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## Contested Spaces: Entanglement of Chinese Migration, Gender Discrimination, and Colonial Resistance in Olivia Ho's "Working Woman"

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### Abstract

*Southeast Asian colonial experiences are of immense significance yet under-exposed. It entails an irony as Southeast Asia as a geographical entity is one of the most colonized regions in the history of humankind. This paper serves to provide an elaboration of the Chinese Singaporean colonial experiences during the British occupation in Singapore in a steampunk short story entitled "Working Woman" by Olivia Ho. This short story is compiled in an anthology of Southeast Asian steampunk short stories named *The Sea is Ours: Tales from Steampunk Southeast Asia* edited by Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng. Postcolonial feminism approach is utilized as the critical framework in the analysis of the story. The analysis finds that there are three contesting themes in the narrative namely 1) the reception of forced migration of the Chinese that result in their permanent residence in Singapore, 2) double colonization undergone by the Chinese female characters, and 3) the resistance toward British colonial power and patriarchal subjugation in the Singaporean Chinese society. The three themes intermingle as a linear course of history rather than an independent sub-historical phenomenon within the fiction. Thus, the reception of Chinese migration in the fiction is made possible by the arrival of British colonialism in Singapore and as a result, discrimination and resistance of Chinese women become the implication of the contact of colonialism and migration.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese Migration; Colonialism; Colonial Resistance; Steampunk Fiction*

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### Introduction

The distribution of Southeast Asian postcoloniality within the intellectual domain of postcolonial studies is positioned within the marginal lines of either minute significance or

totally forgotten. This intellectual reality is not an overstatement as Southeast Asia as a geographical entity and an imagined-regional union is one of the most colonized regions in the history of Western's colonialism. Huat (2008) maps out two major bodies which

become the reason for the underrepresented archives of Southeast Asian experiences in postcolonial studies: Postcolonial practitioners which includes anthologies editors and Southeast Asian scholars.

In regard to the postcolonial practitioners such as anthologies editors, their roles are immense in compiling texts used in an introductory postcolonial textbook. Huat argues that even if the source of postcolonial texts coming from Southeast Asian archive is indeed very few in practice, some texts which represent "political statements, anti-colonial speeches and social investigations of the conditions of the colonized, which embraced the postcolonial 'political impulse'" could serve as the region's postcolonial discourses in introductory texts and anthologies. He furthers the argument by providing an example from a five-volume anthology of postcolonial studies edited by Diana Brydon. The anthology 'contains all of three entries from Southeast Asia, totaling forty-three pages' within the anthology amounted to more than 2,000 pages. These three Southeast Asian archives, however, remain distinctively under-signified as they only make up forty-three pages out of the thousands and focus solely to the postcolonial discourses of Philippines (E San Juan Jr's 'Postcolonial Theory versus the Revolutionary Process in the Philippines', vol. I, pp 358-386,' Indonesia's Bandung Conference ('Final Communique of the Asian-African Conference', vol. 1, pp 419-427) and Renato Constantino's general postcolonial discourses ('Nationalism and the Third World', vol. 2, pp. 488-494). Huat synthesizes this phenomenon as the intricate intermingle of texts and languages of the European power. The fact that textual sources from Southeast Asia are mainly written in the respective region's languages instead of the European's could be the reason why the region's archive remains under seclusion of the studies. This demonstrates how the production of knowledge in the scope of postcolonialism is innately a 'colonial practice' and as Foucault denotes that knowledge is never pure as it functions under the auspices of power—Western power in this instance.

The second role of the body responsible for hampering the distribution of Southeast

Asian postcolonial discourses is the Southeast Asian scholars. Huat (2008) delineates how the occurrence of cold war and the rise of capital have become the main emphasis of intellectual discourses among Southeast Asian scholars rather than the postcolonial ones. The region of Southeast Asia underwent massive anti-colonial struggles during the Cold War between the capitalist world of the West and the communist east which were generally represented by the United States with its allies, the Soviet's bloc in Europe and China in East Asia. The word 'Cold' in this case is problematic for the Southeast Asian nations that generally witnessed a heated wave of civil wars within their countries. Southeast Asian countries were more associated with the Cold War as the contesting ground between the Capitalists and the Communist major power to exercise their influence in the region.

