Portrayals of Vigilantism in the *KL Noir* Anthologies

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Abstract
This article examines the motif of vigilantism in selected stories from the four anthologies in the *KL Noir* series, published by Fixi Novo. The prevalence of the vigilante figure in these stories suggests a preoccupation among the authors not so much with crime, as with a lack of trust in the ability or willingness of the appointed authorities to effectively deal with crime. The stories often grapple with the moral ambiguity which comes with seeking justice, perhaps at the expense of the law, in a society in which the law appears to have failed its citizens. Focusing on the darkness allows the writers and the readers to confront some unsavoury truths about the city – truths which seem to be at odds with the vision of gleaming towers and glitzy malls, but which more accurately represent a part of city life that many people have to encounter.

Keywords
Malaysian crime fiction, Malaysian noir, criminality, vigilantism, KL Noir, moral ambiguity

Introduction

This article examines the motif of vigilantism in selected stories from the four anthologies in the *KL Noir* series, published by Fixi Novo.[2] The first in the *KL Noir* series (*Red*) was published in 2013. It was followed by *White* (also 2013), and *Blue* and *Yellow* (both in 2014). Each volume contains from fifteen to eighteen short stories loosely connected by their urban location (all are set in Kuala Lumpur). Kris Williamson, editor of *Yellow*, declares that "*Red* had its blood and gore, *White* its light and shadows, and *Blue* its crime" (9), before explaining that *Yellow* implies "fear" (10) as well as "decay and sickness" (11). Within these broad categories, however, the stories offer a great deal of variation, ranging from comic sci-fi, to the futuristic and dystopian, to tales of corruption, abuse, violence, love

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[2] Fixi Novo is an imprint of Fixi, an indie publisher started in 2011.

in unexpected places, revenge narratives, etc. However, one motif that reappears across all four volumes is vigilantism. The prevalence of the vigilante figure in these stories suggests a preoccupation among the authors not so much with crime, as with a lack of trust in the ability or willingness of the appointed authorities to effectively deal with crime.

The central concerns of the selected stories point to a deep engagement with the current state of urban Malaysian society, and perceptions of crime and safety within that society. This very contemporary and topical focus is quite different from the more well-known Malaysian fiction that has made waves internationally. Tash Aw, e.g., focuses on the past in two of his three novels (World War II and the Konfrontasi era). Tan Twan Eng sets both his novels primarily during World War II. Preeta Samarasan's sole novel so far is set in the 1980s.

This tendency to dwell on the past, perhaps as a means of coming to terms with the postcolonial, nationalist present, has been roundly rejected by Fixi Novo. Their manifesto (printed on the flyleaf of every volume of *KL Noir*) declares that they want to "publish stories about the urban reality of Malaysia. If you want to share your grandmother's World War 2 stories, send 'em elsewhere and you might even win the Booker Prize" – this being a sarcastic allusion to the kind of work done by Tan Twan Eng and Tash Aw which, they imply, focuses on something that is too far in the past to really resonate with Malaysian readers.

Fixi Novo's manifesto declares that they "specialize in pulp fiction, because crime, horror, sci-fi and so on turn us on." Given the focus on crime, horror and sci-fi, we can say that what they publish tends to underline the darkness and danger of contemporary Malaysia, talking about it and portraying it as grittily as they can. Focusing on the darkness allows the writers and the readers to confront some unsavoury truths about the city – truths which seem to be at odds with the vision of gleaming towers and glitzy malls, but which more accurately represent a part of city life that many people have to encounter.

In *KL Noir: White*, Lim Li Anne, in her story "Time Agents," has two of her characters discuss isomorphism:

> Lin propped her elbows on the table. "He's right, thought. Ever heard of the isomorphism of the soul and the state?"
>
> "Iso-*what*?"
>
> "It's from Plato's *Republic*. Something to do with the parallel between the soul of an individual and the condition of a city. When the hearts of the citizens are dark, the city itself is a city of darkness." (187)

