

## Journey to the West: Malay(si)an Women's Narratives of Travels in England, 1934-58

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### Abstract:

This paper examines two texts by Malay(si)an women: Aishah Ghani's *Ibu Melayu Mengelilingi Dunia* (1956) and P.G. Lim's memoirs, *Kaleidoscope* (2012). It focusses on the narratives of their journeys to and in England between 1934 and 1958. P.G. Lim (1915-2013) and Aishah Ghani (1923-2013) were contemporaries who lived in Malaya under British colonial rule, participated in nationalist movements for Malaya's independence, and served in the post-colonial government of Malaya and Malaysia in pioneering roles. Their journeys to England took place before the Second World War and after. Their travel narratives provide readers with valuable insight into the rapidly changing roles of Malay(si)an women within a span of twenty-five years. Lim's and Aishah's travels to England in the waning days of the British Empire reveal their experiences and observations of the imperial centre, and the significance of these to their notions of women's freedom of movement and independence from colonial rule. Informed by the work of Inderpal Grewal on Indian female travellers to the West, this paper aims to address the limited research on the history of female mobility, travel, and travel writing in Malay(si)a.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asian female travellers, female mobility, twentieth-century travel writing, Malaysian women and travel, women's travel writing

### Introduction

The scarcity of women's travel writing from Malay(si)a<sup>2</sup> may imply that women from this part of the world hardly travelled or lacked the means to do so. A cursory look at extant and/or well-known travel narratives from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century from Malay(si)a shows that travel and mobility are a largely masculine endeavour and domain. For example, the *Hikayat Perintah Negeri Benggala* (An Account of the State of Bengal [1811]) by

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<sup>2</sup> Both women whose travel narratives are discussed in this paper were Malaysians, and later, Malaysians, hence the term Malay(si)a.

Ahmad Rijaluddin ibn Hakim Long Fakir Kandu, a scribe from Penang, on his travels in British-ruled Calcutta; the scribe and translator Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi's two travelogues, *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi dari Singapura sampai ke Kelantan* (The Voyage of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi from Singapore to Kelantan [1838]) and *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Mekah* (Abdullah's Voyage to Makkah [1854]); and Malayan educationist Aminuddin Baki's personal diary on his journey to England in 1952.<sup>3</sup> However, women from Malaya are known to have travelled for various reasons: such as the Perak royal women who accompanied Sultan Abdullah to the Seychelles when the British exiled him in 1877, the women who accompanied their male relatives or husbands traveling, working or studying abroad, and the women who themselves travelled to pursue higher education or professional qualifications overseas.

Travel from the metropolitan centre to the colonies had taken place since the sixteenth century and were recorded in numerous travel narratives published for audiences back home. However, travel during the colonial period was not a one-way process, as there was a reverse flow of travellers from the colonies to the imperial metropole too. As Antoinette Burton points out, there was a significant presence of "black" people<sup>4</sup> in England in the mid-nineteenth century, whether they were temporary or long-term visitors, royalty or drifters (Burton 27-28). Therefore, when early twentieth-century Malayan women such as Tengku Permaisuri Che Uteh Mariah (1895-1924) and Raja Puteh Kalsom (1884-1940), the wife and daughter of Sultan Idris of Perak respectively, travelled with him to England to attend the coronation of King George V in 1911 ("28<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Perak"), they performed a journey to the imperial centre that had been undertaken in previous decades by their fellow countrymen, whether sultans or lascars.<sup>5</sup> Later, upper-class Malayan women traveled to England for higher education rather than to accompany their men, such as Lim Beng Hong @ Mrs. B.H. Oon (1903-1979), the first Malayan woman to be called to the English Bar in 1926 ("Lim Beng Hong"); Teo Soon Kim (1904-1978), the first Singaporean woman to be called to the Bar in Hong Kong and the Straits Settlement ("Teo Soon Kim"); and Maggie Tan (1913-1995), who in 1930 became the first female recipient of the Queen's Scholarship (Wu & Ng qtd. in Sutherland). By the 1950s, as the British Empire drew to its end, not only elite Malayan women but middle-class women too had the opportunity to further their studies in England in fields such as teacher training and journalism.

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished; available in the National Archives of Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup> According to Burton, the term refers to African and South Asian peoples, but also includes other non-whites including Malays.

<sup>5</sup> The term "lascars" is often defined as Eastern seamen who were employed on British registered ships during the colonial period.

