Identity in Flux: The Sarong Party Girl's Pursuit of a "Good Life"

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Abstract

This paper examines the identity of young Singaporean Chinese women, branded as "sarong party girls," as part of the state government's moral crisis debate. Through an interdisciplinary lens, it combines the study of their literary representation with a linguistic analysis of Singlish, a local variety of Eglish spoken by most Singaporeans in informal domains. By discussing the main protagonist in Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's novel *Sarong Party Girls* (2016) in this perspective, the authors argue that the identity crisis she experiences within herself is symptomatic of a wider conflict between Eastern and Western values that Singaporeans have not reconciled. While the Singaporean government enthuses over promoting Asian or shared values, its citizens continue to embrace Western influences that the former would rather eradicate. Therefore, Singapore's state production of a national discourse of questionable morality of those not espousing moral Eastern standards accentuates citizens' conflicted identity. By illuminating the social-cultural conditions giving rise to, and, in turn, informed by the subject of women as problematic for the state, the authors frame the dilemma faced by the sexually autonomous woman with aspirations to marry a white and Western man as her identity in flux, signalled by her deviant behaviour, use of Singlish and material goals.

Keywords

Sarong Party Girl, Chinese women, Singlish, identity crisis, literature, Singapore

Introduction

It is interesting to note that the major concern currently for the success-driven Singapore government is not so much its economic or political stability, but the "general moral degeneration of its people" (Kuah, "Inventing a Moral Crisis" 63). The overwhelming attention paid to this issue has been reflected in public

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speeches by government officials and writers (Goh; Kuah "Inventing a Moral Crisis"; Lee; Heng and Devan). The government claims that in recent decades, Singaporeans appear to be losing their Asian values (with an emphasis on state, family values and filial piety) and embracing Western values and ideas, the latter often linked to moral degeneration; the acceptance of "alternative lifestyles"; relying on the state to look after aged parents; casual sexual relationships and single parenthood (*White Paper*). These are beliefs and values frowned upon by the state and, in fact, the situation is serious enough for the government to claim it as a "moral crisis" (Kuah, "Inventing a Moral Crisis" 63). The government has increasingly recognised certain "disturbing" social patterns that appear to deviate from desirable Asian values, such as women's liberal attitudes towards sex, the disintegration of family as the building block of society, lack of filial piety and so forth.

As Kuah points out, this "moral crisis" (63) frequently revolves around Singaporean women: the disinclination of educated women to get married, the single mother syndrome and the increasing trend of Singaporean women, especially its majority Chinese, in marrying interracially rather than intra-racially. In the case of Singaporean women seeking out Caucasian husbands, Catherine Lim uses the analogy of "The Pinkerton Syndrome" (10), in part, because of the way that these women have a tendency to perceive white men as a ticket to material success and a life of luxury. In literary works, the perpetuation of the myth of the expat-coveting Singaporean girl is readily observed in Jim Aitchison's satirical book series (1994-96) on the "sarong party girl" – a term associated with, even as it signals the intricate and disparaging stereotyping of, the Singapore girl as the embodiment of national femininity. Written by an Australian who permanently resided in Singapore (1883-1910), Jim Aitchison's books delineate the fascination of white men with Asian women, who are cast as sexually available to the Western expatriate. In turn, the rhetoric of the women's requited affection is unambiguously presented through their yearning for the social and cultural values attached to the male Western foreigner.

With the launch of Jim Aitchison's *The Official Guide to the Sarong Party Girl* (1994), *Revenge of the Sarong Party Girl* (1995), *The SPG Rides Again* (1996) what becomes noticeable is the germane role of such literary imaginings in re-igniting the profound conversations on the perpetuation of the exotic – via representations of her sexual availability – Oriental woman, who is quickly branded as a "girl" for her untamed desires for the white male expatriate. At the centre of Jim Aitchison's stories is a female Singaporean protagonist "hell bent on associating with expatriates at any cost" (*The Official Guide* 18), an image pandering to the self-serving agenda and sexual fantasies of white men. At present, in addition to literary configurations of the sexually deviant and nation-betraying rogue in the sarong party girl, the internet provides an additional domain for this model of femininity to be expressed, engaged and re-visited. With

its high internet penetration, the World Wide Web serves as a further platform for Singaporean citizens to render their notions of feminine identity to an audience beyond that of the nation. An instantiation is the female Singaporean blogger who goes by the confessedly transparent moniker "Sarong Party Girl," who has achieved widespread infamy for her explicit and textual sharing (naked) of her sexual escapades with various men. Sparking a national crisis as international countries weighed in on her graphic self-expressions of intimate details of her personal life, this illustration of the sarong party girl and the mostly negative critique received and, thus, controversy stirred by her articulations of self-identity via her sexuality encapsulate the way this feminine model remains problematic.

Such counter-hegemonic articulations of Singaporean femininity have resulted in heated discussions and scholarly debates on the questionable moral values and dangerous sexuality of the island-state's transgressive women within the wider nation-space. As several scholars have been quick to point out, gender is intimately intertwined with Singapore's nation-building project (Holden; Hudson; Teo). Significantly, norms of prescribed femininity for female citizens has been sustained as an intense subject of scrutiny (Ong and Peletz 10) to justify and consolidate Singapore's father-style political leadership (Low 89). It is no surprise then, that the dangerous – thus, uninhibited and immoral – sexual preferences of female citizens is maintained as a persistent challenge to the nation with its building block as the family unit, whose cohesion, integrity and solidity are to be protected at all costs (Heng and Devan 195). Promiscuity, when committed with little respect for the nation's recommendations for intra-racial relationships too (Lyons-Lee 309), directly betrays the call by the government for women to subscribe not only to monogamous relationships, but also endogamy as a fundamental part of the state's brand of eugenics (C. Chan 707; Hoong and Chan).

