



Adapting the Golden Age Crime Fiction Genre in the “Kain Songket Mysteries” Series

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the way in which the conventions of the Golden Age genre of crime fiction have been adapted to a completely different socio-cultural setting in Barbara Ismail's "*Kain Songket Mysteries*". The Golden Age novels of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers offer neat solutions to their mysteries, implying an unproblematic return to the right path; at the same time, the conventions of the form underline the corruption and danger hidden within these apparently perfect societies. Similarly, Ismail focuses on life in a village in Kelantan, Malaysia, in the 1970s, offering her readers a chance to revel in the gracious social order of the time, while creating inevitable juxtapositions with the ways in which that society has changed in the present. Ismail's seemingly rose-tinted vision of the Kelantan of forty years ago develops as the novel progresses, culminating in a rather bleak assessment of where that society is heading.

Keywords: crime fiction; Golden Age; Malaysia; Kelantan; tradition; *budi bahasa*

Golden Age crime fiction, best exemplified by the works of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, is often dismissed as being old-fashioned and unrealistically simplistic in its presentation of crimes, which are always neatly and thoroughly solved at the end of the novel. It is also criticised for its apparently hermetically sealed settings – narrow and exclusive in terms of physical environment as well as social class. Yet Christie's novels, in particular, remain constantly in print, and are repeatedly revived in film and on television, most recently with Kenneth Branagh's 2017 film of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Does this suggest a voracious appetite for nostalgia, for an uncritical look back at a "better" time, when things were more ordered and everyone knew their place and role? To some extent, this is indeed the case – and is part of the reason why crime fiction in general is popular. Gill Plain points out that all crime fiction¹ has "a fundamental shared concern with the disruption of order, the violence of shattered community and the search for some form of viable resolution that will set the world back within its familiar, if slightly tarnished, parameters" (20).

Two important points arise from this idea – first, the need to find a resolution and, second, the recognition that the borders of society are now inevitably "tarnished", despite that resolution. The nostalgia of the form cannot remain or continue to be blind to the encroachment of corruption and danger. The form, then, can be seen to hark back to simpler times, while at the same time acknowledging the rot hidden within that idyll, as well as the unstoppable spread outwards of that rot.

The work of Christie and Sayers is rooted in socio-cultural specificities: World War I as a background, for example, as well as the complex and rigid class structure extant in Britain. In this paper, I would like to examine the way in which the conventions of the form have been adapted to a completely different socio-cultural setting, in Barbara Ismail's "*Kain Songket Mysteries*". Rather than the war looming in the background, Ismail focuses on social change in a village in Kelantan, Malaysia, in the 1970s, offering her readers a chance to revel in the gracious social order of the time, while creating inevitable juxtapositions with the ways in which that society has changed in the present. Ismail's seemingly rose-tinted vision of the Kelantan of forty years ago develops as the novel progresses, culminating in a rather bleak assessment of where that society is heading.

I will focus on the four novels in Ismail's "Kain Songket Mysteries" series, namely *Shadow Play* (2012), *Princess Play* (2013), *Spirit Tiger* (2015), and *Moon Kite* (2017). The titles reference traditional performances, beliefs, and games – *Wayang Kulit* or shadow play, *Main Puteri* (which translates literally as "princess play", but is a healing ritual), the belief in *hala* or were-tigers, and *Wau Bulan* (literally "moon kite", the iconic Malaysian kite) – and the plots are also centred on these traditions and their practitioners. The amateur sleuth protagonist is Mak Cik Maryam, a *songket*² trader in Kota Bharu's main market. She and her cousin Rubiah, a purveyor of fine Kelantanese *kuih* (cakes), come to the aid of the new Chief of Police, Osman, who comes from Ipoh, a city in the state of Perak, and is therefore regarded as (and himself feels like) a foreigner.³

Though the novels present a seemingly tranquil time and place, there are tensions within that idyll which erupt in the form of murder. I argue that by setting the novels in the halcyon days of the 1970s, and then disrupting that peace and contentment with violence, Ismail manages to point to ways in which that society has to some extent broken down. This is similar to the way in which the Golden Age evocation of an apparently well-ordered society disrupted by murder reflects an attempt to deal with the horrors and depredations of two World Wars.

Crime fiction writing is still an emerging genre in Malaysian fiction. The first Malaysian novel in English considered to fall under the rubric of crime fiction is Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* (1994), as a murder does occur and the police are involved in its investigation, as is the narrator, Ai Lian. However, the novel's primary focus is much more on issues of nation and identity, rather than on the process of detection and the search for clues leading to the solution of the mystery, as is typical with most crime fiction. Two other Malaysian writers who have begun to make a mark with more traditional crime fiction novels are Rozlan Mohd Noor and Shamini Flint. Rozlan has written several novels featuring Inspector Mislán of the Malaysian Special Branch (his first novel, *21 Immortals*, was published in 2010). His novels fall within the sub-genre of the police procedural, and have a ring of authenticity provided by Rozlan's own background as a policeman in the Special Branch. Shamini Flint's *Inspector Singh* series (the first novel was published in 2011) features the troublesome Singaporean Inspector Singh, who is constantly being sent to investigate crimes in other countries so that his superiors do not have to deal with him.