Important studies of Asian women travellers to the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been carried out, most notably on women travellers from East Asia and South Asia, but studies on Southeast Asian women travellers remain under-explored due to the limited availability of records of their travels (Winichakul qtd. in Yang et al. 11). Certainly, not much is known about Malay(si)an women travellers due to the lack of oral or written records. The numbers who travelled abroad is also small. However, two Malay(si)an women – P.G. Lim (1915-2013) and Aishah Ghani (1923-2013) – travelled to England in the inter-war period and after the Second World War up to the late 1950s and left their accounts of their experiences.<sup>6</sup> An examination of their narratives can expand knowledge on the history of Malay(si)an female mobility, travel and travel writing. This paper analyses Aishah’s travelogue, *Ibu Melayu Mengelilingi Dunia: Dari Rumah Ke London* (A Malay Woman goes Around the World: From Home to London) (1956) and Lim’s memoirs, *Kaleidoscope* (2012) to understand how their travels in England expand their conceptions of women’s freedom and also reveal the limitations on female mobility. I argue that Aishah and Lim’s travels in England during the inter-war and post-war periods allowed them to pursue a new role as career women and to envision women as citizens of a soon-to-be independent Malaya. However, their experiences as non-white, colonised women travelling in England were also marked by incidents of exclusion based on racism and sexism. These incidents indicate that assumptions of Malay(si)an women’s freedom and mobility as being enhanced by their travels in the West need to be reconsidered and take into account the challenges that also existed.

Aishah’s memoirs and that of other female Malay nationalists have been studied through a feminist lens<sup>7</sup> but none have so far looked at her only travelogue as a source of information on a Malay(si)an woman’s travel experiences and women’s roles in a future independent nation. Lim set many milestones for Malay(si)ans in the legal profession, trade union activism, women’s rights and politics. The publication of her memoirs, *Kaleidoscope*, just one year before her death in 2013 captures her experiences as a woman who lived through colonialism, independence and nation-building. Yet it remains to be studied as an example of a woman’s travel narrative. In carrying out this study, I take a leaf from Inderpal Grewal’s *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Culture of Travel* (1996), an illuminating work on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Indian women who travelled to Western countries. Grewal examined the nexus

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth, Aishah Ghani will be referred to as “Aishah” and P.G. Lim as “Lim.” In Malaysia, a Muslim/Malay person is conventionally referred to by her first name and a Chinese person, by her surname.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Ruzy Suliza Hashim’s “Not Seeking to Please: Self-Narratives of Two Malay Female Memoirists” (2007) and Helen Ting’s “Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya” (2013).

of travel, gender and nationhood in the journeys of pioneering Indian women in Europe and the USA: Toru Dutt (1856-77), Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Parvathi Athavale (1870-1955). The women's engagement with Western discourses of freedom and progress as early manifestations of a sense of nationhood is useful to understand Lim and Aishah's own efforts at figuring out the meaning of freedom through their travels in England.

Lim and Aishah travelled to England at a time when local and global developments had opened the doors for greater physical mobility for Malayan women. By the end of the Second World War in 1945, Malayan women participated in education, politics and took up professions previously limited to men. Thus, there is a need to look into the history of Malay(si)an women's travels to England in order to understand the extent to which their travels to the imperial centre was instrumental in their notions of freedom for women and for the nation. It is also important to understand how these examples and discourses were filtered, critiqued, or incorporated into their visions of women's roles in an independent Malaya. First though, it is useful to cast a light on the conditions surrounding Lim and Aishah's experiences of travel to England from the mid-1930s to the 1950s. The next section will discuss prevalent attitudes towards female travel and mobility in Malaya in the early twentieth century, from the 1920s to the end of the Second World War in 1945.

### **Malayan Women's Mobility in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century up to the Second World War**

In the newspapers and periodicals published between the 1920s to 1945, women's issues were debated as part of the responses to modernity in Malaya. Issues such as education for girls (including English education), whether women should be allowed to work, fears over how modernity could adversely affect women's morality and even women's dress reveal the opportunities for and constraints on women's mobility. In this section, I draw from previous studies by Su Lin Lewis (2009) on the discourse on the 'New Woman' or the Modern Girl in 1930s Penang and by Mahani Musa (2010) on the woman question in Malay-language newspapers and periodicals published in Malaya and Singapore between 1920 and 1945, as well as from articles on women's issues from selected Malay-language periodicals published in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

As a global phenomenon in the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, modernity enabled greater mobility for women, which itself became an indicator of 'progress' in the West (Smith xi). In colonised societies in the Third World, women's emancipation and mobility also became hallmarks of progress and modernity, incorporated by male reformers and nationalists to reshape their

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<sup>8</sup> The newspaper and/or magazine articles cited in this paper are taken from the Jawi Transliteration Project, part of the Southeast Asia Digital Library of Northern Illinois University. It can be accessed at <<https://sea.lib.niu.edu/seadl/islandora/object/SEAImages%3AJawi>>.

societies in the face of Western colonisation. While this strategy was modeled to a certain extent on movements for women's emancipation in the West, Kumari Jayawardena points out in her classic study on the rise of feminist and nationalist movements in the Third World that Asian nations were not passive recipients of Western feminism. Rather, debates on women's emancipation took place in Asia much earlier than is usually assumed, contemporary with the early stages of women's emancipation movements in the West (Jayawardena 33). It should also be noted that the emergence of the 'New Woman' in colonial Malaya was a result of the global flow of ideas and intellectual movements not just from the West, but also from China, Japan and Egypt.

