

Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* and The Politics of Environment in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The question of “Who has the power?” is often central in environmental politics, since power serves as a crucial mediation through which conflicts related to environmental problems are resolved (or not resolved). In this paper, the author analyses how power relations are unpacked in Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998) and what effects these relations have on land that is threatened by an environmentally-destructive project. Environmental politics within a society is usually carried out based on the political system that exists. In the case of Malaysia, it is within a semi-democracy that environmental politics takes place, which is characterised by liberal democracy (such as competitive elections, citizen participation and civil liberties) as well as authoritarian rule (dominant political ruling parties and strong interventionist states). This analysis compares and contrasts the novel with the Marxist theory of power, which is referred to in this paper as “power over” or the various ways that power is wielded in order to maintain the status quo. The author argues that although Ooi seems to subscribe to this traditional concept of power, representing the state, the capitalists and their ideologies as “having” power, she also undermines that “having” by constructing notions of “power to” – power that refers to an individual and/or a social group's sense of worth, values, knowledge and potential to shape the course of actions and decisions related to the land – in order to create more equitable relations and structures of power. Ooi also presents this notion of “power to” as “problematic”: demonstrating how “power to” is often constricted by the forces of “power over”, as well as how the realisation of “power to” essentially hinges on paying more attention to ideological rather than coercive domination.

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INTRODUCTION

The growing importance of environmental issues and their connection to political change points to the politics of environment. The question of “Who has the power?” is often central in environmental politics, since power serves as a crucial mediation through which conflicts related to environmental problems are resolved (or not resolved). This also points to the nature of power – that it is generally exercised and practised through human interactions and thought of in terms of relationships. These relationships usually result in unequal power relations, which would have a bearing on the outcome of environmental conflicts and activism.

In this paper, the author analyses how power relations are unpacked in Yang-May Ooi’s *The Flame Tree* (1998) and what effects these relations have on land that is threatened by an environmentally-destructive project. The struggle for power within a society is usually carried out based on the political system that exists. British colonial rule in Malaya was based on the divide-and-rule policy, whereby the economic and political needs of the colonial government were placed before all else, leaving the different races to fend for themselves. In the case of post-independence Malaysia, the struggle for power is usually carried out within what Neher (1994) has termed a semi-democracy, characterised by liberal democracy (such as competitive elections, citizen participation and civil liberties) as well as authoritarian rule (dominant political ruling parties and strong interventionist states) (p.949). In

Malaysia, a general election is held every five years, out of which a government is formed based on the majority political party in Parliament. *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), a coalition predominantly made up of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), has been Malaysia’s ruling political party since independence. Over the years, the government (henceforth, the state) has been criticised for its authoritarian rule, under which it has become a problem to question or criticise its policies, decisions and accountability.

The author’s analysis compares and contrasts the novel with Marxist theory of power, which scholars usually classify as “power over”, or the various ways that power is wielded in order to maintain the status quo, often involving coercion, control, oppression and domination. “Power over” in this sense is distributed among the top stratum of society, especially the capitalists and the state. In environmental politics, this form of power often plays a role in denying, curtailing or discouraging people from exercising their rights to participate in or resolve environmental conflicts. The author argues that although Ooi seems to subscribe to this traditional concept/form of power, representing the state, the capitalists and their ideologies as “having” power, she also undermines that “having” by constructing “power to” in order to create more equitable relations and structures of power. This form of power counters “power over” in light of these three arguments:

i) that capitalists and workers are not the only classes or social relations in capitalist societies; ii) that landowners are one social class that make up Malaysian society (and often susceptible to environmental injustice and coercion); and iii) that Malaysian civil society (the social sphere separate from the state and the market, comprised of non-governmental organisations, mass-based movements, religious and social groups, trade unions, public intellectuals and other unaffiliated activists and alternative media) has expanded since the 80s (Weiss, 2009, p.742). In this study “power to” is taken to mean the form of power that refers to an individual and/or a social group’s potential to shape the course of actions and decisions related to the land. This form of power is central to understanding the private sphere of power (as opposed to the public sphere), which this author suspects is often overlooked in the nation’s narrow political outlook that sees politics as a practice associated solely with the public sphere and the state. Ooi also presents this notion of “power to” as “problematic”: demonstrating how “power to” is often constricted by the forces of “power over”, as well as how the realisation of “power to” essentially hinges on paying more attention to ideological rather than coercive domination.