As previously discussed, the role the government plays in inventing, engineering and fuelling this "moral crisis" – which, for all intents and purposes, is posed as a substantive threat to social cohesion and thus the national imaginary (Kuah, "Inventing a Moral Crisis" 63; Hudson 18) – has been studied on numerous occasions as part of the political party's rule of governance. Arguably, the branding of un-filial and disloyal Singaporean citizens who have allegedly initiated this moral crisis arises because of the nation-state's pursuit of economic prosperity by aggressively attracting expatriates with its friendly trade policies, while also unwilling to compromise on its authority on the political and social-cultural fronts (Reyes). Singapore's authoritarian rule, labelled diplomatically as a brand of "soft authoritarianism" (George 127; Lingle 5), has been the topic of analytical scholarship dealing with the strong influence and intervention of the government within the intimate affairs of individuals comprising the nation's body politic.

In the immediate aftermath of independence from the British and in today's milieu, there has been the single-minded pursuit of economic stability and wealth. However, as existing scholarship reveals, comparatively little attention has been paid to the socio-cultural fabric of the country. In other words, even as the political discourse of the sarong party girl has been vehemently shaped to serve the government's national agenda, this moral crisis has not been commonly examined in terms of an inherent identity crisis, which may be partially attributed to the legacy of colonial hegemony that established the Western subject as economically and culturally superior to the Asian other. This identity crisis may also be accorded to the home-grown language that has arisen since the colonial encounter. As with the difficulty to dislodge and un-learn the binaries between the Western Self and Eastern Other (as outlined by Edward Said's theory of Orientalism) heavily internalised during the British colonial period, the superior value accorded to the white man has persisted in neo-colonial times – today, the add-value quotient extends to American and other European expatriates working in Singapore. For Singapore's political leaders, the desire was to make Singapore an economic powerhouse in Asia and, if possible, in the world – which it has demonstrably succeeded in achieving. As such, the nation has promoted the ideas of wealth, material possessions and the get-rich mentality among its people, which admittedly were, by and large, Western ideas and values. Moreover, in terms of language as a marker of (personal, cultural and national) identity, little has been studied about the spoken local languages from a socio-cultural affirmative lens, contrasted to the ample documentations on political party's stance about this brand of communication espoused by the people. Consequently, the government's heavy promotion of English – the standard variety – as the language of success signalled the politicising of those inclined to incorporate their own language into their everyday speech. Working class women, including sarong party girls, fall into this category as do the majority of Singaporeans speaking the home-grown colloquial variety of English, called Singlish. It, thus, comes as no surprise that other ethnic languages and, particularly the various Chinese dialects, have been relegated to the back seat and are strongly discouraged. Also, the use of Singlish, while serving as an identification tool employed by Singaporeans to affirm a uniquely Singaporean identity in today's post-colonial and globalised era, is a site of conflict between the individual and the nation.

Moreover, as part of the government's efforts to assert recognisable authority, it actively brought in Confucian teachings in the concerted attempt to instil a brand of Asian values in a people, who like the government, are still in a state of limbo in terms of identity. The palpable aim was to reap the best of both Western and Eastern worlds – thus, for the Singaporean people to be instilled in Asian values while living, working with and enjoying Westernised wealth, success and material resources in the contemporary era of competitive globalisation.

Even as the purported justification for the proclivity to emphasise Singaporean's attachments to Eastern principles, values and morals was to balance out the further encroachment of Westernisation (vices perceived to derive from the West, such as divorce and promiscuity), the move towards Asian values was effectively a way of authoritatively homogenising the Chinese through the enforcement of Mandarin over other Chinese dialects. The dwindling of other dialects can be analysed as such – first, as evidence for the crisis in identity of an intergenerational community who traditionally partakes in a local dialect; and, second, borrowing from Graham Huggan's postcolonial exotic, an identity fissure occurring in the commoditisation of the body removed from its cultural histories via the effacement of familial dialects. Viewed through these lens, this paper argues that the "moral crisis" in Singapore is embedded within the more complex issue of Singaporeans' identity crisis, at an individual and social level.

Consequently, the objectives of the paper is to examine the "moral crisis" generated within Singapore from a different perspective – one that is intimately tied to a people's identity at both the individual and societal levels. The paper, thus, posits that there is a complex relationship between identity and morality, and puts forward the argument that underlying the "moral crisis" in Singapore is the issue of a people grappling for an identity in a country still straddling two dominant cultures: the Eastern/Asian and Western. This paper draws on Graham Huggan's concern with the mechanics of being "self-consciously exoticist in [the] spectacularisation of sexual/ethnic difference and in [the] ironic portrayal of the exoticised body as 'forbidden' fetish object" (xiv). Such a frame of analysis is brought to bear on reading Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's *Sarong Party Girls* (2016). Tapping into the fetishised body of the sarong party girl constructed by the tourist gaze and outside lens of white expatriate men, Tan's novel articulates the self-exoticising processes of Singaporean girls who, exchanging the sarong for more Western outfits today, censor their Singlish speech in the presence of white men to fit into their myth of exotic subjectivity. Based on this recent literary work, this paper attempts to highlight the well-documented "moral crisis" among young Singaporean Chinese women via its main protagonist, to argue for the salient role played by a conflicted identity within this crisis.