Although Lim's story proves ultimately not to subscribe to this notion of darkness, many of the other stories in these volumes delve into ideas of corruption, greed, crime, loneliness, lust and murder with a certain relish. Kuala Lumpur, as presented in these stories, is primarily a "city of darkness," inhabited by individuals who seem largely to be engulfed by and absorbed into this

darkness. In his review of *KL Noir: Red*, Andrew Nette points out that "there's no better vehicle than crime fiction for shining a light into the crevices and cracks of society the powers in control don't want you to see." Given the propensity of the Malaysian authorities to crack down on ideas which may disagree with their primary narrative, this idea of showing what is hidden or papered over is important. The sense of there being a seething underbelly of crime and corruption is also brought out by John Berra, who in his review of *KL Noir: Red* points to the "often frightening duality of a developing metropolis where shopping malls are not merely meccas for the consumer class, but also havens for fringe illegality which have the potential to induce encroaching paranoia." It is because of these preoccupations with darkness, crime and the "encroaching paranoia" engendered by the surrounding corruption and danger that these anthologies can be called "noir."

Noir and Contemporary Malaysian Society

There are two main strands in discussions of noir: one which maintains that noir shows the presence, however isolated and beleaguered, of a moral centre; and the other which is more focused on the constant threat to whatever moral centre there is, if any.

Philip Simpson describes noir as follows: "Noir's universe is bleak, divested of meaning. Flawed human beings in these stories must somehow make moral decisions with no transcendent morality on which to base them. The consequences of those decisions are frequently fatal and always tragic to someone" (189). In noir, if there is no transcendent moral code (i.e., a code which provides a kind of overarching moral vision governing society at large), then the only moral code we see is that of the individual. Woolfolk also supports the notion of a personal moral core at the heart of noir films:

> The mark of the noir protagonist during the classic period of these films, 1941-58, was neither moral victory nor moral defeat so much as a personal struggle to define and maintain a coherent self-identity in the face of a gnostic world of overwhelming darkness and distant light. (108)

He goes on to emphasise this point, suggesting that "the central drama of the film noir… has continued to be the struggle of the protagonist to achieve in some way mastery of an ethically irrational universe… rather than to succumb to it" (108). Woolfolk implies an ability, however tenuously held, to actually maintain both a sense of self, and to be able to overcome the moral murkiness.

Skoble also argues for an ethical centre to the genre of film noir, suggesting that "there is some pedagogical moral value to the ostensible moral murkiness and that, in fact, films noirs are less morally ambiguous than they are said to be"

(41). Skoble's phrasing here ("ostensible moral murkiness," "less morally ambiguous") implies a moral basis to which characters can return.

The more pessimistic views of noir focus on the seeming impossibility of emerging from the darkness. Sanders describes the main "themes and moods" of noir as including "despair, paranoia, and nihilism; an atmosphere of claustrophobic entrapment; a nightmarish sense of loneliness and alienation" (92). This idea of entrapment is underscored by Abrams:

> … what is really uncovered in all great film noir is a world in which far more questions about the darkness of human nature remain fundamentally unanswered. Indeed, within this unlimited labyrinth of being, there is no safe place to hide, no final hidden doorway, and, ultimately, no possibility of escape. (69)

While Sanders and Abrams point out that society itself is morally questionable, Holt states that the individual characters "are morally ambiguous" (24), a view echoed by Conard, who notes the strong sense of "moral ambivalence (e.g., the protagonist of the story, who traditionally is the good guy, in noir films often makes very questionable moral decisions)" (1).

The majority of the stories in the *KL Noir* anthologies tend towards the darker side of this moral ambiguity, perhaps because it is only recently that writers focusing on urban malaise and corruption have found such a ready outlet. John Scaggs points out that early noir and hard-boiled fiction dealt quite uncompromisingly with issues of crime and corruption. He suggests, citing Mandel, that the noir writing associated with hard-boiled detectives arose out of "the rapid encroachment of crime during Prohibition," and goes on to point out that the "Great Depression, in turn, lent impetus to crime of all sorts" (57). The writers of the era saw crime as a dark and desperate response to dark and desperate times. However, just ten years later, the crimes associated with Prohibition "had already become a romanticised backdrop in the pasts of characters such as Rusty Regan" (Scaggs 57). I would suggest that the *KL Noir* anthologies have been written in the stage before any romanticisation of crime and criminals has taken place. Instead, for the past decade or more, the dialogue in Kuala Lumpur has been about increasing crime rates and a prevailing sense that no one is safe.