A Marxist approach to environmental politics is concerned with debates related to materialism, justice and nature in capitalist societies, with the aim to attain a fairer distribution of rights and resources. In their conceptualisation of power, Marx and Engels used the concepts of “economic power”,

“social power” and “material power” interchangeably to refer to power (1848). In Marxism, power is generally thought of in terms of class relations, determined by property. According to Poulantzas, power is derived from “the capacity of a social class to realise its specific objective interests” (as cited in Sandbach, 1980, p.108). In this context, the capitalist class is the most able to realise its own objective interest considering economic interests and technology often works to their advantage. Unlike the capitalist who holds economic power, the state holds political power – providing, implementing and enforcing sets of standards, codes of conduct and law, as well as policies. Nevertheless, it is common to see the ruling class using the state as an instrument for the domination of society. The capitalists, by virtue of their economic power, can have a direct political influence on the state to ensure that class power is maintained (Newman, 2004, p.141). Thus, economic power could also lead to political power. In the same context, the state is often thought to reflect the interests and power of the dominant economic class.

Control over the economy and the state is not the only source of power for the capitalists. Another equally important source is control over ideas, or ideology. Marx’s own corpus of works such as “The German Ideology”, “Capital” and “Grundrisse” have touched on ideology, particularly in the context of class struggle. Central to class struggle are the forms of consciousness or the ideas and beliefs of the different social classes. These ideas and beliefs

are dependent on the material conditions in which they live and thus support the economic structure of a society. Marxist thinking about ideology and consciousness was extended significantly by Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Althusser defined ideology as a “system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society” (as cited in Goldstein, 1990, p.23). Althusser demonstrated the workings of ideology through a useful distinction of state power and state control. State power is backed by repressive structures such as the law courts, the police and the army. State control, on the other hand, is supported by ideological structures or state ideological apparatuses such as political parties, schools, media, religious institutions, family and art (including literature). These institutions serve to secure an ideology that would side with the state and the political status quo. This, however, does not mean that other ideologies cannot exist side by side with the ruling ideology: they can, indeed, without being adopted or internalised by the rest of society.

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is closely related to Althusser’s distinction of state power and state control. Drawing on Marx’s basic division of society into a base and a superstructure, Gramsci further divided the superstructure into the state or political society (coercive institutions) and civil society (all other non-coercive institutions). The state, which comprises public institutions such as the government,

police, armed forces and the legal system, asserts political control through rule (direct political control) and hegemony (subtle political control). Hegemony in this sense serves as an organising principle or ideology, which is not based on force and coercion, but on the subordination of the rest of society through their own consent. Through means such as ideology and false consciousness, hegemony is diffused by the state and the ruling class to obtain and maintain their power. The rest of society adopts as well as internalises these through the usual process of socialisation or culture.

The Marxist concept of power, however, has been challenged seriously by critics, who argue that Marxist deliberation on power is restricted to “all spheres of social life penetrated by a single, productivist logic, which privileges economy and identifies class relations as key to the structure of domination and the forms of resistance” (Peet & Watts, 1996, p.29). Therefore, the plurality of relations and struggles in society, and the exercise of power by diverse, socially situated agents, precipitated by the rise of “new social movements” such as social justice, civil rights, environmental and feminist are undermined (Isaac, 1987, p.220; Cohen as cited in Peets & Watts, 1996, p.29; Peet & Watts, 1996, p.30). In this light, post-Marxist theory has foregrounded production as not the only arena for collective resistance. In the words of Poulantzas:

A concrete society [a social formation] involves more than two classes, in so far as it is composed

of various modes of production. No social information involves only two classes, but the two fundamental classes of any social formation are those of the dominant mode of production in that formation (as cited in Isaac, 1987, pp.116-117).