The Sarong Party Girl: Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's *Sarong Party Girls*

Sarong Party Girls by Singaporean writer Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan deals explicitly and predominantly with the identity crisis of its Singaporean protagonist, a young woman named Ah Huay who goes by the moniker Jazzy. The novel traces the main character of the self-proclaimed Jazzy, who along with her closest friends, is in desperate pursuit of an escape route to a more luxurious lifestyle promised in Western materialism and the social status accorded through marriage with a white man. Thoroughly dissatisfied with her inert and static day job, she is also uneasy with the reality of her Chinese cultural background (as she receives

frequent reminders through her parents – a Chinese father who she dismisses as unsuccessful and a Chinese mother who annoyingly insists on referring to her via her Chinese-given name and gets her to do menial tasks like Sunday trips to the wet market to prepare her for a domestic marriage within a Chinese family). Even as she is in her late twenties, as an unmarried girl, she continues to live under her parent's roof – and this fact readily illustrates the intergenerational community and Asian ties within which Jazzy is so strongly embedded. As a relief measure, she and her like-minded girlfriends visit night clubs to catch the attention of its Western male patrons in the hopes of discovering a desirable husband with a well-paying job. The novel's plot is, thus, constructed around Jazzy whose life mission is to secure herself a lucrative white husband who will propel her to a standard of living beyond her own economic means. In the midst of this project, she casts aside the use of her Chinese dialect and Singlish. Thus, this self-defining project is tinged with the inner conflicts she encounters, as she comes to reflect on her Chinese roots and relationships, and in doing so re-examines the promise of a rich white man in adding to her self-worth and construction of self-identity.

As for the novel's title, it is borrowed from a well-established term that is adopted within the city state. "Sarong party girls," as Jim Aitchison's texts readily demonstrate, originates from the cultural contact between local women and Western (British) soldiers on Singapore's shores, which can be traced back to colonial times when Singapore was under British rule from 28 January 1819 to 16 September 1963. Beyond Singapore, it is also used in Peninsular Malaysia to refer to Malay or Indian girls with a sexual attraction for white men. In Singapore, the label carries an especially pejorative connotation as it alludes to sexually loose and socially wild girls aiming to snare white husbands at parties hosted, traditionally, by British officers. The descriptor of "sarong" is drawn from their donning of the *sarong* – a piece of traditional garment local women wear. In the Singaporean context, the sarong donning girl is also an ubiquitous figure in the aviation industry where sarong-clad air stewardesses define the national air carrier and its global brand. By definition, the "sarong party girl" is characterised by her primary aspiration to secure a better livelihood through marriage with a Caucasian or "ang moh" man. Beyond this "scant ambition" (Hudson 18), the sarong party girl embodies sexual deviance and racial difference, thus attesting to her relationships with white and Western men rather than Singaporean Chinese men. Hence, unlike the celebrated Singapore girl who flies with the feted national air carrier, the sarong party girl carries with her an unambiguous association of dangerous female sexuality that troubles and defies the government because it poses a "moral crisis."

In her debut novel, Tan focuses on the motivations, predispositions and insecurities of the sarong party girl through its central protagonist, Jazzy. As Jazzy explains, her self-given moniker is "not Jasmine or Celine or any boring name like that – it's damn special" (C. Tan 34), which immediately signals her desire for

forging her own identity within the nation-space. Through this self-appellation, she simultaneously rejects her Chinese roots and the intimate associations of her Chinese upbringing. Instead, her future is focussed on her ultimate "goal" (C. Tan 2) to attain a white and Western spouse, promising upward class and material mobility away from working class Chinese men with whom she is all too familiar. As she explains, "once you manage to marry a white guy, then you are only one step away from the number one champion status symbol in Singapore – a half ang moh kid. The Chanel of babies! But how to get an ang moh husband" (C. Tan 2).

With the novel's emphasis on working class Singaporean Chinese girls with ambitions of close associations to the Western man, Tan's novel is not surprisingly composed in Singlish. The use of this home-grown variety of English is part of the technical approach of the novel, and individual expressive style in keeping with the representation of the sarong party girl's identity. As Tan claims, she "write[s] in Singlish" (C. Tan, author's note) to convey the subjective voice of Jazzy, who is the first-person narrator. In effect, Singlish serves to highlight the intertwining issues of identity and the moral crisis at play. Jazzy's first-person narration is smattered with this particular variety of colloquial English, which also forms her dominant speech or voice. According to another Singaporean novelist who features Singlish through her Singaporean female protagonist Mei, Singlish adheres to the "rules of Chinese grammar" (H. Tan 8), thereby resulting in a lack of intelligibility to speakers unfamiliar with this "tossed salad" (C. Tan, author's note) [that stems from its Malay equivalent "rojak" (H. Tan 8)] of a language. In essence, Singlish deviates from Standard English in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. In *Sarong Party Girls*, Jazzy's attitudes to – and use of – Singlish are tied to an attempt to flout the Singaporean government's call for its citizens to "speak good English" (Rubdy 341). Additionally, her use highlights a defiance against the government's derogation of Singlish even though it is the preferred language among Singaporeans, regardless of class, status and education (Wee 213). Her persistent use of Singlish also reveals a deeper confusion within herself, which is shared by other Singaporeans when considering their search for an identity within a conflicting setting of Asian versus Western values (Ho 17). This issue of the identity crisis of Singlish speakers is dealt with in the following sections of the paper. But first, one should not ignore the significant role the setting in the novel plays in highlighting the identity crisis of Jazzy. Therefore, what can be gleaned about the social ethos of Singapore, an affluent nation where the Asian multicultural and multilinguistic ethnic groups merge with modern skyscrapers, condominiums and a Western style of living?