Ismail's *Kain Songket* series is the only one among these roughly contemporaneous series to focus on an amateur sleuth who has to solve crimes on behalf of an out-of-his-depth policeman, very much in the tradition of the Golden Age novel. Ismail is also different in that she is not Malaysian, and writes based on her anthropological knowledge of Kelantan and its customs. An American, Ismail did her anthropological fieldwork on *wayang Siam*⁴ in Kelantan in the 1970s and 1980s. This background in anthropology and her research on the *wayang Siam* allow her to recreate in some detail the ancient rituals and performances centred in Kelantan, such as the *wayang kulit* and *main puteri*. This is important in the face of the threat of the possible loss of these forms due to hostility from Kelantan's ruling state government, PAS (Parti Se-Islam Malaysia). However, because her focus is on anthropology rather than on sociology she does not look closely at issues such as the underpinnings of social change. This means that the social world is not presented with the kind of complexity we see in the works of, for example, Che Husna Azhari, a Kelantan native who has written several short stories set in her home state. Che Husna's story "Mariah," for example, builds a complex picture of women's powerlessness against the practice of polygamy, in the face of patriarchal authority, even within a society such as Kelantan where women are perceived to have a great deal of autonomy. Another of Che Husna's stories, "Pak De Samad's Cinema", is rooted in

Kelantanese cultural specificity and tradition, but also takes into account the social and economic trials brought on by progress and modernisation.

This nuanced kind of reading is missing from Ismail's work. However, I should stress that her novels are primarily murder mysteries, rather than social critiques, and her focus is more on how Maryam, as a strong and independent woman⁵ steeped in Kelantanese culture and the codes of *budi bahasa*, or correct behaviour, is able to use those qualities to put her little society back on an even keel. By presenting a murder, an investigation, and a solution, Ismail shows that these older customs and ways of behaving are so deeply ingrained within the fabric of this society that, in these novels, they literally become life-or-death matters. But the murders themselves point to worrying cracks in the foundations of Kelantanese society. The effects of these cracks, in terms of how society functions, are far more visible today.

Restoring Order in Crime Fiction

Golden Age crimes tend to be situated within small, contained areas such as villages. While this may seem idyllic, Robert Barnard has pointed out that “beneath the surface calm of village life there lurks a seething lava of crimes, sins, oddities and other potential disruptions” (qtd. in Knight, 92). As happy and comfortable as the sites of these stories may appear, there is always something ugly waiting to erupt. The eruption is all the more shocking because the inhabitants of the idyll appear to be unaware of the “seething lava” – or at least, unwilling to confront it. Nothing, however, can be cured or removed until it is first exposed – in this context, through the murder and the subsequent investigation. Gill Plain suggests that “Crime fiction in general, and detective fiction in particular, is about confronting and taming the monstrous. It is a literature of containment, a narrative that ‘makes safe’” (3). A murder brings violence and danger into a previously safe haven, and the point of the solution of the crime is to restore a sense of safety by identifying and removing that danger. However, in Golden Age crime fiction, the danger has also emerged from within that “safe place”, underlining the fact that it was never really safe to begin with. The idyll is not really an idyll.

Because the murder is so strongly guided by personal issues between murderer and victim, once it has been solved, the danger, it would seem, is completely removed — the space is once again made safe, the mess is cleaned up. Horsley suggests that it is possible to read the crimes as “no more than ripples on the surface of an otherwise comprehensible, largely benevolent universe” (39). But, as Plain notes, the cleanliness of this enclosed world is now irrevocably “tarnished” (20) by the intrusion of violence. Once the lies and deceits in this society have been exposed, things can never be wholly as they were. Sally Rowe Munt also points out that this “image of benign passivity” which seems to be associated with cosy crimes has been deconstructed by critics lately, “reminding us of its contained violence” (12). The idea that these idyllic villages are sites of “contained violence” (a phrase which suggests imminent explosions) is underlined by the point that the murderer is inevitably a known member, and usually a product, of the community. Despite the common impression that cosy crimes are rather superficial and unrealistic, then, they do have a darker edge to them. The roots of the crime always spring from the relationships which have been built up within that society — it is always personal, rooted in motives such as “money, fear of exposure and sexual jealousy” (Priestman, qtd. in Knight 82). That cosy little community is the creator or producer of violence, and this genre of novel demands that we go back to the community to search for reasons, before it can to some extent be cleansed and the house set back in order.

