

Dismantling Gendered Nationalism in Kee Thuan Chye's *We Could ** You, Mr. Birch***

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Abstract

This article analyses the representation of gender in Kee Thuan Chye's play *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* (1994), examining how the characters are used to undermine patriarchal concepts of nation. Kee uses historical characters and events, situating them within a modern-day frame which takes a critical stance towards the common portrayal of both imperialism and nationalism as male-centred domains. The events of this play highlight the masculinising discourse of imperialism and, subsequently, nationalism; this discourse is then viewed through a modern lens which interrupts it through the presence of "unruly woman whose refusal to comply with gender expectations unsettles various power relations on which the stability of the... society depends" (Gilbert 153), as well as men who cannot live up to the expectations of nationalistic constructions of male power. He thus critiques the "maleness" of the nation, while proffering alternative possibilities for nation-construction through the recovery of (fictional) female histories.

Keywords

Malaysia, theatre, nationalism, gender, historiography, postcolonial

This article will look at the representation of gender in Kee Thuan Chye's play *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch*, examining how the playwright uses his characters to undermine male, patriarchal concepts of nation. Kee situates his play at a particular historical moment which can represent both the establishment of the British colonising presence as well as the beginning of nationalistic resistance to that

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presence. However, this moment is also situated within a modern-day frame which takes a critical stance towards the common portrayal of both imperialism and nationalism as male-centred domains. The events of this play highlight the masculinising discourse of imperialism and, subsequently, nationalism; this discourse is then viewed through a modern lens which questions and interrupts it through the presence of “unruly woman whose refusal to comply with gender expectations unsettles various power relations on which the stability of the... society depends” (Gilbert 153), as well as men who cannot live up to the expectations of nationalistic constructions of male power. He thus critiques and deconstructs the “maleness” of the nation, while proffering alternative possibilities for nation-construction through the recovery of (fictional) female histories.

As much postcolonial criticism has noted, both imperialist and nationalist discourse tended to figure the woman as purely symbolic, rather than as an active participant in the formation of a nation or a national identity. Men were the progenitors of the nation: masculine and, therefore, by definition active and powerful. In *Birch*, Kee questions these constructions, suggesting instead that male constructions of nation are self-centred and greedy, while the female voice provides a more thoughtful, rational dimension to the discourse. By thus destabilising the conventional tropes of nation, Kee also questions the construction of the Malaysian national identity. The contemporary idea of national identity, best summarised by the catchphrase “*Malaysia Boleh!*” (literally, “Malaysia can do it!”), posits the nation as a site of enterprise and fruitful activity – a view that is challenged, again, by the oppositional stance taken by the women in this play. Kee forces a reconsideration, not of the national identity *per se* but of common perceptions of and reactions to it.

Gendering the Nation

The assigning of gender roles within a nation has deep implications for the development of that nation’s identity. Ania Loomba notes that: “If the nation is an imagined community, that imagining is profoundly gendered.... To begin with, across the colonial spectrum, the nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined literally *as a woman*” (214). Thus, nations are commonly referred to in female terms such as “the motherland,” and physically embodied by such female icons as the Statue of Liberty, Britannia and Marianne.

This gendering of the nation ostensibly protects national identities; women are established as culture bearers, preservers of tradition and thus, specifically in colonised countries, the site of resistance to Western cultural hegemony. Theirs, however, is a purely passive role; their submissiveness to male authority, which keeps them within the “protected” confines of the home, is construed as resistance to Western intrusion. But there is no space for active resistance on the part of women. As protectors of culture, they must remain shielded within narrow

boundaries, not coming into contact with the contamination represented by the colonising power/West. Men, however, are figured as not only entering but also mastering the Western worlds of economics and politics, to reassert an independent public national identity. Having stepped outside the culturally-protected boundaries of the home, into the material world of politics and economics, men are open to the danger of cultural contamination. The woman, confined within the home, is the repository of cultural and national purity and integrity, and as long as she remains within the home, this purity is well defended. Woman is thus kept confined and powerless, in the guise of resisting Imperialist/Western cultural hegemony. As Boehmer points out:

it is a male figure who is cast as the author and subject of the nation – as faithful soldier, citizen-hero or statesman.... The ‘female,’ in contrast, puts in an appearance chiefly in a metaphoric or symbolic role.... Figures of mothers of the nation are everywhere emblazoned but the presence of women in the nation is officially marginalised and generally ignored. (6)