Singapore: East meets West, and Their Conflicting Significations

As is often the case, literary works increasingly reflect the prevailing social ethos of a nation. But first, it is established knowledge that Singapore has

metamorphosed itself from a little fishing village into a global business hub. Touted as Southeast Asia's international jewel, Singapore enjoys and accommodates the Western commodities of high materialism and corporate success. Its history of political contact with the British and, therefore, Western cultural influence has been an extended one. Whilst Western values of modernisation existed during the British colonial occupation of the nation-island, the current allure of Western luxury products and its associated lifestyle further fosters the superior status of the West. This has translated into the idea, especially among several young Singaporean women, that the ticket to a better life is one steeped in material luxuries of leisure accessed by marriage to a white man. Consequently, this marriage merger is seen as a way to elevate the women's social status. For them, contrasted with his Singaporean counterpart, the white and Western man is deemed superior not just because of the history of colonial rule, but for his seemingly cultured, worldly and international connections compared to a Singaporean man's "small world" (C. Tan 34). In the context of late capitalism, the white man serves as an embodiment of material riches and, thus, a personification of a desired lifestyle. As depicted by the working-class Singaporean characters in Tan's novel, marital contact established with the Caucasian man is a means of securing cultural capital, marking a departure from Chinese (Asian-valued) roots. Significantly, Jazzy reveals an aversion to being called Ah Huay even as it is her real name: "Aiyoh, I don't know why, after so many years already she's (mother) still calling me by my Chinese name. My god, Ah Huay is so Cheena! [Chinese]" (C. Tan 34). This admission begs the question of whether Jazzy's dilemma speaks more about her conflicted identity, due to an underlying inferiority complex arising within a nation neither East nor West (Ho 17), and less about just the superficial attainment of material wealth.

Consequently, conflicted identity is attributed to the ideological divide between Eastern and Western values, even as the materialistic desire for capital status persists. Despite the fact that Singapore boasts a multicultural and multiethnic society, the main contenders in its socio-cultural scene are still the Eastern and Western values of socially acceptable behaviour, augmented by state politics and its divisive policies. Rather than existing on a fluid continuum, East and West are frequently located on opposite ends of a spectrum. The East/West dichotomy was perpetuated through the colonial ideology. White superiority established by an occidental discourse was employed as self-justification for the presence of British occupiers colonising Oriental others. As a consequence, ostensible civilised progress and attendant abundant wealth promoted a white superiority complex, whilst an inferiority complex was proselytised among the Asians. The subsequent polarisation of Western and Eastern values during the colonial period perpetuates the notion of the West as progressive, whilst the East is dismissed as unsophisticated, uncultured and less worthy. Amidst the Singapore government's effort to redeem its citizens from their loss of identity that is

intimated in "Westernization" or "Westoxification" (Chua, *Life is not Complete* 190), the government promoted neo-Confucian (Eastern) ethics by institutionalising the national ideology of Asian or shared values (*White Paper*). Consequently, this approach decried Western materialism leading to individualistic aims. (Western) moral decadence came to be perceived as a threat to (Eastern) values of moral filialness, piety and a communal spirit. More recently, Singapore's governmental policies have made it easier for mainland Chinese people to work and live in Singapore, thus attesting to an increasing Asian presence (albeit physical here). The result is an influx of Chinese migrants into the nation. If the intention is for this migration to inject some form of Asian values into a people inclined towards the West, it has gone awry judging from the additional social problems possibly attributed to these migrants. It is little surprise that Tan's novel, thus, deals with the promiscuous and materialistic tendencies of the mainland Chinese women in Singapore, whom Jazzy despises for their immorality despite herself exhibiting similar qualities as a sarong party girl. The next section will address whether Jazzy is in self-denial or if her deviant behaviour is a desperate attempt to rid herself of an Eastern identity she so despises.

Desire for the Superior Life of Materialism: Sarong Party versus China Girls

Jazzy's notion of her self-worth is derived by contrasting herself with mainland Chinese women – an attempt to set herself apart from these women from the Far East who she perceives as possessing a lower status for both their taste in Singaporean men and calculative ways of "hook[ing]" (C. Tan 38) them. On the surface, the two appear to have more in common than she would comfortably admit. It may be that her animosity towards mainland Chinese women belies an inner recognition of their similarity more than disparity of purpose. Through a first-person voice, Jazzy refers to mainland Chinese women as "the enemy" (C. Tan 39) in "coming to Singapore in herds to marry rich guys" (C. Tan 38), subsequently treating them as foils. Even as she calls on the moral values of these "Chinese bitches" (C. Tan 33), she too, much like the mainland Chinese girls, clings to "that Pretty Woman dream" (C. Tan 98), that desire to marry for wealth and a superior status. An integral part of the appeal of the rich husband lies in an attraction to Western brand-names. "Louis Vuitton…, Gucci, Prada and Chanel" (C. Tan 67) and "Dior, you know – don't play play!" (C. Tan 84) – Jazzy reveals her yearnings for consumerist consumption. Arguably, she seeks self-assurance through identification in these trademark logos (Rindfleisch et al.). Her description of a nuptial to American sailors as "damn lottery" (C. Tan 82) readily denotes marital achievement gauged in material terms and life with a white man. Blinded to the way "happiness does not necessarily come in a shopping bag" (Sidhu and Khoong 88), Jazzy submits to the allure of material goods, as she notes with excitement a woman's "handbag [with a] shiny logo" (C. Tan 93). Her

otherwise acute observation that China girls have no desire for "[returning] home to their longkangs [ditches – a metonymy for poor homes] in China" (C. Tan 44) is intimately related to their common material quest.