This implies that capitalists and workers, although the most important classes, are not the only classes or social relations in capitalist societies. In light of this argument, Marxist theory of power appears to centre too much on structure, and on how power is distributed among the top stratum of society, mainly the capitalists. Groups other than the working class and the state are also important sources of power for they illuminate the active processes of a variety of human agencies, or actors, involved in environmental interaction. As Isaac (1987) has noted, these new social movements signal an autonomous discourse and exemplify the attempts of these groups to advance their own environmental interests, as well as highlight the importance of non-class relations (p.208).

“POWER OVER” AND “POWER TO” IN THE FLAME TREE

Set in the late 90s, when Malaysia was on the cusp of the new millennium, Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (henceforth, *TFT*) revolves around the construction of Titiwangsa University, set to be the grandest, most visionary mega project in Asia. Bill Jordan is determined to bid for the construction of the new university

town in Malaysia. Luke, an environmental consultant, on the other hand, is determined to prove how Jordan's design of the new university town would be damaging to the environment and the people of Kampong Tanah. Caught between her career as a lawyer and the people she had left behind, Jasmine Lian struggles to take the right course of action.

Ooi's *TFT* incorporates most of the events that occurred in Malaysia in the 90s – rapid economic transformation, the globalisation phenomenon, the propagation of Asian values, national tragedies and mega projects to delineate the politics of the environment in Malaysia. Marked by robust economic growth, this period saw the evolution of Malaysia from an agriculture-based economy into a modern, increasingly industrialised, export-orientated economy. Throughout this evolution, poverty and income inequality declined remarkably. Employment rates, life expectancy, level of literacy and education, public facilities and infrastructure all improved. Indeed, by the 1990s, Malaysia had experienced rapid and tremendous economic growth, epitomising the “miracle thesis”, “paragon of development” and “newly industrialising country” that had been associated with other nation-states in Southeast Asia (Rigg, 1997, p.3; Dixon & Smith, 1997, p.1).

The 90s was the era when the word globalisation took up public consciousness all over the world. Malaysia was no exception. Malaysia responded to globalisation in many ways, one of which was through the propagation of Asian values (Starrs, 2002,

p.7). Rejection of the hegemonic political, social and cultural norms viewed as Western and the promotion of other equally good alternative norms considered Asian, was at the core of the Asian values argument. Dr Mahathir Mohamad's (then Prime Minister) Asian values for example, centred around four areas: emulation of East Asian values and work ethics and resentment against liberal democracy, corrupting influence of Western values and the West's continuing exploitation of the developing world (Barr, 2002, pp.41-45). It is usually argued that the propagation of Asian values serves to undermine and dismiss public opinions and criticisms, traits usually associated with Western democracy (Barr, p.178). Loh (2002) argued that in Malaysia in the 90s, Asian values was a manipulation on the part of the state "to legitimise their authoritarian developmental states and downplay demands for liberal democracy" (p.50).

The 90s was also marked by much local and international criticism, especially concerning the destruction of the natural environment at the expense of environmental sustainability (Rigg, 1997, pp.35-36). A large number of these criticisms were focused on the rapid growth of oil palm plantations, logging, hill development projects and the persistent engagement with mega projects, all of which entailed the destruction of rainforests, the loss of biodiversity and the displacement of people from their traditional lands. To add to these concerns, the 90s were also marred by 'national tragedies' caused by hill-land

developments such as the Highland Towers Tragedy in Kuala Lumpur in 1993, the Genting Highland landslide tragedy in 1995 and the North-South Highway landslide near Gua Tempurung in 1996. These tragedies claimed many lives, caused considerable damage to property and the environment and gave rise to public uproar. They demanded explanations, compelling the state to carry out investigations.