Ania Loomba has stated that “nationalist movements have used the image of the Nation-as-Mother to create their own lineage, and also to limit and control the activity of women within the imagined community” (216). It becomes clear, then, that despite the rhetoric of freedom and equality frequently adopted by nationalists, there is a deliberate, concerted attempt to maintain gendered power differentials, with women excluded from active participation within the nation.

Thus, the apparent centralisation of female figures within the national consciousness does not point to a concomitant centrality of women within national power structures. As Anne McClintock notes, “No nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state” (353). The “rights and resources” are commonly annexed to the men in a society. McClintock cites Cynthia Enloe, who asserts that concepts of nationalism have “typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (cited in McClintock 353). By highlighting “masculinized humiliation,” Enloe suggests that these concepts are deployed in order to rebuild or replace some power or position that has been lost. In the context of postcolonialism, then, nationalism seeks to reassert the sovereignty taken away by the colonial project. Thus nationalism is more than just a reassertion of male power, it is also an attempt to reinstate such power where it might have been lost or taken away.

In the power equation, however, the building up of power on one side requires that it be reduced on the other. Thus, while the nation is imagined as, in some ways, a “female” body, that body is at the same time constructed as being powerless, constrained within the boundaries of male political and economic needs and plans. The nation’s public face – its political, economic and military might – is directly linked to the pride and masculinity of the male makers of the nation. McClintock

suggests that the “vast, fissured architecture of imperialism was gendered throughout by the fact that it was white men who made and enforced laws and policies in their own interests” (6). While specifically referring to imperialists, this same point is valid for a postcolonial nation such as Malaysia, whose native cultures also functioned along gendered, patriarchal lines.

In the Malaysian context, Ruzy Suliza Hashim’s book *Out of the Shadows* traces the representation of women in Malay court narratives. She notes that many scholars see the women in these narratives as “Powerless and defenceless” (18); they are represented as being “the weaker sex, and easily manipulated” (19). They are marginalised and even dehumanised: “While the men in the court narratives appear human with their conflicting emotions and shifting subjectivities, the women’s rigid identities do not endear them to the audience” (Ruzy 29). Being thus limited, pushed to the peripheries and accorded unchanging, inflexible identities, women are shown as taking no active, valuable part in the formation of the nation.

The nation, then, is emphatically a domain of male power, a creation of the complex male imagination. Furthermore, women are actively disempowered, so that power will devolve entirely into male hands. Writing about Irish nationalism, Rob Doggett states that the Irish peasant female was “both the symbol of domesticity and an object of exchange within Ireland’s rural economy – both positions working in conjunction to deny her unmediated access to political and economic power” (1013). In the same context, Maria-Elena Doyle writes that “nationalists preferred to put forward the figure of the woman-nation who could return to Irish men a sense of their own masculinity by standing as a passive ideal in need of their rescue” (33). In both traditional and modern Malay literature, women are figured as “passive, loyal, persevering, accepting, submissive and pure” (Ruzy 23); in other words, their function is to silently support the active male characters. All these portrayals relate to Enloe’s point, quoted earlier, about using the female as symbol, to rebuild male power or dominance.

Postcolonial and nationalist literatures frequently support this enterprise, portraying women in silent, subject positions. Gilbert and Tompkins, for example, note that there is a

metaphorical link between woman and the land, a powerful trope in imperial discourse and one which is reinforced, consciously or not, in much post-colonial drama, particularly by male writers. In some instances, women’s bodies are not only exploited by the colonisers but also reappropriated by the colonised patriarchy as part of a political agenda which may not fully serve the interests of the women in question. (213)

While woman functions as a symbol, she is a passive one; she remains still, while the men actively “exploit” and “reappropriate” her body. Gilbert and Tompkins go on to assert that “women’s bodies often function in post-colonial

theatre as the spaces on and through which larger territorial or cultural battles are being fought” (215). Again, the emphasis is on passivity, on a purely symbolic and utterly powerless function, with no recourse to active agency. Such portrayals reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy, with the nation imagined as female but the national identity being staunchly male.