Crime and Vigilantism

Research into trends in violent crimes in Malaysia from 2004-2013 suggests that:

> there may be some truth in the public's perception of rising crime rates. Despite official statistics indicating a reduction of overall crime, crimes that are comparatively more violent – meaning a higher likelihood of physical and

> emotional harm as crime outcomes; appear to be increasing. (Muhammad Amin B et. al. 51)

In 2005, ACP Amar Singh Sidhu reported that "Despite the efforts by the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), newspaper reporting shows that the public continues to see crime as one of the most pressing problems in society" (25). Sidhu notes that "numerically crime has increased by 120% from the year 1980 to that of 2004," though if compared "on a per 100,000 population basis," then the increase in that period is 19.8% (27). However, he also makes the important point that crime rates "are affected more by urbanization and population density" (27), indicating that Kuala Lumpur has a very high rate of criminal activity. As recently as 2017, then-Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi also noted that "the perception of crime remained high despite a 2.8 per cent decline in overall cases last year" ("Survey: KL Seen as More Dangerous Than it Really Is").

More germane to the discussion of vigilantism, however, is the issue of public perception of policing within the community. Syed Nadzri noted in 2017 that despite the crime index falling, "public perception of the police is either still negative or remains unchanged." A 2014 report by Human Rights Watch finds that "Police abuse remains a serious human rights problem in Malaysia," and suggests that these abuses "persist because of an absence of meaningful accountability for Malaysia's police force." Meanwhile, Sadho Ram notes that according to a 2013 Transparency International survey, the "police and political parties are perceived by Malaysians to be the country's most corrupt institutions."

If policing is seen to be ineffective, then questions will arise about how society should respond to increases in crime. Does ineffective policing (or the perception of ineffectiveness) encourage some degree of vigilantism? Nicole Haas states that "vigilantism is assumed to emerge when the criminal justice system is perceived to fail in the provision of a satisfactory level of security to its citizens" (17). Silke adds another level to the argument when he notes that research shows that "vigilantes were much more likely than non-vigilantes to have been personally victimised" (123); even within broader communities, "it was the ones with higher rates of victimisation which were most likely to produce vigilantes" (123). Vigilantism, then, springs largely from victimisation and the need to somehow respond to that victimisation, or to punish those who perpetrated it. Silke posits that "vigilantism will be most common in communities which are reasonably cohesive but which suffer from relatively serious crime problems" (123). Silke's research also indicates that the public, or other members of the community, tend to approve of vigilante action, despite it being outside of the law, with approval ratings in most cases sitting at over 60%. What this implies is that vigilante action emerges as a response to a threat of some kind – and the response is heightened because of the individual's personal experience of threat or victimisation.

The perception that crime rates are increasing, coupled with an evident distrust in the police, leaves members of this society uncertain as to where to turn for help. Increasingly frequently, they take matters into their own hands by creating guarded communities, in which groups of residents in neighbourhoods which may have been hit by numerous muggings and house break-ins, work with local municipal councils to legally set up barriers (manned by security guards) within the neighbourhood to restrict access. According to Noor Rosly Hanif et. al., the rationale behind this response "is simply to enhance the sense of security and to reduce crime in residential areas. Crime in housing areas has become a fact of life" (4). The formation of guarded communities is in itself a form of vigilantism, in that it takes the provision of law and order to some extent out of the hands of the official channel, the police. People have thus taken power into their own hands, but in a very limited way. What the stories in these anthologies imagine is the consequences of taking that kind of power even further.

The sense of having to take power into one's own hands ties in with the notion of moral ambiguity, as well as with Woolfolk's idea of an ethically irrational universe – which makes it difficult to see the characters in stark "black-or-white" terms. In the stories, assassins have a conscience, bankers plot murder, gangsters try to save trafficked women, children kill. What ties all these figures together is a sense that they do not seem to have the *choice* of making what might be considered the "ethical" option (i.e., law and order, the criminal justice system). In fact, the choice often seems to be between doing the ethically correct thing and being frustrated in the quest for justice, or taking matters into your own hands and actually getting some redress for the crime. The vigilantes in these stories clearly commit quite heinous crimes, but they are usually motivated by a desire for vengeance for some harm committed to themselves or loved ones. And it is not just private citizens who turn vigilante – some are police personnel who have lost faith in the system. Nor can the vigilantes always be seen as being on the right side of justice, if not the law. In many instances, there is ambiguity about whether the action taken by the vigilante is even just. As I noted earlier, the romanticisation of the criminal figure (be they victim or victimiser) has not occurred in these stories. Rather, the stories often grapple with the moral ambiguity which comes with seeking justice, perhaps at the expense of the law, in a society in which the law appears to have failed its citizens.