The gain of independence after the Second World War had given a means for the Southeast Asian nations to fight the remaining colonial institutions and residues. In these struggles against colonialism, communists in countries such as Vietnam were part of the anti-colonial struggle. By the time power was ceded to the nation's capital, the call for anti-communists engagement began to emanate and thus resulted in a labelled 'communist insurgency' and civil war between the civilians as the anti-communist factions and the communists group (Huat, 2008). This communally-shared history toward the Southeast Asian countries has made them as the newly independent nations to vacillate in seeing their historical materiality as the history of the oppression of colonialism and the transition to the surging fright with the totalitarian form of communism. Nonetheless, history can also be differently reinterpreted when the anti-communist group triumphed and took control of the nation. The history can be seen from the point of view of the first settlement of colonial power that had made the nation come into existence as what Singapore's government attempted to fabricate its nation's history of emergence as an island of 'a trading post by the officer of the British East India Company'.

After the mass defeat of communist ideology in the non-Indochina peninsula,

Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Indonesia with the exception of Thailand within the list were similarly undergoing a capitalist economic development. This economic capitalization was deemed as the mode of advancing the nations into the pave of modernization. The force of industrialization among the countries also coincided and corresponded with the shift of industries occurring in Europe and America which underwent a high cost of production. The low-cost of laborers in Southeast Asia were thus the gasoline that ignited the export of consumer products to the developed market. Huat states how the 'rapid capitalist development' was made possible by the 'foreign capital driven' and 'export-oriented industrialization'. East Asian countries namely 'Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong' became the first countries to reap the fruit from the capitalized and industrialized markets. This was followed by Singapore and other nations in Southeast Asia which had capitalized their markets. Nonetheless, the positive economic growth and rising standard of living have been proven to be the addiction that Southeast Asian governments have decided to dwell upon. Economic growth and materialism become the gist of a success narrative of the postcolonized nations. History is then oriented and orchestrated toward the forces that could contribute to the wanted, unending growth and material achievement. Historical archives which represent and recall the presumed barbaric, underdeveloped and degraded past of the region are thus overlooked in order to give way for the economic success of the present to be historically narrated (Huat, 2008).

By looking at Huat's proposal on the marginalization of postcolonial narratives within the history of Southeast Asian nations done by both anthology editors and Southeast Asian scholars, any counternarrative which could counterargue the established concoction of history and representation would be indispensable as an alternative mode of seeing for the region's postcolonial discourses. Jefferess (2008) postulates that canonized literary production of English literature and the colonial historiography made by the European have been the two established

discourses that postcolonial studies has been aiming to criticize. The underlying of the argument posits how postcolonialism as a discipline is innately a form of resistance for the colonized subjects. Literary works and its production, furthermore, become the one of the modes of resistance as Ben Okri announces that stories hold power to alter the lives of individuals and nations. The course of this study is to present an analysis of a multicultural steampunk fiction entitled *Working Woman* by Olivia Ho, a short story compiled in an anthology named *Sea is Ours: Tales from steampunk Southeast Asia* edited by Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng.

The Oxford Dictionary of science fiction defines steampunk as 'a genre of science fiction with a historical setting in the nineteenth century characterized by technologies extrapolated from science of that era, but which were not invented at that time' (Prucher, 2007). The word 'extrapolated' has to be emphasized in this instance as it demonstrates a 'speculative' nature of steampunk as a literary subgenre and the pervading Victorian fantasies as the ground of orientation for the authorship of steampunk fiction. The association of steampunk and Victorian esthetic is not negligible as it was in the Victorian land of England that the steam engine was initially invented and later created a space for major progress in productivity and technology. In this way, the Industrial Revolution has become the default setting for the common narrative of steampunk arts (Goh, 2017). This idea continues to pervade the steampunk establishment until multicultural steampunk is introduced.