In a sense, both Jazzy and the mainland Chinese girls show a joint desire for materialism secured through marriage. Even while scorning China girls for their "fierce" (C. Tan 42) approaches, Jazzy concedes that she too wishes for "a good life" (C. Tan 59), involving the "big bucks" and an "atas [or superior] title" (C. Tan 25). Here, she shows herself refusing to submit to the discourse of their shared aim and thus mutual purpose, instead viewing herself as better than the China girls. Whilst stating "it's not like we were like those China girls" (C. Tan 38), Jazzy exposes the same avaricious desire for the "Coach handbag, condo, car and cash" (C. Tan 44) – a list to describe "all [China girls] care about" (C. Tan 44), but also what young Singaporean women yearn for too: the Singaporean dream of "the 5C's – condominium, car, country club, credit card and cash" (C. Tan 25). Censuring China girls for setting out to "win the man" (C. Tan 44), Jazzy's own "hungry look" (C. Tan 44) in her pursuit of material status is evident through confessions to secure the "big money" (C. Tan 51). She blatantly admits that marriage to the "dream husband" (C. Tan 64) will provide a "life [that] will be good money-wise" (C. Tan 50). In clubs, Jazzy judges ang moh [the Chinese term for being white and Western] patrons based on their wealthy prospects. Ultimately, much like the China girls' desperation to escape from their working-class roots (C. Tan 44), her life ambition is driven by the aim to avoid "living in some lousy government housing building in some dark flat where you're chained to the kitchen making soup" (C. Tan 176). This menial chore intimates an Ah Lian – wife to a working class Singaporean Chinese man – living in dependence within a council home provided by Singapore's Housing Development Board. It is precisely this lowly domestic scenario that Jazzy and Mainland China girls intend to eschew in their quest for a superior life of material success by marrying a rich man.

Essentially, Jazzy and the China girls have a shared inclination for superior materialism evident in their common goal of marriage to rich men. While Jazzy cannot see herself being married to anyone but a rich white man, the Chinese mainland girls, contrarily, appear to be less fixated about securing one. Jazzy herself makes the observation that "China girls actually prefer rich Singaporean guys to ang mohs" (C. Tan 41). Regardless, she stakes out these Chinese girls to learn their strategies in this ruthless "business" (C. Tan 39) to pursue a rich husband. Viewing herself as superior to the less-than-decent (C. Tan 39) China girls, Jazzy quickly denounces them as unattractive non-SK-II [huge facial brand in Asia akin to Estee Lauder] faced competitors (C. Tan 44) and convinces herself that "China girls are nothing compared to us!" (C. Tan 44). Yet, on visiting the Lunar club, Jazzy acknowledges the aggressive manner of China girls: "The competition was a bit unfair" (C. Tan 45) and "[it] was total defeat" (C. Tan 56).

Furthermore, for Jazzy, as a sarong party girl, the ultimate marker of attaining a superior life away from the tedium of the working-class lies in the biological product of a "Chanel baby" (C. Tan 139) – the "number one champion status symbol" (Tan, 2016, p. 2) for an "ang moh princess" (C. Tan 22) married to the rich, white man. From a study of the novel, the Chinese mainland girls, on the other hand, do not appear to be too interested in marrying a white man and having "Chanel babies." Theirs is a purely calculated and deliberate move to attain wealth and status, and not necessarily with a white man. This difference highlights an important insight into the differing motive between Jazzy and these girls. The Chinese mainland girls appear to be only interested in marrying wealthy men and therefore a "good life" to escape poverty back home. Thus, their motive is economic. These girls do not question who they are because they know who they are. The embodiment of the Asian Chinese values have been instilled in them from a young age back in their homeland in China, and as such, these girls do not feel threatened when it comes their identity as Chinese.

In addition to wanting a "good life," Jazzy, on the other hand, is fixated on marrying a white man to attain an identity she thinks will elevate her social status. Despondent with whatever cultural baggage she carries as a Singaporean, Jazzy sees marriage to a white man as a means of escaping from it. This is evident in her attraction for ang mohs and her distaste for Singaporean Chinese "Ah Bengs." She associates them with failure, not least their material and cultural deficit. Ah Beng is a "caricature of youth who [is] working-class or otherwise [a] failure in the competitive education system and market economy" (Chua, *Life is not Complete* 10). In the novel, Jazzy's derision for such Singaporean Chinese men has to do with their working-class status, and the inferior marriage she greatly shuns in the fear of reproducing "Ah Beng babies" (C. Tan 176). Thus, she aspires to escape a similar fate as her mother, who she thinks made the mistake of marrying a Singaporean "low-level manager" (C. Tan 38). Similarly, she speaks of having "lost" her best friend (C. Tan 2), when the latter chose to settle down and have babies with a working-class Singaporean Chinese man. Jazzy conveys her thoughts plainly to Sher, "You marrying Ah Huat – it's just so wasted" (C. Tan 177). With Ah Beng as the "sartorial configuration of working-class males" (Chua, *Life is not Complete* 10), and both "Beng and Lian stand[ing] as the 'Other' of the self-appointed sophisticated English-speaking cosmopolitans," Jazzy implores Sher by saying, "You can do so much better" (C. Tan 177). The resulting estranged ties between these two friends mark Jazzy's feelings of betrayal, and signal the proximate menace of the poor Ah Beng relative to the rich ang moh. Hence, to Jazzy, becoming an Ah Lian signals squandered opportunity for superior wealth, since the means to abscond a materially wanting and subordinate existence is snuffed – "Get an ang moh husband or bust, man" (C. Tan 38). Yet, nowhere in the novel does it show her mother or best friend Sher as dissatisfied