Vigilantes in *KL Noir*

Angeline Woon's story "Big Bertha and the Stones of Justice" (in *KL Noir: White* 85-100) perhaps hews closest to Silke's definition of vigilantes as people who have been victimised themselves. Elsie is the victim of a snatch theft – a motorcyclist grabbed her bag and left Elsie bewildered and bruised on the sidewalk. Now fearful and panicky, she runs and falls down when she hears a motorcycle nearby, and (looking for a weapon with which to protect herself)

picks up an ordinary stone (later named Big Bertha), which takes on a kind of talismanic force. Without ever articulating her need to feel protected from violence, Elsie takes Big Bertha with her wherever she goes. It is, of course, significant that she names the stone Big Bertha, after the "powerful German weapon of war" (88), even though, as Elsie's friend Deena points out, the Germans lost despite having Big Bertha in their arsenal. Perhaps more unwittingly accurate is Deena's teasing description of the stone: "'Is it one of those batu whatsits, the kind that makes you kebal?" Deena went on. "Elsie the invincible.'" (87).[3] Elsie does in a sense become "invincible" with Big Bertha at hand. Out on a walk, she witnesses a snatch theft, and undergoes a struggle between her instinctive fear and her equally instinctive desire to do something active. Her fear puts her in the position of a perpetual victim: "Elsie froze. She stared at the thief's receding back. She was afraid that he'd have a knife. What if he pushed her to the ground and she hurt her head?" (95). Her body, however, armed with Big Bertha, responds differently: "Her first reflex was to close her hand around Big Bertha. Like an Olympian in the shot-put event, Elsie hefted the rock and let her fly" (95). While this can be seen as just the instinctive action of an individual wanting to help out another individual, it pushes her over the edge from concern into (possible) vigilantism. The diction here implies triumph and strength – Elsie is an "Olympian," her throw makes Big Bertha "fly." However, that sense of triumph, which challenges the sense of victimhood, does not last long. While others gather and start accusing and beating the snatch thief once Big Bertha brings him down, Elsie is initially horrified by the reaction she has unleashed. But once she is reminded of the injuries suffered by other victims, she becomes judge, jury and possibly executioner. By judging the captive, she reclaims her status as a non-victim. Seeing him restrained and helpless, where he was once in a position of power, Elsie realises that she need not continue to be fearful – rather, she can be an object of fear:

> It wasn't the look of anger or madness from a big bad thief out to get everyone, one who gives mock salutes after putting other people's lives in danger. It was the look of a desperate, fearful man. He was afraid of *her*, stay-at-home Elsie. Elsie who was even afraid of postmen delivering letters. (99)

At the end of the story, Elsie arrogates to herself the power of the judge. Brandishing Big Bertha, she looks at the man and declares "Let there be judgment" (100). Woon leaves us uncertain as to what judgment Elsie passes on the man. However, she has prepared us for the strong possibility that Elsie uses Big Bertha as a deadly weapon. While pronouncing judgment on the snatch thief,

[3] "Batu" means stone, while "kebal" refers to something strong or armoured. What Deena is referring to, is a stone used as a charm of invincibility.

Elsie has been throwing small pieces of gravel at him. Hitting him with Big Bertha does not, therefore, seem an unlikely action.

The story is complex. Woon successfully builds up a sense of the community of the victimised – Elsie, the snatch theft victim whom we see being robbed, and then the old man and old lady who gather to hurl invective at the captured snatch thief (the old man's house was robbed, and the old woman's arm was badly hurt in a snatch theft incident). Their presence makes it clear that crime is a serious problem, and that many have suffered. But the picture of a lynch mob gathering around a solitary, unarmed man complicates things. The old man calls him "a useless thing" and an "animal"; the younger lady accompanying the old woman says "These kind of people hurt people like us" (97). These comments create a "them" vs "us" dichotomy which should make it easier to accept the idea of mob justice being meted out. However, Woon undermines that idea by having Elsie herself declare that "This is not right." She intervenes, asking him not to commit crimes anymore; but in the end her sense of anger at the victimhood he and others like him create overcomes any desire for the rule of law to take precedence. This points to the noir aesthetic of moral murkiness – can we sympathise with Elsie's need for justice, even though it involves victimising someone else? At what point does the "good guy" start to make "very questionable moral decisions" (Conard 1), and, importantly, *why*?