A highly visible manifestation of female mobility in Asia in the 1930s, the 'New Woman' or the 'Modern Girl' was

a visible sign of modernity and change – a nexus of Western influence in fashion and custom, mobility, independence, and new educational and professional opportunities – the Modern Girl was central to the attempts of the Asian intelligentsia to reconcile and reinvent cultural traditions to suit modern times and challenge traditional structures of authority. (Lewis 1387)

With her new ways of being and doing things, the Modern Girl in Asia thus marks a rupture not just from the traditional roles of women, but also from the centre-margin binary of colonialism; she tested the boundaries by socialising with the opposite sex, adopting androgynous dress, and challenging accepted notions of femininity by taking up sports and a highly mobile lifestyle (Lewis 1386). As a young woman in 1930s Penang, P.G. Lim embraced this role. Hollywood movies starring actresses epitomising the Modern Girl, such as Mary Pickford and Clara Bow inspired the young Lim with their modern lifestyle (*Kaleidoscope* 70). In contrast was the rigidity of colonial Penang society, where race determined one's place in the social hierarchy and limited the freedom to go where one pleased.

While some Malaysians hailed the expansion of women's mobility as signs of progress, others were cautious and even disapproved of the negative outcomes of allowing women too much freedom of movement. These conflicting attitudes found expression in both English-language and Malay-language newspapers of the early twentieth century. In the *Straits Echo*, a Penang-based English-language newspaper with a multiethnic readership, readers actively debated the New Woman or the Modern Girl now seen everywhere in real life or in popular culture, with the focus of the debate being the Modern Chinese Girl (Lewis 1398). Su Lin Lewis' analysis of readers' letters in the *Straits Echo* finds that male readers cautiously accepted the Modern Girl, and "[t]he modern woman had to strike a delicate balance in exuding charm, beauty and intelligence, without crossing certain boundaries" (1402). Despite this, the *Straits Echo's* female readers

continued to test these boundaries and to claim a greater role in defining them (Lewis 1402).

In the Malay-language press, the 'woman question' occupied the imagination of readers of both sexes. In the early twentieth century, women's emancipation became part of the agenda for the advancement of the Malays due to the influence of reformist Islamic movements on Malay intellectuals (known as the *Kaum Muda*), and that of missionary schools established and run by white women "who aimed to emancipate local girls within a 'traditional' framework" (Musa 252). Some readers framed their discussion of Malay women's freedom to travel and their mobility within the dictates of *adat* (custom) and *Syariah* (Islamic law). They perceived the increase in 'inappropriate' behaviour among modern Malay women as a result of their freedom of movement, which is in turn ascribed to growing educational and career opportunities for Malay women. A reader's letter published in *Warta Malaya* on 9 December 1931, for example, laments:

When will the knowledge that has supposedly been acquired [by women] be put to use in future, because if we observe, today we can see there are no boundaries between men and women; so much so it has become an intolerable habit among women to have the courage to travel to other states by themselves? They also go around with and talk to men who are not their *mubrim*<sup>9</sup> at inappropriate places such as hotels and the like. ('Musykil' 3)

This excerpt shows that the advent of modernity had enabled some Malay women in the 1930s to travel alone without their male relatives (*mubrim*), enter public spaces ("hotels and the like") and interact openly with men who are not related to them. There was also a real struggle over the issue of the education of Malay girls, between seeing education as necessary to produce good mothers and wives and as leading to immoral behaviour among women and men.<sup>10</sup> Malay women activists of the period such as Zainun Sulaiman @ Ibu Zain (1903-1989) and various women writers and readers of Malay-language periodicals and newspapers supported education for girls that strikes a balance between encouraging modernity and upholding the religion, Islam (Musa 257). These anxieties and debates on Malay women's freedom of movement and mobility are similar to the tensions wrought within the Malay community in the 1930s, as it tries to come to terms with the onslaught of modernity materialised in popular

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<sup>9</sup> From the Arabic *mahram*, one's close relatives e.g. grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts and uncles. Literally 'those whom one cannot marry' because of close blood ties.

<sup>10</sup> This is the subject of the editorial in *Saudara*, 4 May 1932 titled "*Pelajaran Perempuan dan Kebebasan Mereka Itu*" (Women's Education and Freedom); an article by Salwa Fatimah in *Saudara*, 9 May 1936 titled "*Perempuan Sama Juga Seperti Sekuntum Bunga atau Emas*" (A Woman is Like a Flower or A Piece of Gold); and an article by 'Abha' in *Warta Malaya*, 21 September 1936 titled "*Memberi Pelajaran kepada Anak Perempuan Melayu*" (Education for Malay Girls).

cultural forms that do not conform to Malay and Islamic values (van der Putten 42).

Employment brought about more social and physical mobility, although career opportunities for Malayan women before the Second World War were limited. In the 1920s and 1930s jobs considered suitable for women were usually of the nurturing or supportive kind, limited to “teaching, nursing or manning an antiquated telephone system” (*Kaleidoscope* 69). There was little room for women who desired to pursue professions in law and medicine. When visible and active in the public sphere, women were met with criticism. For instance, an article published in the Malay newspaper *Saudara* on 2 May 1936 admonished the untoward boldness of a young Malay female teacher for advertising her single status and seeking marriage proposals by writing in to a newspaper to do so. Clearly a Modern Girl, the teacher “loves games/sports, can ride a bicycle and loves to dress in the new fashion” (Mahyuddin 4).