This subordination of women is reinforced by common cultural perceptions and constructions of bodies; the body, male or female, is constructed in ways which reinforce the central tenets of a state or society. Susan Bordo argues that it “is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (90). One of the most significant constructions has been the defining of gender identities in terms of binaries, namely, the unruly female body, as against the logical and reasonable male mind. As Elizabeth Grosz argues: “Patriarchal oppression... justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women’s social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms” (14). Physical bodies are devalued, while the mind/reason is elevated in status. Males are constructed as being “of the mind,” while women are inextricably linked with the messy, mysterious physicality of bodily matters such as reproduction. Michael Peletz notes that among many Muslim communities in Malaysia, “one finds an entrenched, highly elaborated belief that ‘passion’ is more pronounced among women... than among men” (88). In some Malay communities, reason is held to inhere in both men and women but is qualitatively different depending on the individual’s gender:

Thus certain individuals and classes of people (e.g., adult males) are accorded “long,” “broad,” “high,” or “deep” “reason,” just as others (adult females, and children and adolescents of both sexes) are held to be endowed with “reason” that is “short,” “narrow,” “low,” or “shallow.” Having “reason” that is “long,” “broad,” “high,” and the like is clearly more valued than having “reason” that is “short,” “narrow,” “low,” and so forth; and the person with “long,” “broad” “reason” is accorded more virtue in the hierarchy of prestige (and stigma). (Peletz 93)

Thus, the long-held ideal that man/reason should dominate the woman/body is reinforced: “For Plato, it was evident that reason should rule over the body and over the irrational or appetitive functions of the soul” (Grosz 5). The value-loaded differences noted by Peletz imply that men must dominate. As Peletz further notes, these differences “served to delegitimize women’s important roles in public communal rituals during this time, thus effecting both a constriction and an overall devaluation of women’s ritual activities” (94).

In much patriarchal postcolonial literature, women are certainly portrayed as physical rather than rational or intellectual beings. Gilbert and Tompkins speak of women's bodies, whether black or white, being "commandeered" to fulfil particular needs of the nation, with women being reduced ultimately to their sexual and reproductive functions. Many postcolonial (especially female) writers have therefore chosen to "re-appropriate" female bodies in performance, to destabilise imperial and nationalist constructions of the gendered female body. In *Birch*, Kee also seeks to undermine the male/mind-female/body dyad, thus simultaneously destabilising the common masculine tropes of nationalism. What is interesting about Kee's portrayal of women in *Birch* is that he avoids or rethinks this focus on the body, to position women as questioning, rational beings who resist commodification as physical/sexual objects or, if thus commodified, turn their physicality to their own advantage. The male characters, on the other hand, are sometimes "de-masculinised," thus unfitting them for their assumed roles as leaders of this "male" nation. Kee also gives voice and body to marginalised nineteenth century women, positioning them as questioning, challenging individuals, thereby not only reclaiming women's lost histories but also undermining monocular views of the nation as a purely and solely male province.

Gendered Nation in *Birch*

*We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* works actively to destabilise the mythology of the male-identified nation as a centre of integrity, masculinity and autonomy. The playwright questions the whole nationalist myth through his self-centred, greedy male characters, with the female characters functioning as the rational, ethical voice that is so lacking in the men. Boehmer notes that in the colonial period, "'true' power... had been characterised as rational, disciplined, assertive, masculine; while inertia, weakness, the disorderly, was represented as feminine" (8). Kee's play reverses this assumption, affirming instead the strong, positive power of women vis-à-vis the divisions and weaknesses apparent among the men.

Birch was first performed in June 1994, at the Experimental Theater, Kompleks Budaya Negara (National Cultural Complex), Kuala Lumpur, with the playwright himself directing it. The play is a complex, layered piece, using history as a starting point but interweaving it with contemporary Kuala Lumpur society in a sometimes bewildering manner.

