: Malays) who are unable to afford homes of their own. In the end, Sam refuses to listen to Peter's "boring" (52) talk of money and wealth.

Tapping into the racialised discourse of Malay-Chinese relations, the argument between father and son can be said to reflect the yawning divide between the two communities, whose worldviews appear to be antithetical to each other. As Sam becomes increasingly "disillusioned by the selfishness of the Chinese community" (Kathrina 51), especially his father, he grows closer to the Malay community. Ultimately, Sam is assimilated into the MIB nation through conversion and marriage with Siti Nur. Conversion to another faith does not necessarily entail a change in racial identity as Islam accommodates ethnic and cultural differences—seen in the plurality of Muslim identities and communities across the world. The novel however stresses otherwise. Sam's conversion simultaneously involves the erasure of his Chineseness as he becomes the Malayised Faisal, who also embodies the hegemonic ideal. While Islamic conversion in Brunei marks the "entry point into Malay identity" (Ho, "Women Doing Malayness" 150), the process also threatens non-Malay cultural elements and identity, which "have to be altered to be compatible with Malay/Muslim culture or might eventually disappear especially if they go against the religious teachings in Islam" (Nur Shawatriqah and Hoon 10).

Faisal's symbolic break from his Chinese heritage is thus visualised when he dons the *songkok* and *baju Melayu* made by Siti Nur during the conversion ceremony. Peter's absence from the ceremony is equally important, for it signifies not just his disavowal of Sam, but also the end of the patrilineal line of descent that is important to the Chinese. Still, in becoming Faisal, Sam's ambivalent identity as the racialised Other is finally nullified, while the problematic issue of Chinese wealth is resolved as it now benefits the Malay community.

If conversion marks Faisal's entry and assimilation into Malay culture and community, it is his marriage with Siti Nur that brings out his best qualities. Mindful and respectful of the needs of a cancer-stricken Siti Nur, Faisal does not demand anything from her, not even the consummation of their marriage. He showers her with love and emotional support while stoically bearing his imminent loss as she moves towards the last stage of ovarian cancer. He has become an idealised Malay man in every way possible, with a "most noble heart" (166). When Siti Nur dies, it is Faisal who takes over as the shining symbol of the nation's future (Kathrina 52). Unlike Sam, whose Chineseness signifies foreignness or non-indigeneity, an assimilated and converted Faisal is fully "claimed by Malayness" (Kathrina 52) and can finally be acknowledged as an "indigenous child of an independent nation" (173) at the novel's end.

However, a litmus test of Faisal's transformed state must be made first before the acknowledgement can take place. Nowhere is this clearer than when Peter is hospitalised and requires a blood transfusion, which he eventually receives with the help of Marof's family and friends. As Faisal observes, it is thanks to Malay generosity that Peter's life is saved. Peter's friends are another story. When Faisal decides to "test" their "loyalty" (148) by asking for their

blood donation, all decline. Though not directly stated, *Pengabdian* nonetheless indicates that these so-called friends of Peter are selfish non-Malays, and very likely Chinese (see Kathrina 51). When Faisal's test confirms his view, he "smiles inside his heart" (149) as though he has been anticipating their response. Still, by carrying such an expectation, Faisal is also guilty of typecasting the racialised non-Malay Other as morally flawed and inferior.

The shift in Faisal's attitude and viewpoint is therefore vital to the novel's ideological goals, for in seeing the world from the perspective of a Brunei Malay, he has also come to distrust and discriminate the Brunei Chinese, who have become the Other in his eyes. At the same time, the polarised differences between the two ethnic communities are reinforced through the binary of Malay generosity versus Chinese selfishness. It is this very lesson, as well as the "impact of Sam's conversion and the behaviour of the Malay community" (Kathrina 51), that convinces Peter—who now regrets his wrongdoings—and his wife to convert to Islam. Respectively named Ismail and Aishah, the couple is finally reconciled with Faisal and assimilated into Brunei Malay identity and community; they have truly become "united" or "one" with the Malays (50), as Faisal had wanted. Fully embodying the hegemonic ideal by the end of the novel, Faisal has successfully performed his duty as a patriotic MIB citizen and subject by claiming Ismail and Aishah for Islam and the MIB nation.

Conclusion

In *Pengabdian*, the strategies of stereotyping and idealising have been deployed to great effect to construct an MIB-compliant narrative in which the marginalised masculinity of the Chinese man is marked by racialised inferiority, while the hegemonic masculinity of the Malay man

upholds cultural and religious values and propriety. By endorsing the MIB discourses of race and gender, the novel reinforces the ambivalent position of the Brunei Chinese man, who can only be viewed with anxiety, unease, and distrust. Even though Peter and Sam respectively represent second- and third-generation Brunei Chinese citizens, they are still deemed foreign and Other by virtue of their individualism, egocentrism, greed, and materialism—racialised traits that are extended to their ethnic community. Bearing an ambivalent identity as both insider and outsider, the Chinese position is further complicated by their economic power over the Malays, who are mainly portrayed as an underprivileged group in the novel.

The issue of Chinese wealth is invariably double-edged; inasmuch as it poses a potential danger to the state-sanctioned race and gender hierarchies, it is also useful to the building of the country's economy. To manage the problem of the threatening yet possibly useful figure of the Chinese, the novel uses the character of Sam to articulate the ideological stakes. It is through Sam that the fractious issues of class and wealth are downplayed while the larger and more important vision of the MIB nation, which serves the higher purpose of Islam, is embraced. In other words, the novel nullifies Chinese class dominance in favour of the spiritual values of Islam, which are considered far more relevant and significant. By painting the marginalised masculinity of the Chinese man as morally inferior and spiritually corrupted, the novel accordingly champions Malayness, and indirectly Islam, as the bearer of a superior masculinity. Notably too, *Pengabdian* suggests that the crippling weaknesses that burden the Chinese can only be solved by religious conversion and assimilation into the Malay community, which also pave the path to fuller entry into the Sultanate.

However, the novel's endorsement of such strict demarcations of identity also leaves little room for the negotiation of Chinese difference, which is subjected to racial and cultural erasure. Although Sam's conversion is provided as a solution to the ambivalent identity of the Brunei Chinese, his characterisation is nonetheless troubling, for it reveals the novel's inability to accommodate racial and cultural Otherness even as it taps into the racial and religious divide between the two ethnic communities. Ironically then, the novel raises more issues than it resolves them, for by essentialising identities through stereotyping and idealising, it also forecloses the possibilities of hybridity, change, and transformation, evidence of which can be found in both the history and social reality of evolving Chinese-Malay relations and identities in the Sultanate.

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Notes

1. *Pengabdian* is Norsiah's debut novel. It won the novel-writing competition that was organised by the National Language and Literature Bureau in 1983, and was published in 1987. Norsiah has also published a Young Adult novel, *Janji Kepada Inah* (*A Promise to Inah*) in 2007, and a short story collection titled *Tsunami di Hatinya* (*Tsunami in her Heart*) in 2009. For a discussion of other Brunei Malay women writers, please read: Chin, "Bruneian Women's Writing" 587-601; Chin, "Counter-Narratives of the Nation" 129-148; and Ho, "Beyond Intractability" 240-251.

2. The sensitivities surrounding the Brunei Chinese are reflected in my own recent experience. This article was intended for an edited volume published by Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Though initially accepted by the editor, this article encountered obstacles during the vetting

process and was subsequently withdrawn, based on the reason it could not be published in Brunei.

3. All translations are my own.

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