With the Japanese Occupation of Malaya (1941-45) came a breaking down of conventions as more Malay women became employed, and the space for (literate) Malay women’s political participation grew with Japanese support (Musa 265). The impact of events during the Japanese Occupation on women’s roles was also felt among Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent. In Lim’s memoirs, she recalls how Indian women in Malaya and Singapore answered Subash Chandra Bose’s<sup>11</sup> call for recruits to the Indian National Army’s all-women Rani of Jhansi Regiment during the closing years of the Occupation. Lim narrates about Indian women “from the deserted British rubber plantations, from the middle classes, the young and the middle-aged, all raring to go to the front” (*Kaleidoscope* 115).

When the Japanese Occupation ended, political activism in Malaya further accelerated women’s mobility. Advances in Malay women’s roles and mobility in post-war Malaya were also made possible by their exposure to “modern ideas of egalitarianism and female emancipation” (Khairudin Aljunied 140) through education, employment, and migration to cities and towns. It was in this context that Aishah became the head of *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (AWAS, or the Conscious Women’s Movement), the women’s wing of the *Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM, or the Malay Nationalist Party)<sup>12</sup> for ten months from 1945 to 1946 before she resigned left the party. She was also a writer for the PKMM’s

<sup>11</sup> Subhash Chandra Bose (1897-1945) was an Indian politician who fought for India’s independence from British rule. He established the Indian National Army (INA) in Germany in 1940. From 1943 to 1945, supported by the Japanese, Bose was based in Singapore to recruit Indians for the INA and lead offensives against the British from Burma. Bose died in a plane crash in Taipei on 18 August 1945 (Wong & Ong).

<sup>12</sup> AWAS was the first women’s political movement in Malaya, and a model for other political organisations’ women’s wings such as the *Kaum Ibu* of UMNO. When AWAS and other left-wing organisations were outlawed by the British in 1948, the *Kaum Ibu* stepped in to fill the vacuum left by AWAS’ disbandment (Khairudin Aljunied 160).

party organ, *Pelita Malaya* (Ting 159). Aishah continued her political activism, joining the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1950 (Ting 162). In England, Lim joined the Malayan Forum, an organisation of Malayan and Singaporean students in London formed with the objective of “creat[ing] political consciousness among fellow students to work towards independence for Malaya” (*Kaleidoscope* 128); she became editor of its journal, *Suara Merdeka* (The Voice of Freedom) in October 1951 (*Kaleidoscope* 129).

The decades between the 1920s and 1945 had increased Malayan women's freedom of movement and mobility through education and participation in the economic and political spheres. Modern models of women's emancipation from around the world, coupled with developments in transportation and mass communication in the pre-war decades had opened the way for women to obtain better access to education and employment. Images of the New Woman in mass media had inspired Malayan women and men alike to a new perspective on the roles of women in society, while women's participation in the public and male-dominated arena of politics during the Japanese Occupation and after had increased their opportunities for travel and mobility. However, education for Malayan women was still predicated along traditional gender roles; meanwhile, Malaya emerged from the Japanese Occupation divided along racial and political lines, the memory of the cosmopolitan Modern Girl of the pre-war period all but erased (Izharuddin 493). It is in this context that Lim and Aishah's awareness of women's freedom and sense of nationhood took shape.

In the following sections, Lim and Aishah's narratives of their travels to England will be examined to ascertain how their experiences in the imperial centre further developed their notions of women's mobility and their roles in an independent nation.

### **Changing Landscapes for Malay(si)an Women in P.G. Lim's Sojourns in England**

*Kaleidoscope* covers various periods in Lim's long life and illustrious career, from her family's origins to her final post as the director of the Regional Centre for Arbitration in Kuala Lumpur. Two chapters are dedicated to her travels in England, titled “University” and “London 1946, 1951-1953 and Lee Meng.” Lim's travels exposed her to patriarchy in the English university system, racism in post-war England, and also to an anti-colonial movement in the early 1950s, albeit one that was dominated by elite, English-educated men. As a junior lawyer, she also took part in a trial in England that challenged the colonial British justice system in Malaya. In Lim's memoirs, the changing landscapes of women's rights to education and employment in a colonised, patriarchal society are interwoven with the awakening of national consciousness among Malaysians.