More recent discussions of Golden Age fiction emphasise the importance of reading it as a kind of response to the horrors of World War I, particularly. While hard-boiled detective fiction and police novels confront the reality of the prevalence of violence and corruption, Golden Age fiction seems to want to deliberately resist such a confrontation. The Golden Age novel does appear to contain and even cauterize the outburst of violence in each story. But this effort at containment has been connected with a strong reaction against the horrors of World War I. Plain suggests that “the fragmented, inexplicable and even unattributable corpses of the war are replaced by the whole, over-explained, completely known bodies of detection” (34). Against the deep-rooted horror of unnamed, unacknowledged deaths in the mass, there is the individual body – known, named, and paid scrupulous attention.

While Barbara Ismail’s novels are clearly not a reaction against the excesses of war, the murders she plots hinge on something fundamental within society. Christie, Sayers et. al. pay homage to a world destroyed, or at least deeply damaged, by the depredations of the war. Ismail, by focusing on long-standing codes of behaviour and ancient art forms, also pays homage to a world that is fast disappearing.

Ismail’s series is set in Kg. Penambang, a village in Kelantan near the capital city Kota Bharu, with a few forays into nearby villages (though even roundtrips to “distant” villages can be accomplished within a day), thus setting up the idea of a contained community. The sleuth, successful *songket* trader Mak Cik Maryam, is well-known in the village, and ends up helping the new Chief of Police who, as a non-Kelantanese, finds himself out of his depth in this culturally and linguistically foreign environment. The series delves into issues of petty jealousy, dysfunctional families, professional rivalries, and the repeated violation of Kelantanese notions of manners and hospitality.

The motivations for murder in Golden Age crime novels – jealousy, money, relationship frictions – tend to stem from disruptions of socially-accepted codes of behaviour, for example, a too-controlling parent, an abusive or philandering spouse, a desperate need to get hold of an inheritance, the possibility that a scandal is going to be revealed. Bright and Mills note that “Detective fiction deals explicitly with transgressions against property and person, but beyond the dichotomy of right and wrong, legal and illegal, there is an implicit idea of further transgression, against cultural and spiritual rituals” (32). In Ismail’s series, the focus is very much on how cultural codes and beliefs are severely damaged by these “wrong,” “illegal” actions, and the damage to the cultural codes has a lasting and often destructive impact on the community. If people do not behave the way their community expects or needs them to, chaos and disruption – in the form of murder – ensue. It is only by acknowledging that these customs and rules work, and returning to them, that order can to some extent be restored. But Ismail also acknowledges the inescapable (and permanent) tarnishing of society, and her fourth novel (*Moon Kite*) shows us Maryam’s growing despair and disillusionment at the seeming breakdown of society and justice, resulting from transgressions of the principles of *budi bahasa*, which is central to Kelantanese values.

Kelantan is a state in the northeast of the Malaysian peninsula, bordered to the north by Thailand (specifically the Narathiwat Province); culturally and linguistically, it shares many ties with Thailand. Kelantan is in many ways quite distinct from the other states of peninsular Malaysia: Kelantan natives speak *loghat Kelate*, a form of Malay that is virtually unintelligible to non-Kelantanese. Kelantan is home to many unique cultural traditions, from performance and healing rituals such as *wayang kulit*, *menorah*, and *main puteri*, to forms of material culture such as batik making and songket weaving. The state is quite unusual in the extent to which women play a leading role in the economy as well as in the domestic sector, with a long-standing tradition of women dominating trade in the markets. An extremely important part of Kelantanese society, and the focus of

this paper, is manners: personal and social interactions are strongly governed by “the rules of courtesy (*budi bahasa*) which are an important element of Kelantanese culture” (Raybeck 226).

It is manners and codes of conduct which keep society functioning. For example, Raybeck shows that roles within families are socially mandated, and to some extent also governed by society; a youth who does not respond to paternal discipline will find himself being advised and warned by “first his relatives and then important members of his village” (227). The strong sense of community means that each person knows how to behave towards others. This sense of correct behaviour is complemented by an equally strong sense of belonging within a specific environment:

The kampong ideology holds that a Malay should live in the sweet shade of his own *dusun* (where garden and tree crops grow), engaged primarily in padi farming, among a group of co-religionists and many kinsmen. In this setting he is to exhibit the grace and charm of relaxed primitive sufficiency as he orders his life according to Islam and treats his neighbours with the “soft and gentle” manners involved in face-to-face social interaction. (Nash 245)

Murder (or violence in general) represents a complete disruption of these codes. The actual murder also tends to be motivated by some kind of violation of the rules of good conduct. In attempting to address some actual or perceived violation towards him or herself, the murderer goes too far and imperils the sense of safety and security which have hitherto prevailed in the community. I will focus here on ways in which accepted codes of behaviour and practice are disrupted, in relation to marriage, family and gender roles, and manners. By having Maryam solve the murders, Ismail’s novels valorise the restoration of order to society and to individual lives. However, for readers at all familiar with Malaysia, there is a strong contrast between this older society and Kelantan as it is today.