The 90s in Malaysia is also known as the era of mega projects. Many multi-billion dollar mega projects were launched during this era, mostly for functional, symbolic or ideological reasons. These projects attest to the integration of the Malaysian local market to the global finance market, and symbolise "the shift from Third to First World status, from cultural periphery to creator of cultural symbols for global consumption and regime maintenance based on legitimisation through internationalisation" (Douglass, 2000, p.2322).

The Titiwangsa University in *TFT* represents the craze that surrounded most mega projects in Malaysia in the 90s. It is envisioned that Titiwangsa University will be the first Asian university to rival the reputations of Oxford in England and the Ivy League universities in the USA. The site for the university is located up in the hills of the Titiwangsa Range. Two towns will be directly affected by the project: Ranjing in the foothills and Kampung Tanah, up on the slopes. Ooi could not have picked a better setting as the Titiwangsa range forms the backbone of the Peninsula, extending for about 500 kilometres from the Malaysia-

Thai border in the north to Negeri Sembilan in the south. A biodiversity hotspot, the Titiwangsa Range is covered with forests and is home to a wealth of endemic and endangered species. Many rivers of the Peninsula have their headwaters in the range, and a large population of Orang Asli also resides in the lower slopes of the Titiwangsa Range. Many of the protected areas in the Peninsula such as Taman Negara and Royal Belum State Park also cover vast areas in the range. With so many things at stake, the proposed Titiwangsa University town becomes a perfect site of power struggle.

On the one hand, there is Bill Jordan, owner of Jordan Cardale PLC, a construction and property management firm in the UK, which boasts projects involving hotel complexes, office buildings, shopping malls and condominiums in most parts of Asia. One of the six firms to bid for the construction of the new university town, Jordan represents neo-liberal business corporations from the West, pressured to move to Asia “just as the building industry collapsed at home” (p.77), tapping into and riding on its booming market. Having tried in vain to secure large-scale high-profile projects in Malaysia, Jordan is determined to win the bid: “‘The university project is our ace,’ Jordan said. ‘Anything it takes to win, we’ll do it. This is the gateway to the big time. No one is going to stand in my way.’” (pp.77-78). Jordan’s past and present business deals, coupled with his wealth, affect his attitude towards the way he perceives the Titiwangsa project. Riding

on the Malaysian state’s mega-project craze, Jordan tailors a project that would give Malaysia and its people the prestige it would need to compete and stand out internationally, as well as a project that can be easily won with the ‘right’ kind of “offerings” and “control”. To this end, Jordan offers the Titiwangsa Tower, part of the overall proposed design for the university town, which would be the tallest tower built on the highest site in the world. It would, according to Jordan, win him the bid as well as give Malaysia back its national prestige after the Petronas Twin Towers lost the record of tallest building in the world to the Shanghai World Financial Centre (p.78). Acting upon his hunger for the Titiwangsa project, Jordan is resolute to “... conquer the jungle for the next millennium. The Empire might be dead but we Brits can still thrash ‘em all. We’ll civilise the wilderness, like we’ve been doing for centuries” (p.80).

Jordan is well aware of the risks involved in the Titiwangsa tower design – that the foundations of the tower would pierce into the limestone which would eventually result in a major landslide – but his determination to capitalise on the land immunises him to the probable catastrophe. He knows that unless the design is manipulated to blind the authorities to the impending disaster, his bid will not be accepted. The geophysical data that come together with his design are therefore manipulated to obscure the flaws and the impending catastrophe. To this end, he pays his accomplices extravagantly: Scott, the architect; Tsui, the mainland Chinese geophysicist who provides the

graphic logs showing the multi-layered soil and rock embedded below the site; and Zain, the project manager and surveyor. Using his financial power to make them beholden to him, Jordan is confident that these men will not “[bite] the hand that fed them” (p.230). Scott, besides being paid handsomely, is well aware of the international contacts Jordan’s project would bring him. Tsui “had no morals and no god but money” (p.230). Zain, “a weak, cowardly man, who’d grown accustomed to the wealth and status that working for Jordan had brought him”, proves to be easy prey (p.230).