Multicultural steampunk came into being as a form of resistance activism. This stream argues that steampunk does not have to rely on Whiteness and European entailments for its narrative's resources. Goh (2011) states that Victorian British as a setting of reference is not the only archive available as the source of steampunk narratives. Archives featuring non-Eurocentric histories exist and the creator of steampunk should not limit their creation to the foundation of Victorian England. The limited choices of historical archives for the people of color should not hinder themselves to reclaim and rediscover their histories. A

way to compensate with the limited choice is to utilize the remaining clues and knowledge as the source of formation. By not relegating the non-European histories, new worlds with the absence of Eurocentric frameworks can function as a counterhegemonic force to the existing ones.

Goh's proposition on non-European use as the foundation of multicultural steampunk narrative reverberates to Huat's on the marginalization of critical observation of Southeast Asian colonial and postcolonial history by the anthology editors and Southeast Asian scholars. To write within the multicultural stream of steampunk means that the authorship has to deal with the hegemonic power of Western anthology, Southeast Asian scholarship, publishing houses and general readership. In fact, it is the reception of the application of non-European historical archives in steampunk fiction that will play a major role for the multicultural establishment. While it occurs that POC authorship might be given a space to utilize steampunk as the mode of representation for their colonial or postcolonial materiality, it will remain as void spaces if it is not read and criticized. Thus, reception of readership essentially proceeds as the deciding factors which might prolong or terminate multicultural representation in steampunk narrative.

It has been previously mentioned that multicultural steampunk requires the presence of readership in order to make it thrive. In this particular instance, readership functions as the agent and the participant that initiates discussions and critiques for the works. Nonetheless, it is also known that the fandom of steampunk has been deeply recognized with its strong correlation toward the mainstream British esthetics. To illustrate, the fandoms of steampunk popularize the term "Multicultural steampunk" for signaling the difference of minority aesthetics from the culture of British Victorian (Goh, 2017). Goh's finding provides an interesting underlying on how steampunk is still an unrecognized space of representation for the postcolonized subjects and postcolonial issues which are heavily reliant on the realism and magical realism stream in literature. If this is to continue, the discussion of multicultural

steampunk will only operate under the white gaze which according to Goh (2017) can attempt to recycle and transmute racist stereotypes. Therefore, active participation from the authorship and the readerships who belong to the postcolonized societies must cooperate in making sure that the distribution of multicultural steampunk can work for the sake of representing their voices.

A similar study in demonstrating how steampunk comes into being as an alternative mode of representation is also presented by Bergman (2013). Through a list of steampunk fictions such as Priest's *Boneshaker*, Clare's *Infernal Devices* series, she puts a greater emphasis on the female authorship of steampunk that gives rise toward the discourse of 'feminist steampunk'. Within the study, she recognizes how steampunk as a mode of representation reconfigures the gender identity and role of women in the 19th century especially within the American and Victorian ideals. The heroines in the narratives are found to be significantly presented as the progressives whose voices are acknowledged. To illustrate, the common narrative in the Victorian texts which underlines the 'tradition' of women being courted is found to be disavowed. The 'motherly role' and the 'womanhood' aspects are not limited to the mainstream definition popular in the period. This shows how once again steampunk manages to 'radically redefine socio-cultural implications that represent both past and contemporary societies' (Bergman, 2013, p. 70). Through this research, a similar idea on the reconstruction of the presence of women is also considered as the sub-part of analysis. A different take, however, is suggested as this research observes how steampunk enables to provide reconsideration toward the narration of migrated Chinese women in Singapore under the postcolonial light and issues.

Accordingly, this research has been situated as the active participation of accessing and discussing multicultural steampunk which uniquely and specifically revolves around the colonial and postcolonial history of the Southeast Asian region which remains minimal in the literary studies scholarship. To be specific, this research wants to explore the reception of Singapore's colonial history which

involves the British occupation and the great migration of the Chinese to Singapore. This paper will also introduce some readers to the Southeast-Asian-themed steampunk narrative, which is also a part of the science fiction, which denotes that the domain of science fiction is not limited to the literary imagination of some of the most technologically advanced countries as steampunk fiction completely reimagines the past with the contemporary capacity of knowledge and reality that one possesses.