Lim's sojourns in Cambridge (1934-38) and in London (1946-48; 1951-53) were enabled by a tradition of English education, her family's considerable wealth,



and an available network of relatives and friends in England. When she embarked on her first journey to study law at Cambridge in 1934, it was to continue in the footsteps of her parents and their siblings, who had been educated in universities in the West.<sup>13</sup> In spite of the misogynist attitude among wealthy Chinese society towards women, Lim was able to pursue a university degree because of her parents' progressive views on women's education, which they had imbibed through their English/Western education. The circumstances of Lim's travel to Cambridge parallels that of English-educated Indians in the nineteenth century, for whom, according to Inderpal Grewal, "[t]ravel to the West in the nineteenth century, especially for education, came with an apparatus of English education [and] the formation of elites under colonial rule..." (189). The effect of this apparatus of English education<sup>14</sup> is evident in how Lim depicts her first journey to England as

a voyage that would take me to a land made known to me by my parents and elders and the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, R.L. Stevenson and other nineteenth-century novelists, which had been part of our school curricula. (*Kaleidoscope* 73)

Thus, prior to her departure, English literature read at home and at school activated the idea of England as a sort of cultural homeland in Lim's imagination. Her first voyage is described in terms of an "adventure" and "breaking new ground" (*Kaleidoscope* 77), similar to a Victorian-era adventure novel. This trope that English education and English literature had activated in Lim presents England as familiar and reachable via the imagination, if not by actual distance.

Leaving for England was also an opportunity for Lim to escape the stifling nature of colonial society in Penang, which organised people and their movements according to a strict racial hierarchy. Colonial Penang was alienating, a society where

the white man was looked upon as a minor god, who snapped his fingers to call a head boy in a bar or hotel, who committed the sin of inter-marriage by marrying outside his race. A society in which white women hung little boxes outside their gates, on which were painted In and Out signs and their names; the In sign was not an invitation to call but a place in which to put your visiting card. (*Kaleidoscope* 71)

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<sup>13</sup> Lim's father, Lim Cheng Ean, a lawyer and member of the Penang Legislative Council from 1928 to 1933 was educated at Cambridge. Her mother, Rosaline Hoalim and her siblings also had an English education.

<sup>14</sup> Lim attended Light Street Convent, a convent school in Penang.

Her English education and Anglophile family background had indeed shaped Lim's outlook and cultural compass, and afforded her considerable privilege. However, Lim's journeys to England also need to be read in the context of the barriers put in place by the colonial administration and local patriarchal communities on colonised women's mobility through limiting women's access to education. Lim presents her journey to Cambridge as a result of the lack of opportunities for Malaysians to pursue higher education within the country (*Kaleidoscope* 89).<sup>15</sup> Ironically, in England, Lim still encounters restrictions on women's mobility and access to intellectual pursuit.

Cambridge University in the 1930s practised several policies that curb women's freedom of movement, such as the curfew system at Girton College (Lim's college), which allowed students to return late only up to three times. When Lim broke this rule, she was reminded by her tutor that "[f]reedom, my dear, is self-imposed restraint" (*Kaleidoscope*, 83). Along with another women's college, Newnham, Girton College was not considered part of the University of Cambridge until 1947; its graduates received only "titular degrees" issued by the colleges themselves, something Lim realised only as she neared the end of her studies (*Kaleidoscope* 87). While she did not experience discrimination from her professors due to her gender and race, Lim recalls that she could not attend the debates at the Cambridge Union, for "it was a preserve of male undergraduates; their female counterparts were not yet members of the university" (*Kaleidoscope* 85). Similar debates were organised in Girton College for the female undergraduates, but Lim found them "uninteresting" (*Kaleidoscope* 85). She finally received her degree from Cambridge in 1949, an occasion she describes as "a long-awaited degree that would legitimize my years at Girton" (*Kaleidoscope* 87).

Lim's return to England years later (1946-48; 1951-53) took place in a world that had been recast in a new mould. Britain's power and its hold on its empire had been diminished by the war, and nationalist movements had gained traction in Asia and Africa. During the war years, Lim's aspirations for a career in Malaya, already hampered by the lack of opportunities under the colonial administration, was halted. Her marriage also broke down, but the example set by Indian women who volunteered to join Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) marked a turning point in how she viewed the roles of Malayan women. For the first time, she saw that "women had a role outside of their traditional roles.... Their example showed our women that they too had a role to play in self-rule and independence" (*Kaleidoscope* 121). This was a departure from the ethos that restraint is part of freedom that she had learned at Girton, and also underscores the dyadic relationship between women's mobility and nationalist movements.

Her subsequent travels in England in the late 1940s and the early 1950s involved direct participation in activities challenging British colonial rule of

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<sup>15</sup> Up to 1949, the two higher education institutions open to Malaysians were Raffles College and the King Edward College of Medicine, both located in Singapore.

Malaya as she began to carve out a career as a lawyer. However, there were new obstacles in her travels in England which she had not experienced in the pre-war years: economic hardship and racism. Post-war Britain, reeling from the destruction and economic downturn brought by the war, had opened its borders to subjects from its shrinking empire to take up menial and low-paid jobs in areas such as public transport and nursing. The wave of Caribbean and South Asian immigrants to England in the late 1940s further added to Britain's already multicultural population, but also resulted in racism directed at the new arrivals. Lim recounts an incident while queuing to receive her ration book when an elderly Englishwoman rudely asked if she was Japanese, and she notes that this experience made her realise that "the war from which we had all just emerged had worked no change on the British regard for Asians, then referred to as Asiatics, as an inferior race" (*Kaleidoscope* 125). Racism in post-war England was also extended to housing, and Lim had difficulty finding lodgings in London because she was not white (*Kaleidoscope* 126).<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, her second journey to England was important in her quest to become a practicing lawyer as she prepared to sit for the Bar Finals exam. Now a single mother, she returned to studying after a gap of almost ten years; she passed and was called to the Bar in November 1948. With this qualification and a Master of Arts degree received from Cambridge the following year,<sup>17</sup> Lim then began her career as a lawyer in Penang. This part of Lim's narrative of her travels highlights how England was both a place of freedom and oppression; women from colonised societies could achieve social mobility through education that enables them to enter professions previously limited to Europeans or/and men. Yet, Asian women like Lim are also regarded with hostility due to their race. Also evident in her narrative is a breaking down of patriarchal notions of women's mobility both in Malaya and England, as she becomes a more independent traveller, personally knocking on doors to find accommodations for herself and her young son.