The "why" of many of these stories goes back to the very common problem of urban crime, and the seeming helplessness of the police. When Elsie goes to make her police report, she realises that nothing is going to be done:

> 'If you find anything, you'll let me know?' Elsie insisted.
>
> Leaning forward, the detective said, 'We'll call if we find something.' There was a strong accent on the 'if.'
>
> Elsie thought, they're not fighting crime, they're filing it away. We're putting our safety in the hands of clerks. (91)

Her realisation that she is not going to get any real help underlines noir's "prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure" (Simpson 189).

The portrayal of societal failure through the failure of the police is repeated in other stories, often to an even more extreme level. If the police cannot/will not help, it is implied, what choice does the individual have? In Nadia Khan's "Savages" (*KL Noir: White* 13-24), a young woman who has been subject to abuse by her father, and is then groomed to become a sex slave by her father's younger colleague, kills her would-be trafficker and becomes a vigilante, killing men who victimise women. She refers to her murderous spree as her "calling," and declares that she has "lessened the burden of this beautiful city by ridding it of its savages" (23). The story ends with a vision of the narrator preparing to kill her latest victim, who is trussed up in her apartment. There is, however, a question as to whether he deserves such treatment – in their interaction, he never appears to be more

than friendly and sympathetic. All we hear is the narrator's assertion that he has stepped closer to her (19). Clearly, her years of vigilantism have pushed her to the point where her motivation for killing is no longer sexual predation – rather, she seems now to see all men as potential predators, and therefore as her potential victims.

Before she takes that first step into vigilante killing, she has a brief moment when she thinks about going to the police. However, she recalls a story she has read about another victimised woman:

> It was a newspaper article I read once. About a foreign girl who was detained by cops for not having a permit – and was later subjected to rape instead. I was angry when I read that article. It wasn't fair – the girl, albeit detained for committing an offense, should not have been taken advantage of. She trusted those cops – they were men of authority. **To Serve and Protect** – wasn't that the motto? Oh wait… that only applies in America. What was ours? **Tegas, Adil, Berhemah**… was it? What the hell does that even mean, anyway? (22; emphasis in original)

The sudden intrusion of this memory implies that the narrator, in that moment, considers and immediately rejects the possibility of going to the police for help. Here, the issue with the police is not incompetence or a lack of willingness to take action, but an active desire to further victimise the victim. The narrator, feeling similarly victimised, chooses to find justice for herself and other victims by killing the victimisers (starting with the man who has tried to traffic her). But by the end of the story, we question the fundamental justice of her actions.

A rather more sympathetic vigilante appears in Rozlan Mohd Noor's "Ballerina in Pink" (*KL Noir: Blue* 13-36) – in this story, a grieving father seeks vengeance for the rape and murder of his beloved daughter. His focus, however, is not on the perpetrators of the crime, but on the type of cop who essentially lets the criminals off the hook for money. He therefore goes after an officer in the Narcotics division, because the rapists were high on drugs, as he tells his victim, ASP Zahid, who protests his innocence:

> 'I did not sell them the drugs. I told you, if you want to blame anyone, blame the dealers.'
>
> 'But my dear ASP, they do not have a sworn duty to keep drugs off our street – you do. Instead you tamper with evidence so that they can go free and continue flooding our streets with the poisons. Kill our children, destroy our families… our nation. You, a man who swore to protect us. Your greed for money… you became the merchant of death and suffering.' (33)

This story acknowledges that crime cannot be overcome (or even reduced) as long as there remains a system which allows the lawmakers to connive at the

commission of crime for a financial consideration. The story reflects back on the ways in which corruption is embedded deep within Malaysian society. Where Malaysians tend to live with it, Rozlan shows a need to root it out. However, at the end, we are presented with a picture of the father lost in memories of his dead daughter as a little girl in pink. We are forcibly reminded that his vigilante actions do not fundamentally change anything – there are more corrupt cops and more drug dealers; and his daughter remains dead.