Jordan’s equally important accomplices are Tan and his brother, Kidd. Tan owns a security business in Malaysia offering personal and property protection, surveillance equipment and profile investigation. He thrives on the business, which is helmed with the objective of ensuring the success of the associate’s enterprise, often using intimidation and threats. In Kampung Tanah’s case, Jordan sets out to control the thinking of the people of Kampung Tanah, making them embrace the idea that the Titiwangsa project is needed to develop and bring wealth to the small town, in line with the state ideology of modernisation, development and urbanity. Tan and his brother set out to approach some of the businessmen in Kampung Tanah. One of them is Wong, a businessman in Kampung Tanah who runs a general goods shop. In one of their earlier meetings, Tan briefs Wong on the kind of development the project would bring. He also ‘shares’ with Wong the sentiment of progress-and-

development, which has long become the nation’s overriding priority and ideology, implemented mainly through economic and political measures determined by the state:

University – top class. New life into this dead place, heh, what do you think? Businesses will follow, tourists will come to see this new wonder of Asia. There’ll be condos and country clubs, restaurants and malls, casino, even, maybe – bright beautiful lights flashing up the night, big fancy freeways zooming us all up and down to KL, to Kuantan, anywhere you want, everything you want (p.12).

The ‘picture’ painted by Tan above echoes with the picture of post-colonial Malaysia, which aspires to pursue wealth and economic growth. He then gives money to Wong and intimidates him into becoming the “representative” of the Kampung Tanah Development Committee, a committee set up by Jordan, which would be given the task of networking and persuading the town people to embrace the rewards of progress and the rich prospects that Jordan’s proposed development project would bring. Jordan also establishes the International Development Foundation, with Tan as the Vice President, to ‘disseminate’ funds to all eight members of the Kampung Tanah Development Committee, on the pretext that it does not care who wins the project but believes that “the local community and international business interests can build

a successful local economy if we all work together” (p.172). Enticed by money, the Committee members network throughout the town, feeding the townspeople progress-and-rich-prospects propaganda, until it “became received knowledge” (p.173), or, in the Gramscian terms, “consent”. This “consent” affirms the active role of subordinates themselves in reinforcing the hegemony of the ruling stratum of society. In Kampung Tanah, this “consent” also plays a definite role in drowning other concerns, especially suggestions made by Dr Kenneth Chan, the town’s doctor, that the townspeople should make submissions to protest the impending environmental impact and the relocation of the people to New Kampung Tanah. In *TFT*, Ooi illuminates “power over” through Jordan’s devious machinations, exercised through control, coercion and manipulation.

Dr Chan and Luke McAllister both try to counter “power over”, which acts to control the people of Kampung Tanah. Luke McAllister is the environmental consultant who is hired by Dr Chan to look into the technical side of the proposed designs and their subsequent environmental impact. Of American and British parentage, Luke was born and raised in Malaysia. His parents have long left for America. Having majored in Environmental Sciences and Development, Luke chooses to stay in Malaysia and regards the country as his home (p.51). Attached to a local university, Luke has been commissioned countless times to give environmental recommendations to government bodies and

Third World development agencies. His life is often threatened as a result. Luke uses his knowledge and expertise as a key resource to do preliminary investigations, which eventually reveal that Jordan’s proposed design has disastrous environmental consequences. First, the people of Kampung Tanah would have to be relocated at the proposed New Kampung Tanah, 10 miles away from the university town. This means they would not be involved in the economy of the new town. Access to this new location would also only be available through a circuitous detour from the new proposed highway. Second, the design of the university tower would be damaging to the environment. Luke finds that the height and the style of the building are not compatible with the slopes and the natural environment surrounding it, which could result in “a major landslide of colossal proportions” and wipe out New Kampung Tanah (p.203).