Lim's travels in England reached a new level on her third journey. What was initially a journey made to improve her health led to her involvement in a nationalist movement as a member of the Malayan Forum, a multiethnic Malayan students' association featuring many future leaders of independent Malaya and Singapore.<sup>18</sup> As editor of *Suara Merdeka*, the Forum's journal, Lim moderated debates on Malayan independence among contributors and readers. It was also

<sup>16</sup> Lim writes, "In response to "To Let" advertisements in the newspapers, I was twice turned down at the door when they saw that I was a 'foreigner.' What a contrast to my days at Cambridge where I was always welcome because I was a foreigner" (*Kaleidoscope* 126).

<sup>17</sup> The M.A. was awarded to holders of "titular" degrees from Cambridge.

<sup>18</sup> Members included Abdul Razak Hussein (future Deputy Prime Minister of Malay(si)a and second Prime Minister of Malaysia), Maurice Baker (academic and future Singaporean diplomat), Goh Keng Swee (future Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore) and Mohamad Soviee (future MP and Malaysian diplomat) (*Kaleidoscope* 128).

during this period that Lim's fledgling career and her anti-colonial activism came together when she became involved in an appeal against the death sentence by a woman named Lee Meng. Lee, a member of the Communist Party of Malaya had been sentenced to death for illegal possession of a hand grenade under a colonial justice system that was biased against Malaysians. Lim managed to secure a Queen's Counsel, Mr. Dinglefoot, to represent Lee Meng in her appeal, Lim herself acting as Mr. Dinglefoot's assistant. Although their appeal was unsuccessful,<sup>19</sup> one of the outcomes of the Lee Meng case is the end of the trial by assessors system, as it was found to be unjust and exposed Malaysians to bias from European judges and assessors (*Kaleidoscope* 141-42). This episode in her travels marks a significant moment when Lim's aspirations for personal independence (as a woman with a career) and nationhood intersect.

Though a brief part of her memoirs, Lim's narrative of her travels in England shows the changing circumstances in Malay(si)an women's freedom and mobility from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s. In her first journey, women were not always able to enter all spaces in England due to restrictions mandated by a patriarchal British society. However, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, the war and the strengthening of anti-colonial movements in the British colonies had opened up more spaces for Malayan women in public roles. Post-war England became a place where Lim acquired the necessary education and experience for a bona fide profession and simultaneously challenge the colonial system that had suppressed Malayan women's mobility and freedom of movement.

### **Aishah Ghani in England and the Question of Women's Rights and Freedoms**

According to Inderpal Grewal, non-elite Indian women travellers to the West followed other patterns of travel based on their religious, cultural and class backgrounds (181). Similarly, Aishah Ghani's travelogue reveals different patterns of travel than that of Lim. In her introduction to the reissued edition of her 1956 travelogue, *Ibu Melayu Mengelilingi Dunia: Dari Rumah ke London* she states that the freedom that she had to travel to England was meant to raise a national consciousness and love for one's country. Aishah was not so interested in discussing travel and personal freedom for women as much as in discussing travel as a valuable educational experience for Malay women, especially in light of the struggle for independence from British rule. Much of what there is to learn from England about women's freedom is presented in her travelogue as what Inderpal Grewal terms a "comparative epistemology" that arose out of the experience of traveling between the 'East' and the 'West', and places both as "essentialized, locational identities" (Grewal 224). Discussing the Indian reformist Parvati

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<sup>19</sup> Lim and her colleagues went on to assist in obtaining a commutation of Lee Meng's death sentence from the Sultan of Perak by gathering the signatures of many British MPs and public figures in support of the appeal.

Athavale's travel narrative, Grewal explains how Athavale's comparative method involves comparisons between India and the West in order to "construct a better past and a more productive prehistory for nationalism" (225). Aishah can also be viewed as an early example of the new Malay woman whose emergence in the Malay literary scene of the 1950s and 1960s set up a counter-discourse to modernity's patriarchal elements (Izharuddin 56).

Similar to Lim's travels to the imperial centre, education and the possibility of pursuing a profession as a result of one's education abroad were the impetus for Aishah's journey. The difference was that Aishah was not a product of English education, nor was she a member of the colonial elite. She had several years of political activism in the PKMM and UMNO under her belt prior to leaving for England to study journalism, and left before the historic 1955 federal legislative elections in Malaya (Ting 162). Her travels came at a great personal sacrifice as she had to leave her husband and three young children behind throughout the duration of her studies.