or discontented with their marriages to Singaporean men. Jazzy's criticism about their situations is therefore more about her deep-seated inferiority complex.

Singlish: A Linguistic Marker of Identity in Flux

Significantly, *Sarong Party Girls* is written in Singlish – a local and colloquial variety of English spoken by almost, if not all, present generation Singaporeans regardless of age and race. Singlish, or what Gupta calls Singapore Colloquial English, first caught the attention of linguists and sociologists back in the 1960s (325). Singapore English exists along a speech continuum envisaged by Platt, Weber and Ho. At the top end is the acrolect speaker whose speech is similar to the British native speaker proficiency in terms of grammar and vocabulary; located along the middle range of the continuum is the mesolect speaker whose speech may contain local expressions but is otherwise generally standard in terms of grammar and thus would be intelligible to a native speaker audience. At the basilectal end of the continuum is the non-standard or the slightly derogatory term "semi-pidgin" (Valdman 227). It is this language variety that is the unmarked linguistic feature in the novel and is thus the focus of discussion here. Principally, basilectal Singlish or Singapore Colloquial English deviates quite radically from its standard variety in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that can be unintelligible to the native speaker world. It is a mixture of English peppered with smatterings of Malay, Hokkien and other local dialects spoken in the city state. Today, Singlish utterances may be produced completely in English with an underlying Chinese or Malay grammar framework. It also has an extensive repertoire of articles such as *lah, meh, aiyoh, ma*, often used to show the speaker's attitude towards a thing or person. An example in the novel is when Jazzy responds to her mother's suggestion to fill the vacancy of an air stewardess – the lauded type of Singapore girl serving as a national pride. She says,

> "Aiyoh, please lah… old birds like me? Please lah. If I apply, [people will] sure[ly] laugh [their heads off] until [they] fall down." (C. Tan 48)

According to Gupta, Singlish has been generally regarded as "imperfectly learned standard English, both by scholars and the general public" (17). Spoken among the different ethnic groups in Singapore, Singlish is the lingua franca of intra-communication in Singapore. Moreover, Singlish is not only spoken by the less educated citizens of Singapore. Today, most of the well-educated Singaporeans are able to switch between Standard English and Singlish seamlessly. It has been written about quite extensively from a number of perspectives ranging from its grammar and its politics to its pragmatics (Gupta; Alsagoff et al.; Wee; Deterding, Low and Brown; Hoon; Lim). And, although Alsagoff (2010) proposes a new model of Singapore English from a socio-cultural perspective, not much has been written about the use of Singlish as a marker of identity for the speaker in terms

of place and ownership. While the identity crisis in Singapore has not been fully explored, Ho (2006) shows how the use of Singlish by a character in a local play, titled *Rosnah* (1995), showed a young Singaporean woman grappling with her identity as a Singaporean. One of the few works that addresses Singlish as a marker of identity for its speakers, she argues that while Singlish may be a marker of national identity, for the individual speaker it represents an identity in flux, one that is neither East nor West. With reference to the aforementioned play, written by playwright Haresh Sharma, Ho shows how the use of Singlish reveals a speaker's conflicted and often ambivalent ideas about who she really is, always straddling between two cultures while at the same time trying to find a distinct Singaporean identity. In a similar way, the use of Singlish in this novel expresses the ambivalence, rebellious and conflicted character of Jazzy. Jazzy represents the majority of Singaporeans in that she is able to switch between Standard English and Singlish depending on the context and who she is speaking to. She uses Standard English when describing an event, but reverts to Singlish when expressing her thoughts and when talking to her Singaporean friends. An example of this switching is her description of the night she spent with her best friend Imo's boyfriend in perfect Standard English: "Before I could sit up he was already standing. I quickly buttoned half my blouse and slipped on a pair of shorts so I could walk him to the door" (C. Tan 241), and then afterwards thinking to herself in Singlish that "Imo confirm will don't friend me anymore" (C. Tan 244). Later, when with her group of girlfriends in a bar, she also uses Singlish to reprimand her friend Fann for spending too much time on the phone: "Eh – guniang [young lady], you possessed by love magic is it? Whole life texting Melvin!" (C. Tan 293). One may note the typical Singlish features: the pro-drop in "you," "is it?" tag and the missing verb-to-be "are."

Oftentimes, the Singlish Jazzy uses shows her ambivalence towards others. When an Ah Beng, which is Jazzy's definition of a low class, uncouth and unrefined man, tries to make friends with her and her friends at a club one night, she retaliates with "Who wants to be your friend? You think we what? Desperate, is it?" (C. Tan 86). It should also be noted that she resorts to Singlish when thinking negatively of herself. Meeting an old rich schoolboy who falls out of her league, she thinks "this kind of guy, I confirm have no chance with him… for me to dream about being his girlfriend – waste time only lah" (C. Tan 129).