## Methodology

The foundation of this research is conducted through the application of library research methodology. Olivia Ho's short story entitled "Working Woman" in an anthology *Sea is Ours: Tales from steampunk Southeast Asia* edited by Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng serves as the primary source of data for this paper complemented with journal articles, research dissertations and theoretical books related to the research as the secondary sources. Postcolonial feminism approach is utilized to examine the postcolonial and gender discourses found in the course of the short story.

## Results and Discussion

### Chinese Migration

Chinese migration in *Working Woman* is characterized and deals with rich descriptions of Chinese characters and a distinctively well-known society called the 'Kongsi'. The encounter between a Chinese female character named Ning Lam with the guarded abode and presence of the head of the Kongsi is a significant occurrence as the story commences to dive deeper toward the migration existence of Chinese society during British occupation in the island:

*"Weapons,' growled the guard again. 'You're not going in to see the old man armed to the teeth. And throw away that stupid snack'"* (Ho, 2015)

It is known later in the story that Ning Lam is the Kongsi's agent to capture the lost female

hybrid which the head of the Kongsi wants her to do. Hybrid in steampunk fiction is generally associated with the existence of technologically advanced half-human and half-robot persona. The fact that the abode of the Kongsi as the concentrated space of power is heavily guarded and protected means that the Kongsi as an association or society is of great importance. In the passage that follows, the narrative brings the discourses into a characteristics of Chinese ethnic's lively gambling tradition, under-lit and soiled spaces:

*"Ning made her way across the gambling floor, past yelling men in singlets jostling elbows with bored housewives at the chap ji kee tables and the brassy new slot machines. The room beyond was dim and low-ceilinged; she had to stoop as she picked her way across the mess of thin copper pipes that snaked across the floor and curled up besides the shadowy figures lying prostrate on low bunks, sucking dreamily at the opium smoke lowering from the gutta-percha mouths of the pipes"* (Ho, 2015).

It is also crucial to see how the presence of women in the passage above is presented. The wives of the sleeveless and loud men are narrated as the 'bored housewives'. What is important to discuss with the passage is not whether women in the passage are positioned within the marginal lines that operate under the presence of Confucian patriarchy. The concern is oriented more to the fact that the central place of Kongsi is where the affiliation of related kinship is emphasized and nurtured. The presence of the housewives is then meant to strengthen and safeguard the existence of the Kongsi. The attempt of sustaining a cooperation based on a related kinship, therefore, is done in multifaceted forms between the relationship of men-to-men, women-to-women, men-to-women and women-to-men. Chinese kinship as the core of Kongsi which enables it to function has been a natural structure of the society. Peng (1979) states that Chinese Kongsi's establishment had been placed through 'Chinese partnership and brotherhood tradition'. The sense of Chinese brotherhood brought upon by Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia was different from

that of the origin of the brotherhood in mainland China. The origin of the brotherhood was aimed to topple the ruling dynasty. The Southeast Asian kongsi or brotherhood based society was more of a direct involvement of familial relations brought upon by the merits of small partnership in commerce or mining. The term Kongsi was oftentimes misused in the early colonial era which has been argued by Blythe in Peng:

*“Instead of forgetting their national prejudices, or postponing their indulgence of them till their return to China, the people of each province clan together and form a hoey or secret society. The avowed object of these hoeys is to afford mutual protection, but they are often used for the infliction of wrong, and have been found a great stumbling-block to the perfect administration of justice in the law courts of the Strait”* (Blythe in Peng, 1979, p. 103).

It is after its massive growth in number that the organization of clans comes to be recognized as Kongsi.

Peng’s statements on the unifying force of economic merits among the Southeast Asian kongsi(s) is presented in the short story. The head of the kongsi who is later known as ‘Grandfather’ is introduced as an occupied businessman. The eccentric introduction the short story has given toward Ning Lam is overshadowed by the presence of Grandfather who excuses the presence of Ning Lam as he has unfinished economic matters to do:

*“You are early, Miss Ning,” said the head of the kongsi. ‘If you will excuse me my unfinished business I will be with you in a moment’”* (Ho, 2015).