At the very outset of her book, it is made clear that Aishah's journey was part of a greater mission to help lead Malaya to independence by setting a positive example to Malay women. Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903-1990) himself, then the Chief Minister of the Federation of Malaya, penned the foreword to *Ibu Melayu* endorsing Aishah's journey. He wrote:

This book proves a Malay woman's determination and perseverance. For the sake of acquiring knowledge, she made a sacrifice by leaving her husband and children behind to travel abroad, in order to improve her life as a woman who loves her country, her nation and progress. Che Aishah's determination, firmness of purpose and perseverance should be held as an example for other Malay women. (*Ibu Melayu* vii-viii)

The foreword implies that female travel should be in the service of the nation and that national interests come first before the woman's own. However, although the Tunku's endorsement gave her travels legitimacy, Aishah did not necessarily bow down to his wishes when it went against her own purpose and objectives for traveling. She later resisted the Tunku's attempt to entice her away from her studies by offering her the leadership position of the party's women's wing, the *Kaum Ibu*, when the previous leader, Khatijah Sidek (198-82) was expelled from UMNO in 1956 (Ting 162-63). Her action can be understood as the sensibility of the new Malay woman whose agency and transnational journey resist the attempts of nationalist rhetoric to subordinate women (Izharuddin 63).

The "comparative epistemology" (Grewal 224) that marks some colonised women's travel narratives to the West appears in Aishah's travelogue as comparisons of social and cultural norms in Malaya and in England, and as a

dichotomy of good freedom and bad freedom for women.<sup>20</sup> An early example of this can be seen during Aishah's voyage from Singapore to Tilbury, when she meets other female travellers from Asia. The one which leaves an impression on her is *Nyonya* (Mrs.) Kharas, a solo female traveller who boards the ship at Bombay. Aishah is amazed by the fact that despite her age, Mrs. Kharas, who had previously travelled to Burma and France, still plans to travel to Hong Kong and Japan (*Ibu Melayu* 22-23). Aishah wastes no time in holding up Mrs. Kharas as an example for Malays to emulate:

I saw then how women of other nations were interested in seeing other countries in the world; look at *Nyonya* Kharas — she is so old but she still wants to see the Far Eastern countries. (*Ibu Melayu* 23)

Aishah turns the encounter into an opportunity to compare what she deems as the Malays' reluctance to travel abroad with this elderly woman's indefatigable energy for traveling, in her criticism of the small number of Malay students in England. This she ascribes to the Malays' reluctance to invest in their children's education and their dependence on scholarships, creating a sense of dependency that she claims the British colonisers could easily exploit (*Ibu Melayu* 55-56). The comparison is meant to inspire the Malays to change and improve their attitude to education and travel, which could lead them to shake off the shackles of colonialism.

Comparisons of Malayan and British women's freedom appear in chapters discussing the behaviour and rights of British women, titled "Hyde Park" and "*Hak Perempuan Inggeris*" (The Rights of British Women). In these chapters, Aishah offers her observations and critique of British women's freedoms and the impact on their morals, while comparing them with the rights, circumstances and morals of Malay women. Generally, based on her observations, there are two types of freedom that British women enjoy, which I term 'good freedom' and 'bad freedom.'

The examples of good freedom are: (1) British women have the right to divorce their husbands; (2) British women dominate their homes and their husbands are expected to help with domestic work, unlike "Eastern men" (*Ibu Melayu* 68); (3) young British women are given the freedom to determine their lives and earn their own living once they are of age, hence they work hard to acquire useful skills that would lead to a good career (*Ibu Melayu* 72); (4) British women have the freedom to choose to marry men of their liking without parental

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<sup>20</sup> According to Inderpal Grewal, "[t]he discourse of good and bad modernizations was part of the negotiations with modernity that were undertaken in India under colonization. The comparative method of travel and modernity...comes to the fore in Athavale's negotiations with nationalism, because it enables feminist work to be carried out" (Grewal 229).

consent (*Ibu Melayu* 72). On the other hand, Aishah said, too much freedom for British women is also bad for them. Specifically, their freedom in romantic and sexual relationships means British women can have relationships with several men, leading to a rise in unwanted pregnancies and illegitimate children (*Ibu Melayu* 73). Young couples make love in Hyde Park at night (*Ibu Melayu* 64) and British newspapers are filled with stories of scandalous affairs and the ease with which men and women change lovers (*Ibu Melayu* 65). “Pious” British parents who remove their daughters from school for fear that they would become fallen women are praised for exercising control over their daughters’ freedom (*Ibu Melayu* 74). In light of Aishah’s own rebellion against her parents for wanting to marry her off at a young age, this observation is very ironic.