The play begins with a group of modern-day actors rehearsing for a play about the assassination of Perak's first British Resident, J.W.W. Birch. After a while, the rehearsal breaks down and the actors play "themselves,"² chatting about current events. They discuss ideas of truth and history, suggesting that the "truth" of history depends on who is telling it. These actors, while playing their historical roles, also

² "Actors" here cannot be conflated with "performers." "Actors" in this play are scripted, constructed characters, who are then played by performers onstage.

encounter a group of modern-day Kuala Lumpur yuppies. However, at these meetings, the “actors” remain in “character,” so that what we see is modern Malaysians interacting with nineteenth century Malayan historical characters. At the end, we are told of the ignominious fates of the conspirators to the assassination of Birch, and then we witness the frantic desperation of the yuppies as their “sure thing” stocks start to plummet in value.

The play is, at first reading or viewing, difficult to digest. While it is extremely entertaining, it is a little difficult to see the connection between the two sections of the story. How are the yuppies related to the actors or the historical characters? Eventually, however, it emerges that all these characters are united by their greed and overriding self-interest. At the same time, Kee uses the characters to make trenchant observations about Malaysia as a nation and about Malaysians as a people.³

In this context, the choice of Birch’s assassination as a central metaphor is significant. Barbara and Leonard Andaya state that: “The precise motives for Birch’s murder are still debated. Popular interpretations of his death have seen it as an outburst against British authority, the first stirrings of an incipient nationalism” (166). In this nationalist interpretation, Birch is a petty tyrant and a thief (Andaya 165), while the assassins and conspirators are read as heroes and freedom fighters. Such an interpretation resists the imperialist feminisation of Asia, where Asian males are cast as soft and indolent, revelling in luxury, unlike the harder, more ascetic colonisers. It also resists the assumption that “Asiatics” are incapable of governing themselves, as stated by former Governor Weld (Andaya 177). By interpreting the assassination as a forceful and positive move towards independence from the patriarchal dominance of the British, nationalists have sought to cast the incipient nation as masculine, self-determining and powerful. Kee, however, has reinterpreted these events in a way which allows him to destabilise these notions, to open the way to a far less positive and optimistic view of the nation.

By juxtaposing past and present, Kee adds resonance to his examination of modern Malaysia. His intention in this play is always to point to the present, using the past as a tool. He aims to highlight what he sees as the fact that nothing has changed despite the passage of the years: “It seems to be the case now as it used to be before. In a sense it is also giving the idea that things really haven’t changed” (Kee, qtd. in Al-Attas). By obliquely situating his play in the past, making sure meanwhile that the past remains closely linked to the present, Kee is able to demonstrate his belief that situations prevailing in the past, continue to prevail in the present.

³ For a fuller examination of Kee’s subversion of nationalist rhetoric, see my unpublished thesis, “Re-scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-Language Theatres of Singapore and Malaysia” (Australian National University, 2005).

While many postcolonial writers have used the past as a source of myths through which pride and a heroic identity can be recovered, Kee uses the past to destabilise these heroic constructions of the national identity. Furthermore, by generally focusing on the political or martial, rather than the domestic, postcolonial writers tend to recover a determinedly masculine past, from which women have been written out; Kee makes it a point to include female voices, creating fictional female characters, as no women appear in the official histories.

The main characters in this play are Birch, Sultan Abdullah, Maharaja Lela, Datuk Sagor and the slave Siputum (conspirators to the assassination), and the yuppie Ashburn. Kee includes three women in apparently minor roles: Maharaja Lela's daughter Mastura, the slave Kuntum (wife to Siputum, the slave who actually killed Birch) and Ashburn's girlfriend Sofea. All three women are fictional; of the male characters, only the yuppies and minor characters such as the henchmen are fictional. It would appear, then, that the male characters are centralised, with the women appearing only in their archetypal relationships to the men: Mastura as "daughter," and Kuntum and Sofea as "wife." It is the men who run the country and decide on its fate.