The course of the story demonstrates how the ‘unfinished business’ turns out to be an eery and gory exercise of power that the head of the kongsi wants to assert:

*“He turned back to the table he was examining. On the table lay a carved tray carrying thirty or so fingers. Some of the fingers had gold rings on them and some had long scars. None was from the same*

*hand. Ning popped kacang puteh into her mouth, discovered it was a dried pea and spat it out”* (Ho, 2015)

*“Make sure you wrap them nicely before they go to Penang,’ Grandfather said to the waiting men. ‘I want the Hakka scum who fester there to be able to tell which is whose. Let them think twice before they interfere with our shipments again. No that one,” he added, pointing at a finger in the corner which had had its nail gnawed something dreadful. ‘That one is from Eng Siok, whom I once thought of as a son. Send it to his family in Keong Saik, to show them he has spit on our sacred oaths. Perhaps it will help them remember to whom their allegiance is vowed’”* (Ho, 2015)

*“The tray of fingers was whisked away, replaced by two cups of steaming tea. ‘Forgive me the display, Miss Ning,’ said Grandfather. ‘It is distasteful. I am but a humble businessman, trying to help my people get by. Unfortunately this makes me enemies, and they have—shall I say—forced my hand.”*

The former passage underlies two important points with the Kongsi: oaths and allegiance. Peng (1979) notes how the ritual of oath-taking ceremony had become one of the crucial beginnings in the initial formation of Kongsi. If it is traced from the origin of the function of kongsi in mainland China, it is known earlier that the purpose was to ‘overthrow the Ching dynasty’. Oath-taking between its members became vital in order to adhere the patch of cooperation for the communal purpose of the community. In the passage it can be inferred that there is a violation of oath that has taken place between the members of the kongsi. The ‘Hakka scum’ are the the alleged members who have infringed upon the vow. The violated matters are also clear as the passage writes an ‘interference’ with the kongsi’s shipments. It becomes obvious that it is the economic violations that have induced Grandfather to declare and assure his menacing and passive-aggressive presence as the head of the kongsi which one must be obliged to respect. Oath and allegiance are thus as sacred as it has been made possible with kinship based relationship.

### ***Gender Discrimination and Colonial Resistance***

The discourse on Kongsì is displaced in the progress of the plot as the narrative of the short story begins to incorporate the theme of gender and postcolonialism. The two discourses become an integral part of the story which make up the rest of the story. The center of gender discourse in the story rotates around the three female characters: Ning Lam, the Chinese hybrid and Khairunnisa Al-Jazari who transpires to be a Malay woman.

To comprehend how gender discrimination within the narrative occurs, the root of operation of the Chinese familial system must be taken into account: Confucianism. The rights of property proprietary were curtailed among Chinese women and their presence in the structure of their respective families were insignificant and inferior in the domain of domestic, economy, and legal system. Chinese women were mere objects whom men could put into transactions. Girls of young age were offered to sell toward 'slavery, concubinage, or prostitution'. Even wives were positioned as transactional objects as husbands either sold or pawned them into temporary marriage. The discrimination undergone by Chinese women was possible under the authority of men as the person in power within the family system. What made men obtain the authority was the pervading Confucian beliefs held tight by Chinese families. A Confucian motto which denotes 'a woman without talent is virtuous' inhibited Chinese women to progress and has created a family as marginalizing confinement. This sentiment which devalued women's importance came across major changes as the advent of the reformist movement began to take place in the late 19th century (Mangan in Yang, 2014).

The historical materiality of gender discrimination under the Chinese-Confucian family system is innately integrated within the story. Ning Lam as the protagonist of the story is represented as an agent chosen by the Kongsì to capture the lost Chinese hybrid. The choice of Ning Lam as a female agent is indeed thought-provoking as it works in a twofold

underlying: 1) significance of women's labor; 2) maximization of success at the expense of women's lives. While Ning Lam is engaged in a conversation with the head of the Kongsì (Grandfather), she tries to gain more information needed in order to safeguard her mission. Nevertheless, her curiosity was repudiated. It is after some enacting enforcement that Grandfather tells Ning Lam that the hybrid she has to save is British's.