In her critique of British women’s rights and freedom, Aishah explicitly positions herself as “an Eastern woman who upholds Eastern values of decency” (*Ibu Melayu* 64), and the West as an Other. Commenting on the sight of women making love with men in Hyde Park at night, Aishah asks herself, “Is this the result of the freedoms that Western civilisations have achieved?” (*Ibu Melayu* 64). This reduces the complex structures and relationships of Malayan and British societies to a simplified binary of ‘East’ (mostly good) versus ‘West’ (mostly bad), which is then used to justify the need for independence from British rule. In Aishah’s vision of an independent Malaya, a solid moral foundation among its citizens is essential, and young Malay women’s morals are subjected to greater scrutiny than that of young Malay men. This is a classic case of the tendency of nationalist discourse to incorporate women as symbols of the nation, where women’s morals are read as indicators of their nation’s progress.

Aishah ends her chapter on the rights of British women by asking her readers to consider the effects of freedom on Malay women – singling out English education as an enabler – and the importance of placing some limits on that freedom:

One day, our girls will inevitably experience this age of freedom. When we compare the conditions of our (Malay) women before the war and after, there is a huge difference. Many of our girls have attended English schools. So, how much freedom should be given to our girls? Will we be able to stop the freedoms that will come with the changing of the times? (*Ibu Melayu* 74-75)

While she acknowledges that girls ought to be allowed to mingle with the opposite sex, Aishah cautions the Malay youth not to go beyond the boundaries set by decorum and religion (*Ibu Melayu* 75). They are reminded to emulate the British youth’s “sense of responsibility towards their country, towards their obligations” (*Ibu Melayu* 76) and not just to mimic practices such as dancing,

picnics and socialising freely with the opposite sex. In Aishah's opinion, only the former will enable the future independent Malaya to progress.

A short chapter entitled "*Perjuangan Kaum Ibu Britain*" (The Struggles of British Women) in her travelogue reveals an intriguing awareness of Western feminist figures. Aishah likens Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1759-97) to Kartini (1879-1904), the famous Javanese woman activist whom she had probably learned about as a student at the Diniyyah Putri School.<sup>21</sup> Other renowned British women whom Aishah mentions in the chapter include Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946), Rachel 'Ray' Strachey (1887-1940), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Olive Schreiner (1855-1920). In Aishah's own words, the purpose of her overview of British feminism in this chapter (although she doesn't use the term 'feminism' at all) was for the benefit of the Malay women whom she assumes would be her readers (*Ibu Melayu* 77). Thus, there is a degree of cross-cultural engagement with Western feminist ideas in Aishah's travels in England.

While travel gave Aishah many opportunities to observe British society, her encounters with racism also undermined the potential of travel for Malay(si)an women. She recounts that a white British woman in her building complained to the Town Hall at having to share accommodations with "black people", and notes the various discriminatory practices against non-white people in housing (*Ibu Melayu* 59). She also experienced a subtler form of racism as an extra in a film production, which required her and other non-white actors to wear make-up several shades darker than their actual skin tone to reflect the British idea of what Malays look like (*Ibu Melayu* 167). Such encounters indicate the limitations on freedom and mobility for Malay(si)an women travellers in England.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the narratives of two Malay(si)an women who travelled to England when attitudes towards women's freedom of movement and mobility were being recalibrated. The process had been set in motion years before Lim's and Aishah's travels, when the advent of modernity in Malaya in the inter-war years gave rise to a class of New Women who challenged restrictions on their mobility and autonomy. Increased education and employment opportunities for girls in Malaya had also enabled women to cross physical and social boundaries, as the Japanese Occupation and the end of the Second World War brought more women into public roles and spaces.

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<sup>21</sup> The Diniyyah Putri School was established by Rahmah El Yunusiah in 1923. Influenced by the *Kaum Muda* reformists' attitude towards women's education, the school expanded the curriculum to prepare students for their roles in the family, society and religion (White 102). Besides Aishah Ghani, another prominent woman nationalist from Malaya who attended the school was Shamsiah Fakeh, her successor as head of AWAS.



Both Lim and Aishah are highly critical of British colonialism even as England was the location for their pursuit of the education, qualifications and experience needed for their career as well as for the independence of Malaya. However, England's patriarchal attitudes towards women and the discourse of racism limited their mobility to some extent. Nonetheless, England was the space where they tested their mettle against the colonial system and provided a model of women's freedoms that they could learn from and question. Their travel experiences further expanded their roles beyond the domestic realm through exposure to discourses of freedom, nationalism and direct involvement in anti-colonial movements.

There were differences in Lim's and Aishah's travel and mobility, which can be attributed to their class and ethnicity. As a member of the Straits Chinese bourgeoisie, Lim had the apparatus of an English education, while Aishah's hopes of attending an English school was thwarted by her father's disapproval and the expectation for her to marry after completing her primary education (Ting 157). Aishah finally succeeds in having this hurt redressed with the opportunity to study in London. Thus, England in the 1930s to 1950s represents progress and freedom for Lim and Aishah in similar but varying ways. Opportunities for education and training for a profession were the main reasons for their travels; the trend of Malay(si)an women travelling to the West for leisure were still decades away. For Lim and Aishah, travel was a duty for self-improvement, Malay(si)an women's improvement and for a nation on the brink of independence.

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