Although basilectal Singlish is considered as "semi-pidgen" English (Valdman 227) and possesses a history of being persecuted by the Singaporean government and certain groups of Singaporeans (Wong 38), Jazzy considers it better than Mandarin and Hokkien (a local dialect). Interestingly, she never uses either one even though she comes from a Hokkien speaking family. Instead, her use of Singlish is an attempt to divorce herself from all the low class Ah Bengs and Ah Lians in Singapore, and show that she and her friends are of a higher class. After being approached by an Ah Beng, for example, she thinks: "I know

he and his friends and his parents all probably speak Mandarin or Hokkien to each other all the time lah but hallo, doesn't he have eyes to see that Sher and I were more atas [high class] than that?" (C. Tan 86). Such aversion to the local Chinese dialect, however, does not stop her from swearing in Hokkien when angry and annoyed. Such slips into the local dialect, when unguarded, signal her entrenched roots to her familial culture, shaped by parents who continue to inform her about her ethnically Chinese reality.

On the other hand, Jazzy's aversion to Mandarin is partly due to her disdain for all the mainland Chinese girls who flock to Singapore for the purpose of securing a rich Singaporean husband. She makes her viewpoint of the mainland Chinese girls blatantly clear. Alluding to the Chinese female cultural attire of the *cheongsam,* she calls them "cheongsam sluts" (C. Tan 45) and thinks of them as materialistic, cunning, plain-looking and trying hard to attain Singaporean husbands to take up "Singapore citizenship" (C. Tan 44). In a sense, her use of Singlish is aimed to differentiate herself from the China girls and highlight the fact that while she is a Chinese, she is not a Chinese from mainland China. At the same time, she is just as materialistic and, possibly, desperate to escape Singapore to take up Western citizenship.

Having said that, Singlish is also a tool that Jazzy uses to express her lack of desire to appear Westernised. She has little to say about Western culture, or their art or way of life. Even her obsession in attaining an ang moh husband does not have as much to do with a love for the Western culture, but because these men can facilitate her materialistic dreams: "Marrying an ang moh means you get a honeymoon that's not a cheapo Malaysia or Indonesia trip" (C. Tan 50), and elevate her social status:

> "When Jazzy gets married, a Filipino maid is going to do all her marketing. Some more, the kind of shopping my family will do is confirm not shopping at a wet market – it's the 'drive your car and go to Cold Storage on Sunday with the kids' type of shopping. More expensive also no problem. You think Jazzy's husband is going to want food bought in a low class wet market with bloody water and chicken shit all over the floor?" (C. Tan 36)

Finally, Jazzy uses Singlish to show a certain rebelliousness against the Singapore government and all things Singaporean, including the men. Singlish, after all, is very much frowned upon by the government, as indicated by ex-prime minister Goh Chok Tong's launch of the "Speak Good English" movement on 29 April 2000 to discourage Singlish use. So, Jazzy's insistent use of it shows a rebellious attitude towards the local authority. She makes snide remarks about the government, such as implying that her desire for material things cannot be a bad thing because the prime minister "always say it's good to have goals" (C. Tan 128). She thinks, in another instance, that Indian men in Singapore would rather marry Chinese girls because they are "more high class" and that "Singapore

sometimes is just like that one" (C. Tan 144), meaning class conscious. Her rebelliousness against being Singaporean lies ultimately with her vow not to marry a Singaporean man, who she perceives as constituting either the low-class and smelly Ah Bengs (C. Tan 123) or stinky rich doctors, lawyers and bankers who are regretfully "spineless babies who at the end of the day will always kowtow to their snobby mums" (C. Tan 136). Hence, no Singaporean man is good enough for her.

Ultimately, Jazzy's persistent use of Singlish shows a girl experiencing a conflicted identity: she does not see herself as Chinese, nor does she desire to be one of the Westerners despite her extrinsic desire to marry an ang moh. To add to this cultural binary, she demonstrates an ambivalent attitude towards most things Singaporean – its men, the Ah Lian model and its home-grown variety of English.

Self-epiphany: Identity Within, Rather than Without, Singapore

Consequently, it remains that Jazzy is unable to dissociate herself completely from Singapore. As she consciously "hunt[s]" for an ang moh husband to enjoy "conspicuous consumption at the expense of a White Male" (Hudson 19; Wagner 52), this sarong party girl is reminded of her Singaporean-ness by her "super patriotic" (Tan 38) parents. In fact, her parents' demonstration of their "shame" (Tan 37) at her constant socialising with "strange ang moh guys" (Tan 22) discloses their fervent hope for her to marry a "typical Chinese guy" (Tan 22). Apart from obeying the government's call for endogamous relationships, it also reveals what her mother thinks is a successful marriage from an Asian viewpoint – it is the woman's job to keep her husband satisfied: "With men – you must always know how to feed and pamper them otherwise their stomachs will lead them outside" (Tan 36).

Furthermore, whether she is conscious of it or not, her use of Singlish readily associated with lower-educated Singaporeans (Platt 363; Yeo 86) marks Jazzy's innate Singaporean-ness despite her outward anti-Singapore attitude towards both men and things Singapore. So, even as she yearns for the "Dowager status" (C. Tan 42), she consistently maintains her use of Singlish. Considering that Singlish marks a speaker as Singaporean, then her continued use of Singlish coupled with her parents' pro-governmental stance signal a sustained immersion in a reality within, rather than without, Singapore. Being Singaporean is one thing, but forging a Singaporean identity, if there is one, is another. Because of the identity crisis faced by the country as a whole, Jazzy's idea of the Singaporean identity is one in which the Ah Bengs and Ah Lians inhabit their "small world[s]" (C. Tan 34), which she despises and often disregards.