The novels take place in the 1970s, to reflect the Kelantan with which the author was most familiar. However, the time period is important for another reason; it reflects a moment before a stricter interpretation of Islam took hold, i.e. a time before these ancient rituals and practices began to be frowned upon as unIslamic, and were still very much a part of a sense of community well-being. This older Kelantan was also very much at home with a social structure that was not strictly patriarchal. However, these different aspects of Kelantanese heritage are in danger of being erased because of the political dominance from 1990 onwards of PAS (Parti Se-Islam Malaysia), which sees many of these traditions as being incompatible with the practice of Islam. Shannon Teoh, for example, notes that *main puteri* “has been driven nearly underground by authorities in the rapidly modernising Muslim-majority country as a heathen relic of a pre-Islamic past”. In the same vein Jacqueline Ann Surin notes that the “Kelantan state government has remained adamant about banning mak yong, saying that it is un-Islamic because it is based on fantasy and medieval elements”.

Religious and state practices have also impinged on issues of gender identity with, for example, the strong position of women in the Kelantanese economy running counter to the practices of a predominantly patriarchal culture. Raymond Firth noted in 1966 that “[o]ne of the notable features of Kelantan peasant life is the freedom of women, especially in economic matters. Not only do they exercise an important influence on the control of family finances, commonly acting as bankers for their husbands, but they also engage in independent enterprises”

(qtd. in Hirschmann 39). It was also noted in the 1960s that “a feeling of equality between men and women” was a Malay tenet, which the “Malay villager [put] ... before his Islamic precepts” (Fraser, qtd. in Hirschmann 42). In 1992, Wazir Jehan Karim suggested that “Malay *adat* has been able to resist patriarchal influences from Islam and Westernisation” (qtd. in Hirschmann 42). However, Pauline Fan, writing in 2014, points to the high incidence of rape in Kelantan (she states that it is the highest in the country), viewing it as alarmingly out of step with “the important place of women in traditional Kelantanese society”. Eddin Khoo notes that despite official bans on the performance of the healing ritual *main puteri*, it is experiencing a resurgence, being sought out particularly by “Muslim women who feel marginalised after losing their matriarchal influence to Islamic conservatism” (quoted in Teoh). In the same way that Golden Age crime fiction harks back to a “better” time,⁶ Ismail’s novels remind us of a Kelantan steeped in a rich culture, with a focus on behaving correctly for the sake of a harmonious society.

***Budi Bahasa* and disruptions to the proper order**

Raybeck notes that: “One of the most significant of the central or focal Kelantanese values is the importance and dignity of the individual. Each person must be treated with appropriate respect and care should be taken to avoid giving offence” (234). This value is enacted through *budi bahasa*, “the ‘language of character’ [through which] ... an individual communicates his breeding and his sensitivity to those with whom he interacts more formally” (ibid.). Two important elements of *budi bahasa* are the concepts *patut* and *sesuai*, both of which mean “that which is fitting, proper and harmonious” (ibid.). Problems arise when people within the community act in ways which are neither *patut* nor *sesuai* – and this improper, unharmonious behaviour might be on the part of both the murderer and the victim. Ismail shows the disorder within community to spring directly from instances of poor behaviour.

One element of disruption and transgression that crops up more than once is the idea of polygamy. Despite polygamy being accepted within Islam, the characters in the novels express disapproval of the practice,⁷ especially when carried out without regard to law and custom. We can tie this response to the Kelantanese desire “to avoid feeling *malu*”, which is “to be shy, humble, embarrassed” (Raybeck 234). For someone to be embarrassed by another person indicates a lack of *budi bahasa* on the part of that other person.

In the first novel, *Shadow Play*, a musician in a *wayang kulit* troupe is murdered, and Mak Cik Maryam becomes involved in the investigation because the murder happened on her land. The murder victim, Ghani, is revealed to have married a second wife without informing his first wife (a breach of manners as well as of religious law). He thus disrupts his own and his family’s harmony. Indeed, a sense of disquiet spreads through the whole community, stirring strong feelings in response: the novel states that “though no one actually accused his first wife of killing him, sympathy for her had she done so ran high, especially among women” (*Shadow Play* 17). Clearly, it is felt that if anything justifies murder, it is this betrayal of one’s family. The fact that the second marriage is directly responsible for the first wife’s death by poison underlines the idea that, although a sanctioned practice, it is deeply disruptive to harmonious family life, and therefore to society in general. Ghani’s thoughtlessness has brought embarrassment and ultimately tragedy on his family, in a clear violation of the rules of *budi bahasa*.