Using his knowledge and expertise, Luke instils awareness in the people of Kampung Tanah of what is in store for them when the proposed development project is approved. Embodying “power to”, Luke talks about “how development and local concerns could work together” (p.116). He highlights the significance of the land to the people – how it has provided them with food, water and spiritual life. He draws their attention to how everyone should be involved in the development project, that they do not want progress at any cost. “Local skills, local knowledge of the land, local labour. Everyone has a stake, no one is alienated” (p.117). He also underscores

the importance of proper planning and management of the land – how the hilly terrain and the impending soil erosion and air pollution would need to be addressed.

Luke's awareness campaign however, falls on deaf ears as more and more people in Kampung Tanah are 'bought over', intimidated and threatened by Tan. Dr Chan decides to leak part of Luke's report to the media, in the hope that it will alert the authorities and subsequently make the authorities reconsider Jordan's proposed design and its environmental impact. Consequently, Tan intensifies his intimidation by kidnapping Wong's son and threatening Sarojaya and Ibrahim, members of the Kampung Tanah Committee. Luke's office on campus is also burnt down, destroying the data he had gathered for Jordan's proposed design. Dr Chan is killed in a car accident staged by Tan.

Because of publicity by the media, Jordan's proposed project receives its fair share of criticism. Ooi demonstrates that capitalist hegemony over Malaysian society is never totally complete and that the degrees of consent (and dissent) vary. To silence dissent, Jordan is forced to suppress these criticisms, especially those made by Luke, who holds the key to his flawed design. Taking advantage of Luke's 'white' background, Jordan launches a 'smear campaign' against Luke, playing on the locals' dislike and distrust of outsiders, especially whites. At a time when globalisation is often equated by Asian nations to Western political, social and cultural hegemony, Jordan's 'smear

campaign' has to be geared to reinforce the cautious feeling the locals have towards any foreign interference in local affairs.

Thus, at a press conference, Jasmine, as Jordan's lawyer, questions Luke's alleged link with the radical Green Action Direct, an ENGO based in the West. She also lists "all the development projects he has hampered, curtailed, destroyed, brought down across Asia", making Luke appear as a Western leftie green campaigner with an agenda, and a troublemaker whose consultancy has had a hand in curtailing some projects in Asia (pp.195-196). Jasmine plays out the sentiments of dislike towards Western hegemony, knowing that "The Asians have always been deeply suspicious of whites with 'we know what's good for you' attitudes" (p.195). These sentiments, according to Beeson, often find a receptive audience in Malaysia (p.339). As noted by Wagner, the smear campaign against Luke is Ooi's tactic to dismantle the typecasting usually involved in anti-globalisation campaigns (p.171). Such campaigns reflect the distrust of developing nations towards the environmental movement, which has traditionally been dismissed as another alien first world-"ism" and a ploy to retard the pace of development in the former colonies (McDowell, 1989, pp.308-309). This distrust and resentment were also part of the outcome of millennium anxieties that swept the world in the 90s, when globalisation meant the continuation of imperialism and colonialism to Asians and ex-Western colonies (Starrs, 2002, p.4). This distrust and resentment has been propagated by

some Asian nations to dismiss attempts by outsiders to meddle in any 'internal' issues or conflicts, in the name of 'national interests'. Since Luke is not a typical Malay, Chinese or Indian Malaysian, and given his foreign, mixed American and British parentage, the distrust and dislike towards him become almost automatic. To a large extent, this distrust also plays a major part in curtailing Luke's effort to stop Jordan's destructive project as it gives the local people and the authorities the impression that he is trying to meddle in matters and events that an outsider would not understand. Lam, the police officer in charge of interrogating Luke, personifies the anti-Western dislike:

I don't like you Whites, your kind sucked Asia dry in the past and you're still trying to get what you can out of us. You people are proud and weak. None of your tricks are going to fool me. ...You Whites like to make trouble where you don't belong. That may work in the West but not here (p.236).