However, pursuing an ang moh husband, and thus an alternative identity, leaves her feeling empty and deeply alone. Jazzy complains about "feel[ing] damn tired" (C. Tan 302) – an indicator not only of her constant partying, but also a

reflection of her deep insecurity about who she is as a young Singaporean Chinese girl shouldering familial expectations of female demureness and filial submission. Thus, with her attraction for a world characterised by conspicuous consumption as defined through "Western/American [material] decadence" (Chua, *Life is not Complete* 26), Jazzy battles with her Chinese familial roots. The result is a conflicted character. In the end, however, Jazzy experiences an epiphany. Standing beneath a "Prada store sign" (C. Tan 306), she arrives at a moment of awakening whereby the success promised in marriage to an ang moh loses its lustre. With a "sallow" face (C. Tan 305) she roams about Singapore's Orchard Road, the ultimate avenue for conspicuous consumption. Significantly, as she stops outside of McDonald's, a potent signifier of American-ness (Barthes), she chooses not to enter it. As a "place of cultural consumption" (Chua, "Singaporeans Ingesting McDonald's" 188), McDonald's stands for the cultural (also, material) ideology of superior Western consumables. Yet, her response, or more accurately lack of response, denotes her acute self-reflection readily signified by the window. Whilst the lights emanating from the fast food joint hold the attractive appeal of an iconic brand, Jazzy resists participating in it. The fact that she "[can]not see [her] skin clearly" in its glass window demonstrates the extent to which the Western product with its materialistic promise fails to deliver on its ideology of success – for her identity at least. She chooses to remain at the margins, thus ultimately marking her defiance against the "increasing 'Americanization' [Westernisation] of Singaporeans and their ethnic-based cultures" (Chua, "Singaporeans Ingesting McDonald's" 187). Significantly, her lack of action denotes a final rejection of the ideals of superiority commonly attached to the West, including the Western white man.

While steering clear of the consumption of a Western food product, Jazzy poignantly ponders on her mother's persistent nagging about living a life grounded to her roots. As she remains on the external rims of the McDonald's joint, she observes the late night crowd. In comparison to their motions, her stark stillness prompts an internal thought: "I didn't need Seng, or Kelvin, or Louis and most certainly not Roy – not to send me home… or even to marry me. I didn't need Sean or Albert. And thank god I didn't need Alistair" (C. Tan 306). Subsequently, this epiphany points to knowing the self through the process of self-journeying across various ideological landscapes: East, West and Singaporean. At the novel's close, she also exclaims triumphantly "Jazzy doesn't lose!" (C. Tan 306). Here, she takes transformative steps to address her dilemma, which leads her to accept a job invitation from her best friend's husband, Ah Huat – a decision not previously possible considering her huge disdain for Singaporean Ah Bengs. Ah Huat's gesture was originally regarded as an insult as she considered Ah Huat as the classic Ah Beng. However, when she texts her friend "OK lah. You can tell Ah Huat – yes" (C. Tan 306), this positive

affirmation simultaneously suggests her acceptance of her Singaporean identity, informed by the existential dilemma that is no less shaped by ideological conflicts.

As the novel ends, the question remains whether Jazzy resolves her conflicted identity through her cognisance of being Singaporean. As a Singaporean Chinese woman, she ultimately gives up on the sarong party girl's ambition for upward material mobility and elevated social status via abandoning her dreams of marriage to the white and Western man. Through Jazzy's action of jettisoning this scant ambition that was previously shared by herself and her Singaporean Chinese girlfriends, the novel's conclusion points to a sobering phase in her life's journey. Marking a return to, rather than departure from, home-grown gravitations, this juncture indicates an attempt to redress the imbalance presented in the conflict between the East and West. Subsequently, the answer as to whether her conflicted identity is suspended in the novel is left unclear at the end.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper focussed on the issue of Singapore's "moral crisis" that is centred on young Singaporeans, especially women whose deviant or "loose" lifestyles typify a self-ambition in conflict with the nation's Asian values. Tan's novel mirrors this crisis in the portrayal of a young Singaporean Chinese woman living a life of casual sexual relationships and obsessed with marrying a white man in order to acquire wealth, status and a socially acceptable identity. However, the above detailed study of Jazzy unravels a deeper problem. Combining a literary analysis of sarong party girls' material tendencies and a textual analysis of the use of Singlish, this paper looks beyond the government's label of moral crisis caused by sexually deviant behaviour to assert the journey of a young woman battling with insecurity from a deep-rooted and complex identity conflict. Moreover, Jazzy's situation is not a unique nor an individual case. In fact, *Sarong Party Girls* represent the identity crisis of the larger society within both Singapore and Singaporeans who are desperate to attain success aligned with Western ideals of conspicuous consumption. The entry of Western standards of success and intimate contact with Westerners, dating back to Singapore's transformation from a backwater village, comes at a cost that is now apparent – the identity crisis of its people. As long as mixed messages abound about the government's desires for its citizens to adhere to Asian values, even as they strive for high economic standards of wealth, the moral crisis will continue to entail an identity crisis that remains a thorn in the flesh for both Singapore and its people.

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