However, Kee subverts these ideas by focusing on the greed and self-interest of the men, thus undermining notions of heroism and masculine pride. By showing all the men in this play as being grasping and materialistic, Kee suggests that the nation is built on venal foundations. He has recovered the past, only to question the implied heroism of the historical characters. By linking the past and the present, he then shows us that the foundations of the contemporary nation (imagined as energetic, fast-rising and enterprising) are questionable; this is a point he reinforces through Ashburn, the yuppie intent on making a quick buck on the stock market by using insider information – a habit which he resolutely refuses to see as illegal. Kee disallows any group to recover an honourable past; all are part of a continuing scheme of grasping materialism. Birch declares that the British are in Malaya only to profit from tin exports. The Malay chiefs are offended more by their loss of income, than by challenges to their sovereignty. Ashburn is concerned entirely with the possibility of making large amounts of money very quickly, without considering the legality of his actions, or the possible consequences. Thus the male-imagined nation is shown to be a greedy, grasping entity.

The destabilising of the heroic male identity is reinforced by Kee's manipulation of traditionally accepted gender roles within the national framework. In the search for national identity, gender identity has been central; as noted, the nation is, symbolically, female, but it is governed by males. The traditional patriarchal family stands metonymically for the nation, with the male head of the household controlling his female dependents. The male/female dichotomy was complicated by colonialism, as the power equation then demanded that the colonised men be devalued in relation to the coloniser. Hence, "native" men were

represented as feminised, voluptuous, lazy, inscrutable, etc. – in every way, the “other” of the masculine, hard working, frank, honest coloniser. Recuperating the image of the native male meant re-asserting him as a man: a warrior, a ruler, a hero.

Kee’s representation of the main male characters in this play destabilises these images of men as “manly.” Whether coloniser or colonised, his men are fundamentally dishonest and unheroic, and even, in some cases, undersexed and hysterical. If the first two qualities dismantle traditional notions of nobility and heroism, the second two take away the very “maleness” of the men, turning them instead into feminised characters.

The coloniser was frequently cast as exceedingly virile, a fine, manly specimen. Where white women were forbidden to embark on sexual liaisons with native men, the presence of the white man’s dusky mistress was discreetly accepted; it not only confirmed the virility of the coloniser, it also reinforced the dominant/subordinate relationship between coloniser and colonised. Kee draws on these images in portraying the relationship between Birch and Kuntum.

Birch represents himself as saviour to slaves, specifically to the female debt-slave Kuntum, who “belongs” to Datuk Sagor. She runs to Birch for refuge, appearing to reinforce the image of the woman in need of protection from a patriarchal authority figure. Ruzy has noted that “in Malay oral literature, beautiful women often wait for a hero to save them... a passivity which demonstrates the weakness of women” (23). Here, the sense of passivity is (apparently) underscored by Birch’s dominant position as white male coloniser. Datuk Sagor laments that Birch “has power over women.... I cannot bear the thought of him soiling our women with his touch” (Kee, *Birch* 56). This conforms to the notion of woman as bearer of culture and purity, endangered by the threatening presence of the white man/Western culture. Birch also conforms to stereotypes – he is sexually attracted to Kuntum but cannot see her as an equal, telling her that “I find your brown skin inferior yet attractive” (58). They go off stage together, suggesting that Birch has successfully seduced her. Given that Kuntum has resolutely refused to give in to Datuk Sagor’s attempts to seduce her, it suggests that yet another stereotype is being played up, that the white man is irresistibly attractive to the native woman.

However, Kee uses this scene to utterly deflate Birch; after the seduction, Kuntum bursts onto the stage, justifying her actions in terms of her self and her own enjoyment. She evinces no admiration for Birch, no sense of him as the dominant, powerful figure. She then declares, playfully, that: “It’s not true, you know, that the *Mat Salleh*’s one is always bigger” (60).⁴ She thus reduces Birch to a sex object, the subject of snide speculation, easily denigrated. Birch’s manhood is completely discredited, and with it, the notion of the colonising nation as strong and masculine.

⁴ *Mat Salleh* is a Malaysian slang term for “white man.”

At the same time, however, Kee also discredits native manhood. Kuntum's husband, Siputum, is unable to provide for her in any way; they are kept apart by Datuk Sagor, on whom Siputum is totally dependent. Datuk Sagor appears to have power over Kuntum, whom he views as a sexual being, yet he is unable to exploit her sexuality. Thus the usual power relations – husband/master dominating the wife/slave – are dismantled and shown to be hollow.