The apparent helplessness/hopelessness of the police force is such that in some instances, the policemen themselves become vigilantes in order to ensure that crimes are dealt with. However, the treatment of these vigilante police personnel veers towards the very dark, as can be seen in Zufar Ismail Zeid's "Breaking Point" (*KL Noir: Yellow* 235-54). The story begins with the discovery of a gruesomely staged dead body, which appears to be the latest victim of a serial killer with surgical skills. The killer chooses individuals who are guilty of a crime, and stages their bodies in ways which signal what crimes they are being punished for. The story is told from the point of view of Inspector Jeevan, a dedicated cop who is utterly disgusted by Sergeant Hameed, whom he describes as "Hameed the sweaty fucker, Hameed the fat, useless, bribe-dependant son of a bitch" (239). Within a few paragraphs of this description, Hameed turns up dead, another victim of the killer. Jeevan himself is eventually revealed to be the killer, justifying his actions as a necessary evil:

> "… Tell me honestly. Haven't you ever thought of doing something like this? There isn't any integrity in our system anymore, you know that. Murderers walk the streets, rapists are released after a month in prison, people fucking shit up everywhere without consequence. I do this in the best interests of our country." (253)

Jeevan's response here suggests a level of self-awareness that is at odds with an earlier episode, in which we see the "killer" sitting in Jeevan's office and confessing, as well as declaring that he will now start targeting racists "whose words threaten the very stability of this country" (247). In this exchange, there is no awareness from Jeevan that he is essentially talking to himself, and indeed, this episode is followed by scenes of Jeevan desperately trying to think of who the next victim might be. Of course, once he has made a deduction as to the identity of the victim, he immediately kills him, revealing himself to the reader to be the serial killer. This uncertainty about just how aware Jeevan is complicates the story. Does he know what he is doing, or has he, as the title implies, been pushed to the breaking point of insanity by the corruption he sees all around him? Does the possibility of insanity mitigate the lawlessness of his actions? At the end, Zufar again shifts the grounds of the debate – he ends the story with Jeevan pointing his gun at a colleague whom he respects, who is trying to do his job by bringing in the guilty party (254). We do not know if Jeevan pulls the trigger, but if he is

to kill a competent and honest policeman, then is he not further undermining the very system that his vigilante actions were trying to replace? At this point, does he believe that continuing with his vigilantism is more important than trying to work within the system – to the point of killing an innocent? If we look at Woolfolk's definition of the noir protagonist as one undergoing "a personal struggle to define and maintain a coherent self-identity in the face of a gnostic world of overwhelming darkness and distant light" (108), we can suggest that Jeevan has clearly failed at maintaining this coherent self-identity. On the one hand, he seems to have tipped over into mental unbalance, if not insanity; on the other, his urge to kill a respected colleague implies the loss of any coherence in his moral vision.

Zufar's story somewhat tempers our discomfort at the idea of vigilante cops by suggesting that Jeevan is insane, and also by emphasising that he only goes after those who deserve punishment. This tenuous comfort is taken away in "Chasing Butterflies in the Night" by Kris Williamson (*KL Noir: Red* 143-57), in which a bitter, angry man, Ray, kills prostitutes in a self-proclaimed bid to "clean up the streets" (151). At the end he is revealed to be a policeman, the son of a more senior policeman who is covering for him. Ray justifies his killing spree (twelve prostitutes killed in one month) by saying "Well, at least somebody is doing something. The police don't – not unless they need to distract the media's attention from another case they've screwed up" (150). However, this justification, which to some extent works in Zufar's story, is completely undermined in this story by Ray's personality. He is abusive to his wife, rude to an old man having breakfast in the restaurant to which Ray goes, and complicit in the corrupt policing system about which he complains. He talks about "God's will" (156) but the words ring hollow. The prostitutes are victims of society, rather than criminals or perpetrators of evil. Ray's wife implies that he is impotent (148), which might point to the fundamental motivations for his crimes (though it is never spelt out further than this). His vigilante actions, then, are questionable; it is difficult to see him as someone who has been victimised and is responding to that victimisation. Rather, at the end, he is indifferent and uncaring when his father outlines a plan to "pin this [killing] on one of the Banglas in lockup right now" (156). Ray's vigilante actions have resulted in the deaths of several women who are victims of the sex trade, and will result in the punishment of an innocent man. Throughout all this, Ray remains utterly self-absorbed, caring only about his headache, and determined, despite everything, to continue killing. The story is an indictment of corruption within the police force, but there is no "light" here to balance the darkness. The police are corrupt, the vigilante is a self-centred victimiser, and at the end of the story, nothing changes.