Jordan's machinations prove to work for him when the planning review approves his tender and no protest submission is made on behalf of the local residents. The smear campaign against Luke has also harmed Luke's career, resulting in cancelled contracts and lecture series. These machinations serve to illustrate the "power over" that capitalists have. Through coercive and ideological domination, Kampung Tanah, and Malaysia, by extension, is easily

subjugated to serve Jordan's vicious needs.

"Power to", as exemplified by Luke's and Dr Chan's efforts to stop the destructive project, is pitted against "power over" in *TFT*. These antagonistic relations imply that the capacity of grassroots movements depends in part on their capacity to counter the power of capitalists. In *TFT*, Luke and his friends are not able to stop the environmentally-damaging project. A year after construction begins, the university tower that is being built collapses, causing a massive landslide that "skidded and flowed down the full length of the slope, taking with it the new town, tracts of forest, cleared ground and any car, float, surprised resident and costumed child in its path" (p.304). In Kampung Tanah's case, Luke's awareness campaign fails to persuade the people to contest Jordan's proposed project. Dr Chan's attempts to let the public and the authorities know about the flaws of Jordan's design are also easily countered, backed by the ideology that any 'interference' by those representing a first world country or first world environmental movement is encroaching on the rights of Malaysians to enjoy the benefits of progress. This ideology, coupled with the ideology of progress-and-development, which has been propagated by the state and internalised by the rest of society for many decades, comes in handy for the capitalists to advance their interests. In *TFT*, Ooi seems to emphasise the need to focus on ideological rather than coercive domination.

In addition, Ooi seems to suggest that global and local capitalism is the name of the

power structure that dominates Malaysian politics and its environment. It is a system based on social and ecological exploitation for the profit of the capitalists, backed by the involvement of capitalising foreign corporations, the inability of the state to exercise environmental governance and the incapability of civil society to express their opinion, gain information or participate in and influence decision making. *TFT* demonstrates this power structure – Jordan’s devious material power, facilitated by the involvement of capitalist local cronies, far outweighs the “power to” that Luke holds in his capacity as an environmental consultant. In *TFT*, “power to” becomes a problem when efforts to reveal the ‘truth’ about Jordan’s flawed design are constantly countered with material and ideological dominance and coercion. Consequently, the people of Kampung Tanah are deprived of their right to information, right to participate in decision-making and right to justice.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Ooi juxtaposes the notions of “power over” with “power to” to drive the green agenda into the nation’s political consciousness. Understanding these forms of power compels us to be cautious about how we view power and its relationship to environmental politics in Malaysia. These notions of power are found in the ways power is expressed, described, enacted and legitimated in the private and public spheres in the novel. In *TFT*, “power over” seems to be a damning indictment of environmental struggles. This suggests

that whilst Ooi continues to subscribe to the strongly entrenched tradition of “power over”, which often involves coercion, control, oppression and domination, she also constructs notions of “power to” in order to create and also suggest more equitable relations and structures of power. “Power over”, exercised through direct political and economic control, stifles the exercise of human rights – particularly freedom of expression, right to information, participation in decision-making and right to justice. “Power to”, on the other hand, becomes problematic when ideological dominance and coercion are constantly manufactured by the state and the capitalists to stifle public opinion and participation in issues related to environmentally-destructive projects.

In a semi-democratic country like Malaysia, these forms of power – “power over” and “power to” – play a role in dictating the outcomes of environmental conflicts. The notions of “power over” and “power to” also expose the difficulty of balancing ecological and human considerations in a semi-democratic country, where governance and decisions related to the land continue to be defined and constrained by the dominance of the state, the capitalists and the ideology propagated by both, and limited space is provided for civil society participation. These notions of power too, seem to convey Ooi’s attitude towards the political culture in Malaysia, that it needs civil society to be more knowledgeable and “proactive” rather than “submissive” through the exercise of individual and collective agencies to

promote and advocate environmental activism. In addition, Ooi also warns against the subordination of society through ideological coercion, which often prevails through their own consent.

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