The issue of second marriages also appears in the third novel, *Spirit Tiger*. The story highlights female victimisation, with Yusuf, the owner of a gambling den, pressuring his waitress Khatijah to prostitute herself for

his profit. Instead, she decides to become the second wife of one of the gamblers, a particularly weak and helpless specimen who easily falls prey to her manipulation; she hopes that this attachment will give her some protection. In the end, the ploy proves hopeless, and she takes matters into her own hands, murdering Yusuf. However, Yusuf is killed not because of the second marriage as such, but because Khatijah feels victimised by the constant pressure he puts on her to become a prostitute. Here he violates the requirement to uphold individual dignity.

In neither case is the second marriage the actual motivation for the main murder. The first murder in *Shadow Play* is motivated by raging jealousy stirred up by Ghani's reputation as a ladies' man. Both Ghani and his murderer might be seen as behaving based more on *nafsu* or "base interest and animalistic passion" (Kessler 221) than on *akal*, which is "the faculty of reason implanted by Allah to differentiate humans from other creatures" (Kessler 220-221). Kessler stresses that "So long as their *nafsu* remained uncontrolled by *akal*, people were unable to recognize their common interests" (221). We can tie this idea of *nafsu* controlling *akal* to the idea of *budi bahasa*, since *nafsu* can be seen as behaviour which is neither *patut* nor *sesuai*. This clash between *nafsu* and *akal* crops up again in *Princess Play*, in which a troubled woman undergoes the healing *main puteri* ritual, only to be murdered later that night – this time, this first murder occurs because a young man and woman are unable to control their passion, and the woman becomes pregnant out of wedlock. The young man is then unable to deal with the possibility that the girl's mother *might* refuse to allow them to marry, so he smothers her, setting in motion a string of particularly bloody attacks and murders.

Breakdowns in social order also happen because of a disruption in what might be considered "normal" and "proper" male-female relations. Ghani is portrayed as weak-willed when it comes to women, even though he loves his first wife. Yusuf, on the other hand, wants to wield too much control over Khatijah. In *Princess Play*, a dominated wife finds her freedom by killing her oppressor. In these cases, the problem seems to be an inability to find a balance in the matter of control between men and women.

Generally, in these novels, society only seems to "work" when women are left in charge of day-to-day life, reflecting the position of Kelantanese women as economically active and independent. Most of the female protagonists are married, but Ismail's portrayal shows them to be very much in charge of running their households as well as their businesses. The way in which she portrays Mak Cik Maryam and her like reflects her experiences and the impressions formed during Ismail's fieldwork: "Common wisdom was that men did not have much of a head for business, and therefore should stay out of it. Men commonly brought their earnings to their wives, who would then run the family finances" (Ismail, "The Mak Cik Mafia Continued"). It is often the women without the economic independence afforded by being business women who suffer the most – Ghani's wife in *Shadow Play*, the wife of the gambler Ruslan in *Spirit Tiger*, and in *Princess Play* both the daughter of the murder victim and the cowed wife of the domineering Murad. Again, this characterisation springs from Ismail's experience:

The flip side of the Mak Cik Mafia was the sad state of women who did not participate, or who could not live up to the code. They live as visible failures in a way, with other women treating them politely but without much respect. (Ismail, "The Mak Cik Mafia Continued")

Ismail has also noted that:

Kelantan's women have traditionally been among the most self-reliant of the Malay states, which makes them in general, reluctant to be in situations which can humiliate them (the ever popular second wife) or leave them uncomfortable (abuse of any kind). (Ismail, "Divorce Kelantan Style")

If they do accept second marriages, she thus implies, it is because they do not have the economic freedom to walk out, i.e., they are not "self-reliant".

Maryam, her cousin Rubiah, and Maryam's married daughter Ashikin are very much in control of the domestic scene, and of their own economic success, and this is what makes for harmonious relations. The men in this novel are not portrayed as dominant breadwinners within the family, as might be expected in a patriarchal society. Maryam's husband Mamat, for example, appears not to be employed in the usual sense of the word:

Kelantanese men were famous for letting their women make money while they sat in coffee shops talking politics. Mamat was himself an accomplished coffee-shop lawyer, a mainstay of his favourite establishment, and a prodigious drinker of the sweet, milky coffee beloved in Kelantan. (*Shadow Play* 28)

His only other occupation, as shown in these novels, is raising birds to compete in singing competitions. However, it is clear that Mamat is not in any way a henpecked, controlled, or despised husband. He and Maryam have a loving relationship, with no apparent resentment at the role each plays in the family. It is, rather, a workable solution where each knows his or her place in the system. This is exemplified in this exchange from *Moon Kite*:

"What else do you do?" asked Maryam. She didn't always expect men to "do" anything, but they still had to contribute.

"I have rice land. I help my wife at the market, you know."