This sense of corruption and the impossibility of being able to trust the appointed forces to serve justice and maintain law and order ties closely with the general noir aesthetic. As Simpson suggests:

> … noir and the psycho thriller critique the deleterious impact of social institutions upon psychological development. The tone of much fiction within these two genres, and the many others that are cousin to them, is one of paranoia. We fear that the institutions we depend on for our shared existence are not only fundamentally unsound but downright rotten. (197)

Thus, Zufar highlights how incompetence and corruption push an honest cop to the brink. Williamson portrays how deeply ingrained and widespread corruption is within the force. In *KL Noir: White*, Foong Li Mei's "Burger Without Sides" (25-46) pushes the idea of corruption, and vigilantism as a response to corruption even further, by projecting into a dystopian future where the "city never sleeps – it is too afraid" (27). The economy has collapsed and crime is rife. The criminals go by names like Mad Hatter and Geekode, and have dinner with the cops. While Foong does not focus specifically on any corrupt cops, there is a general sense of moral breakdown running throughout the city. For instance, burger seller Pin bemoans the presence of "those grinning officers who grab, go and come back the next day for more" (30). Recalling a traumatic moment from his childhood, Pin remembers that his mother "did not open the door to a real cop. She opened the door to a cop who behaved like a maggot" and killed her (40). The vigilante in this story is called the Lizard; he brings criminals to the police, and hangs around to make sure that the paperwork gets done properly so that the criminals do not get out on technicalities. While in this story there is a kind of strange symbiosis between police and vigilante, it paints a grim picture of an utterly bleak future where crime is ever more rampant, and the work of the police apparently cannot get done without the presence of a vigilante. And yet that "outside help" is seen as intrusive and unwelcome by both criminals and police: "The cops distrust anyone who feels the need to wear a mask, while the crooks distrust anyone who feels the need to throw them in jail" (28). The depths of corruption are such that the lawmakers and lawbreakers are united in their resentment and distrust of the one person trying to actually bring criminals to justice. Foong's portrayal of Lizard also makes it difficult for us as readers to empathise with him – he consciously distances himself from the odd little community of cops and criminals that gathers every night at the burger stall; he exudes disapproval of Pin, the burger stall owner, because he allows these gatherings; and the description of how he eats his burgers (very much like an actual lizard) creates a *frisson* of disgust, making him seem less human. Indeed, the only sympathetic character in the story is Pin, who is demonstrably a victim, but who refuses to take on the vigilante role, instead providing a little haven of peace within a dark and violent society.

However, the peaceful neutral ground offered by Pin's burger stall provides fleeting refuge at best. The stories in the *KL Noir* anthologies show a very strong focus on darkness, corruption, danger and violence, with little sense of a moral centre. Even when a moral argument is put forward, it is often ambiguous,

coloured in shades of grey. As Woolfolk suggests, this is an "ethically irrational universe" (108); perhaps there cannot be any rational way of responding to it. Rather, an irrational universe demands an irrational response. In a rational universe, a victim of a crime would go to the police and the courts for redress. But in this world, this seemingly rational option usually doesn't actually make sense. The result is a world in which individuals take small actions which can escalate into horrifyingly violent reactions. Within the world portrayed in these stories, however, the reactions do not ultimately come off as being unbelievable. Rather, they are a response to the corruption and mistrust within society.

Are the portrayals here exaggerated? Do they portray only one side of the Kuala Lumpur story? Yes. But they also articulate many of the very real fears and experiences of the inhabitants of Kuala Lumpur. They offer a nuanced approach – on the one hand offering empowerment by transforming victims through vigilantism, but on the other, making us question where the limits of vigilantism lie. The stories complicate our perceptions of crime, criminality and justice. While there is no attempt to "solve" these real urban problems, there is an attempt to bring them into the forum of discussion rather than to ignore them or to paper over the cracks.

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