Sultan Abdullah, as ruler, is meant to function as the keeper of the dignity of the nation, symbol of its might and power. Kee reduces him to a figure of fun, given to making pompous pronouncements which are neatly undercut by mockery from Raja Yusuf. Importantly, Kee also feminises Sultan Abdullah, undermining his dominance as ruler. Abdullah demands that Maharaja Lela cut off the middle finger of his left hand, as proof of his loyalty. Lela does so, despite Abdullah's shocked pleas not to do it: "You know I can't stand the sight of blood. I was only testing you" (75). When Lela presents the severed finger to Abdullah, Abdullah promptly faints; later, he is unable to sleep because dreams of the finger keep haunting him. Here, his squeamishness and delicacy undermine his role as leader/father. In the 1994 performance, actor Mano Maniam gave Abdullah a hysterical edge, pitching his voice high and shrieking as he woke up from his nightmare. The "female" complaint of hysteria is thus transferred to a man who should function as the head of his nation.

With the men thus feminised, Kee creates female characters who take on "male" attributes – rationality, logic, sexual power. These women – Mastura, Kuntum and Sofea – are fictional, created to balance the greed and rampant self-interest which are the hallmarks of the nation as created by the males. They also function as voices, mediated through Kee's twentieth-century consciousness, articulating the desires and frustrations of a confined and silenced group.

Mastura is Maharaja Lela's daughter, and her father expects that she will live the typical cloistered life of a Malay woman in the nineteenth century. She will marry, and then "fulfil yourself by fulfilling your husband" (33). Lela situates women squarely within domestic boundaries, barred from participating in "the affairs of men" (34), and defined wholly by their relationships with men. Mastura, however, is smart and articulate, beating her father at the traditional game of *congkak* (a game of strategy) and expressing her dissatisfaction with the life mapped out for her. She articulates an awareness of her own individuality and outlines her frustrations at the narrowness of the boundaries set for her. She also brings a wider, humanistic perspective to bear on the discussion of slavery. Where her father insists that slaves maintain their lowly place within the patriarchal hierarchy, she chooses to see them as individuals whose lives must be worth something. Kee has positioned Lela as the champion of tradition and he comes across as a character of far more dignity and integrity than Sagor and Abdullah. But

by comparing his view with Mastura's, Kee exposes Lela's insistence on maintaining tradition as cruel and unreasonable.

Sofea, too, represents the voice of common sense and ethical behaviour, in sharp contrast to the man to whom she is linked. She is Ashburn's girlfriend and, therefore, in the patriarchal scheme, subordinate to him. However, this hierarchy is disrupted by the fact that they live in the twentieth century and Sofea is, therefore, able to be a part of the "public" world of business which was closed to Mastura. She has mastered the jargon, speaking easily about the stock market and displaying a firm grasp of the workings of financial markets. In his response to her, Ashburn tries to re-appropriate this public world, positioning Sofea as overly pessimistic, as someone who does not understand the daily adjustments that occur in the stock market. Her misgivings about his attempts to play the market, which are in the end quite justified, are dismissed as arising from some personal fault of Sofea's: she is "pessimistic," "too reserved," has "lived too long in England" and is therefore an outsider to Malaysia (49). By thus personalising her worries, rather than admitting that she has some understanding of the situation, Ashburn attempts to remove her from "his" (male) domain of reason; she is, in his representation, overly emotional and therefore cannot fit into the rational male world.

However, Kee undermines Ashburn's confidence by referring to actual cases of stock market frauds and crashes, such as the "Union Paper tip... from some Datuk who's very well connected" (49). The audience, being aware of these cases, would obviously react to Ashburn's optimism with some scepticism, and Sofea's warnings would appear prescient and wise. Furthermore, she is motivated not just by caution, but by an ethical belief that "there's no need to be greedy" (49). If the nation is a male domain, then Ashburn reveals it to be dominated by shady business practices, greed, and by lack of ethics or foresight. Sofea's quiet wisdom contrasts strongly with these negative characteristics.