She nodded. Many Kelantanese men were like that, holding various jobs at various times, and always ready to help their wives at the market. Her own husband, Mamat, did the same, but she didn't think of him that way – she thought of him as gainfully employed. (35)

Ismail's characterisation of Mamat's "career" seems exaggerated, given that Kelantanese social expectations dictate that a man "should work regularly enough to support his family without borrowing money" (Raybeck 229); in line with this, Maryam states that her husband must contribute to the household finances. However, Raybeck does support Ismail's portrayal of Maryam and Rubiah as successful businesswomen when he notes that "in Kelantan, and to a lesser extent in other states of West Malaysia, most women gradually assume a status which is equal to their husband's for all practical purposes save some jural rights" (228). A balance of power and rights, then, is important to maintaining harmony.

But how is the status of women within this society affected by increasing state-endorsed patriarchy? Cecilia Ng has pointed out how the role of women has been negatively affected by the politicisation of Islam by

UMNO and PAS:

It did not take long before a hyper-ethnicised feminine identity among Malay women emerged – that of the veiled, modest and maternal-like Malay-Muslim women. Malay women particularly became the touchstone of a new project for recasting ideological foundations. The gender order of the Malay-Muslim world was reconstituted whereby women’s roles as mothers and guardians of cultural identity were revered, reflecting and symbolising stability in the face of change. (94)

As I mentioned earlier, Teoh, Surin, Khoo, and Fan have all noted the erosion of female independence in the face of patriarchal religious impositions. Ismail suggests, through some of the relationships in the novels, what can happen when that balance of equality and power is disrupted.

When a man does become overly dominant and controlling, as is the case with Murad in *Princess Play*, the results can be horrifying. Murad’s wife, over whom he seems to exert complete control to the point where she seems virtually voiceless, meticulously and cunningly engineers a situation that allows her to murder her husband in a public setting. The murder itself seems to have a therapeutic effect on the wife, Hamidah. Just as the *main puteri* was needed at the beginning of the novel to heal and release Jamilah’s debilitated spirit, the dramatic, vicious murder of Murad has left Hamidah “the calmest person in the building”, while her son, who witnessed the murder, needs a sedative, and every other person in the police station is traumatised by the horror of the incident. The implication is that the crushing of Hamidah’s spirit is an unnatural, unacceptable act, a violation of her individual dignity, which can only be “cured,” unfortunately, by another unnatural, unacceptable act, because Murad is not open to negotiation. Because transgression is piled on transgression, there can be no release for society, which remains horrified by the act. Even Hamidah’s spiritual release is questionable – while she seems to have undergone some kind of catharsis, it remains that she has committed a horrendous crime in order to achieve it. In *Spirit Tiger*, Khatijah’s crime is also motivated by oppression; it is the gambling den owner’s attempt to control her body and to treat her as a saleable commodity that ultimately results in his death. This treatment of women cannot be acceptable in a society where, from earliest times, women were observed to “move about with perfect freedom, buying and selling in their markets” (Graham 25). Kelantanese women buy and sell, but are not to be bought or sold.

Raybeck notes that there is a difference between those whose manners are *kasar* (unrefined) and those who are *halus* (refined). Murder is *kasar*, a gross violation of the courtesy and values inherent in Kelantan Malay culture, and this violation leads inevitably to further breakdowns in good behaviour. In *Shadow Play*, Maryam is angered by Dollah, the *dalang*⁸ who has been trying to lead her down the wrong investigative path, as a result of which she has been pushed down the stairs at the home of the *dalang*’s biggest rival, and been targeted by a “spell” left for her in the form of the poisoned spine of the *ikan keli* (catfish). Incensed, she accuses him in a very straightforward way, which is construed as rudeness, of engineering the situation. Dollah is surprised by her demeanour:

Her straightforward accusations were an affront to Malay courtesy, and he had rarely seen an adult act in such a way. She'd been provoked, however, and he could understand why she'd lost her patience. Understand it, yes, but it still astounded him to see a woman act that way. (*Shadow Play* 172)

In *Moon Kite*, Chief Osman is made uneasy by his own decision not to offer a cigarette to prime suspect Omar – it bothers him to be rude (192). In both these cases, however, their “rudeness” is necessitated by the unacceptable behaviour of those around them. Maryam has been physically hurt and humiliated (made to feel *malu*) because of Dollah's lies and manipulations, while Osman is trying to get the truth out of Omar, who proves adept at playing mind games. In other words, their discourtesy is aimed at finding the truth and thus restoring order, though it goes against the grain for both Maryam and Osman.

So unthinkable is lack of courtesy among these people that even Aisha, Ghani's first wife, is unable to bring herself to be discourteous to Faouda, the second wife, who turns up at her doorstep unannounced. Wanting to throw Faouda out, she is “unable to do so. The exacting codes of Malay hospitality were too deeply ingrained in her” (*Shadow Play* 17). Instead, she offers her refreshments and they sit in silence on the verandah, waiting for their errant husband.

The importance of courtesy to the Malays is apparent in the value Maryam attaches to it in her interactions with potential suspects. In *Princess Play* she is so charmed by the pleasant manners of Rahim that she has trouble seeing him as a suspect. She notes that he has “lovely manners”, i.e. he is *halus*, and believes that this says “a great deal for his character”. Rubiah is inclined to dismiss him altogether as a suspect because he is “not that kind of man”. Maryam responds that “Anyone could be that kind of man”, though she privately agrees with Rubiah. But she is also self-aware enough to realise that if she were to dismiss Rahim as a suspect, it would mean “she wasn't really looking for the real killer” but only “looking for someone she didn't like who might plausibly kill” (*Princess Play* 78). The trouble is that in this novel, she is presented with a plethora of people she does not like, including the autocratic Murad and his psychotic wife, and it seems easier to look at them as the real suspects, simply because their behaviour marks them as *kasar* in a society that depends on rules of courtesy for its smooth functioning. As she admits to Osman, she was “blinded by [Rahim's] manners, and because there were other people so ... crazy!” (*Princess Play* 267). Because, by and large, this community acts with courtesy and thoughtfulness, it is easy to count people who act “right” as being acceptable – they are “insiders”. But if people take good conduct and correct behaviour as signifiers of insider status, the very fact that these individuals are able to use these signifiers to deceive, or to deflect suspicion, destabilises the ground on which the community stands.

Ismail's presentation of these plausible outsiders is not purely black and white. Khatijah is exposed as a murderer, but Maryam and Osman are not without sympathy for her. When Khatijah asks them to “please tell me, what would you have advised me to do instead?”, neither of them is able to provide a solution. Osman admits to himself that “he could have done nothing to protect her, even if she had called upon him”, while Maryam wonders “who could blame a woman for fighting with all her strength against such a fate?” (211). It is not just Khatijah's deceptions which destabilise the community – it is also Yusuf's plot to exploit her, which violates all notions of decent conduct, and pushes her to take extreme action.

While those with good manners are (sometimes mistakenly) perceived as “insiders”, or functioning members of the community, bad manners indicate some people's position as “outsiders” in that they do not seem

to know, or care to know, how to behave as part of the community. In *Moon Kite*, the victim, Salim, is utterly unmourned because he was boastful and arrogant in a community that frowns upon open and excessive celebration of success, as noted by Nik Man (whom Salim has beaten in a kite-flying competition):

Nik Man looked at his cigarette. “You can’t be upset every time you don’t win,” he explained calmly. “It’s part of competing: you can’t win every contest. But this was different because Salim was so petty, yes, that’s the word, when he won. Crowing about it, preening, bragging. It isn’t done; you don’t rub people’s faces in losing, because next time it will be you. But he knew nothing about competing, and so he was terrible. He made us all so angry.” (32)

Salim’s behaviour goes against notions of what is *patut* and *sesuai*. Even Salim’s wife does not grieve, because he was abusive to her – again unacceptable behaviour in a society that respects women. While this bad behaviour gives many people a motive to kill him, he is in fact killed by a *bomoh* (shaman) whose duplicity Salim has just accidentally exposed because he cannot stop crowing about his victory. This motivates the murder, but the *bomoh* himself first violated accepted codes of conduct by providing *jampi* (spells) for both Nik Man and Salim’s kites, a greedy and dishonourable course of action.

In *Shadow Play*, Ariffin murders Ghani because of a silly schoolboy feud based on unwarranted jealousy. But the conduct of Ariffin’s wife Zurainah also marks the couple as being outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. When Maryam goes to talk to Zurainah, the latter responds to the former’s questions brusquely, and does not offer her any of the hospitality that is the norm – an offer to step into the cool shade of the verandah, to partake of coffee and cakes. She compounds this bad behaviour by pushing Maryam into the road. Maryam has by this time already been pushed down the stairs of the rival *dalang*’s house and slapped by Faouda’s third husband. Clearly, the murder has uncovered some ugliness hidden deep in this society, and it is evidenced by the poor behaviour of so many of the characters. To threaten and harm a single member of the community in this way threatens the entire community – as can be seen in *Princess Play* from the way a single murder, motivated by the triumph of *nafsu* over *akal*, spreads out and results in a horrific bloodbath that kills both the guilty and the innocent.