While Mastura and Sofea represent voices of reason and thoughtfulness, Kuntum appears to be embodied as a sexual/physical character. Kuntum is positioned by the men with whom she comes into contact as a sexual being: Datuk Sagor declares that he wants her to produce sons for him. This will make up for his wife, whom he describes as unsatisfactory because she has given him "daughter after daughter" (53); he thus seems to reduce Kuntum's value merely to her reproductive function. But he then goes on to confess that he also desires her, saying that "I must have swallowed some charm to have become like this" (54). It is interesting that he attributes his attraction to Kuntum to some kind of magical (i.e., irrational) intervention; his rational male self, it is implied, would not otherwise be thus dominated by lust and passion. However, his assertion is rendered meaningless because Kuntum does not make any active attempt to seduce Datuk Sagor; indeed, she shrinks from the very thought. But clearly, Kuntum exerts some kind of control

over Sagor. If this happens without any effort on her part, it shows the men to be as governed by lust as women purportedly are.

This is not to say, however, that Kuntum turns from sex completely. She voices her desire for her husband, constantly thwarted by Datuk Sagor's insistence on keeping them apart. More interestingly, she does enter into a physical relationship with Birch. Birch finds Kuntum fascinating, noting that she has "a spark... that the others don't have," that she has "a radiance" in her eyes (58). In the seduction scene (in the published text), Birch does all the talking, implying that he is in control of the situation. In the 1994 performance, however, Kuntum led the way off stage, casting a seductive glance over her shoulder, indicating that she was an active participant in the seduction. When she comes back on stage later, she justifies her actions in terms of her own pleasure and her own needs:

KUNTUM: Is it wrong for me to want the nice things in life? Even if it's for a short time? I didn't do this for anything else. That man was kind to me, he took care of me. I have not been treated like this for so long. My husband couldn't, the Datuk kept us apart. Anyway, I resisted as long as I could. I was scared. But I felt good. I am only a human being. (59)

Referring euphemistically to the sexual act as "the nice things in life," she openly displays her desires, rather than subordinating desire and pleasure to reproductive duty. This is contrary to nationalist constructions of women; according to McClintock, "sexuality, in particular women's sexuality, was cordoned off as the central transmitter of racial and hence cultural contagion" (47). Here, however, Kuntum refuses to acknowledge her duty as repository of cultural purity, vulnerable to the degradations of the imperialist and therefore duty bound to resist his advances. She focuses instead on her individual desires and needs. She succumbs not because she is dominated and not out of duty, but in order to feel good. There are no parallel expressions of pleasure from the men: Sagor is repeatedly frustrated in his desire for Kuntum, and Birch comes to believe that she has betrayed him. They are thus emasculated and robbed of their power, unable to derive pleasure from the woman who is supposed to be, in principle, subordinate to both of them.

The women in Kee's play are well-rounded characters, unlike the more one-dimensional characters of the Malay court narratives as mentioned in Ruzy's work. Mastura is a dutiful daughter but her incipient feminism and her willingness to speak against her father's beliefs reveals a more complex worldview and greater depth of character. Kuntum, although a slave, seems to possess power and initiative, which she uses actively to free herself from restraining bonds. Sofea, although quiet, is not compliant; she is a fully-functioning part of the male world, governed by rational thought and a strong sense of ethics.

It becomes clear, then, that Kee does not take the traditional stance on the position and function of women or men in the nation. His very inclusion of women

in the nineteenth-century narrative destabilises the traditional vision of the nation as a male-created space. His portrayal of the men who have, according to male-dominated historiography, engendered this nation, serves to undermine the assumption that the national space is as healthy and vibrant as is commonly stated. By using women, traditionally excluded from the creation of the national space, to question that construction, he challenges modern-day assumptions about the nation. He figures women as ethical, thoughtful, sexually active beings who attempt to enter the male domain of the nation. The men, while holding on to that domain, are revealed to be greedy, hysterical, perhaps even impotent. Thus, Kee destabilises the construction of the nation as vibrant and healthy; instead he suggests that if it was created by the men whom he has portrayed, it must be as materialistic and irrational as they are. What the nation *should* aspire to is embodied in the women.

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