Conclusion

Ismail’s works clearly uphold the Kelantanese notion of the vital importance of good manners, or the principles of *budi bahasa*, to the harmonious functioning of society. In every novel, the murders (which are themselves *kasar* in the extreme) are motivated by some violation of *budi bahasa*, whether on the part of the murderer or the victim. In *Shadow Play*, the problem is Ghani’s womanising ways and Ariffin’s raging jealousy, both induced by the dominance of *nafsu* over *akal*. In *Spirit Tiger*, it is Yusuf’s refusal to acknowledge Khatijah’s individual dignity. In *Princess Play*, it is youthful lust and indiscretion as well as hot-headedness. And in *Moon Kite*, the victim is a rude and arrogant upstart, while the murderer is a greedy liar and cheat. In the first three novels, however, we see a resolution and a neat tying-up of loose ends, so that society can recover from its temporary derailment and get back on its well-ordered tracks. *Shadow Play* and *Princess Play* both end, much like Greek or Shakespearean

comedies, with talk of marriage and celebration. *Spirit Tiger* at the end sees the tying up of the last loose end, as Yusuf's wife Noriah is revealed as the person who cast an evil spell on Maryam, but has herself been killed by that spell. Those who have violated the rules of *budi bahasa* are punished in some way and removed from society, even if they are not actually guilty of murder.

Ismail's latest novel, *Moon Kite*, however, seems to take a darker and more pessimistic approach, because the murderer is not brought to justice. While Maryam and Osman both know that the *bomoh* Omar is guilty, they are unable to prove it. His escape from justice means that he is not punished for his *kasar* behaviour. Therefore, order is not restored and safety does not return to Kg. Penambang. This extreme social disruption results in an uncharacteristically discourteous, vengeful response from Rubiah, who tells Omar "If I ever see you in the market, or even in Kampong Penambang, I'll make you pay. It's a promise". Omar is shocked, and promises himself that he will "avoid her for the rest of his life" (232). This is as close to a resolution as they come in this novel, but it is unsatisfactory as all it does is to physically remove the cancer from the diseased body, without destroying it completely.

This failure to restore society is reflected in the pensive, pessimistic tone taken at the end of the novel. While there is cause for celebration as Maryam's daughter-in-law gives birth, the end of the novel sees her alone, brooding on all the deaths:

Maryam found at the end of the case how strange it seemed at first that life continued unimpeded. Salim, Dris and Nik Man were all gone, their families broken, their children fatherless. And yet, Ashikin would have her baby as though nothing had happened, as would Azmi and Rosnah, and all her family seemingly untouched by any of the hatred that had affected so many lives. It was lucky, Maryam thought, that it was her family continuing to grow rather than being shadowed by murder, and she prayed for their ongoing good fortune. (234)

While on the one hand Maryam seems to be satisfied that her family is doing well, on the other hand she seems aware of the fragility of their good fortune. It is in these sad musings that Ismail highlights the way in which society is slowly devolving – this cosy, well-ordered world is breaking down. The murders reflect that breakdown, by showing that old rituals and time-honoured customs cannot provide protection. As twenty-first century readers, we recognise Ismail's portrayal of Kelantan in the 1970s as something that seems to have disappeared, or has been suppressed by increasing religiosity, selfishness, and lack of respect.

Like Agatha Christie (whose Hercule Poirot was a Belgian war refugee) and Dorothy Sayers (who created the shell-shocked Peter Wimsey), Ismail recreates a past that appears idyllic and that in many ways stands for something more ordered and predictable. At the same time, within that idyllic past, lie the seeds of a more difficult and unsatisfactory present. Ismail does not root her stories in an event as traumatic or as socio-politically dominant as a global war. Instead, she focuses on the smaller but still-deep trauma of a society heading towards disruption and upheaval in terms of inter-personal relationships, cultural practices, and gender roles. There are drastic changes in day-to-day behaviours, rituals, and interactions. By highlighting the past in this way, the adapted Golden Age novel is able to draw its readers' attention to ways in which society has fallen off from what it once was, rather than merely focusing on the present.

NOTES

¹ Although all crime fiction to a large extent reaches for resolution, most other genres apart from Golden Age crime do not offer tidy endings or cosy, closed environments. The element of nostalgia for a simpler, more ordered past is very much a feature of Golden Age crime fiction, rather than of hard-boiled fiction or police novels, which tend to focus on the corruption of the here and now.

² *Songket* is a fine material made up of gold thread woven with silk to create intricate patterns.

³ Raybeck notes that non-residents of a Kelantanese village are seen as *orang luar* (“outside people”), who “are viewed with suspicion”. This suspicion is heightened for *orang luar* who come from outside Kelantan (230).

⁴ *Wayang Siam* is a Kelantanese variant of the *wayang kulit* tradition.

⁵ Ismail’s blog recounting her time in Kelantan and the genesis of her writing career show her admiration for Kelantan’s market women (Ismail, “The Kain Songket Mysteries”, barbaraismail.com).

⁶ The suggestion that pre-war England was “better” is, of course, arguable. However, it was presented in these novels with a degree of nostalgia and approval, in the same way that Ismail presents Maryam’s Kelantan with approval and affection.

⁷ As noted earlier, Che Husna Azhari also writes about the practice of polygamy, highlighting the apparent powerlessness of women to refuse to accept it.

⁸ A *dalang* is a puppeteer who manipulates all the puppets in the shadow play, as well as narrating the entire story.

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