*"... 'The woman you are going to look for is not...all flesh.*

*'So to speak.' Grandfather paused, then added, 'More hybrid, in fact, than anyone you will ever have seen.*

*'Where'd you take her from?'*

*'None of your business,' growled Chee.*

*'It is my business,' retorted Ning, 'because whoever that was, they're going to want her back. And I need to know if they'll get in my way.'*

*'Grandfather said, 'She was government property.'*

*'Ning whistled. 'Cheeky. You know I charge extra for tangling with British'' (Ho, 2015).*

It is not stated the exact time when the short story might take place. Nevertheless, the discourse can be contextualized within the setting of British colonial occupation in colonial Singapore. By putting this text into the said context, it is important to see how the inception of growing Chinese nationalism and Kuomintang ventures in the 1910s generated fears that the development of political influence and economic power of the Chinese communities could have displaced and collided with 'British political and commercial interest' in the colony (Yang, 2014, pp. 12). By utilizing this context, the narrative of the story becomes understandable. The extra payment demanded by Ning Lam comes from the British's negative sentiments toward the Chinese. In this context, it can also be understood that Ning Lam is a subject within a double colonization phenomenon within postcolonial discourses.

The term 'double colonization' was initially coined by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford in a book they edited *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-colonial Women's Writing* (1986). This term was

disseminated and used by postcolonial feminists in particular as a development of postcolonial studies which aims to instill a complex and holistic implication of sex and gender in observing postcolonial societies. In its essence, double colonization problematizes the parallel oppression that women suffer from colonialism and patriarchal structure. If positioned within the postcolonial discourse, postcolonial women are part of the devalued and repressed individuals whose race and cultural heritages are undermined by the colonialist ideology. On the other hand, postcolonial women also undergo oppression under the patriarchal structure which dismisses their importance of being a woman merely because of their sex and gender. In this mode of thinking, Rajan & Park (2005) argue that the exploration within the intersections of colonialism and neocolonialism in which the discourses of 'gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights,' are taken into account.

The first instance of double colonization begins with the introduction of Khairunnisa in the following narrative. The text informs how she is currently a widow. Having been arranged into an arranged marriage, Khairunnisa cannot be said to have successfully run an engaging domestic life with her husband during their one-and-a-half years together. People set her up as talking points as she could whole-heartedly carry on living her husband's business. She is thought to posit no regard to the husband's family:

*"Khairunnisa's life had not been very exciting since the event of her widowhood. Nor had it been before that, but at least having a husband to talk to from time to time made things less monotonous, even if they had not quite succeeded in transcending social awkwardness in the one and a half years of their arranged marriage. This was punctuated by two surprises: first, when an ornihopter fell out of the sky in Batavia and hit, of all people, her husband trying to cross the street to a toy convention; second, when he left her the house and the toy shop in his will despite the simmering unhappiness of his family and hers. Still, she had been better at it than*

*he had ever been. She made beautiful things, and they always worked. So she shut herself up in the workshop while people talked, about her living alone and running her husband's business without a thought for his family:" (Ho, 2015).*

The premise of the quotation is clear in telling implicitly that women, in this case native women or third world women, are of no use without the presence of their male partners. The fact that Khairunnisa becomes the 'discussion' among people because of her continuing to take care of her husband's legacy means there is a pervading structure which places men above women in the discourse of gender. The passage also portrays how becoming a widow who lives by herself is a taboo that she should have avoided in the first place. Thus, the presence of Khairunnisa as a widow overshadows her existence as a skilled toy maker. In steampunk fictions, toy makers' position in society is crucial as they also take part in furthering the creation of the re-imagined past with their knowledge of technology and engineering. While it is previously quoted that Khairunnisa has always made beautiful functional things—toys—, it is the encounter between her and the unnamed Chinese hybrid that will validate Khairunnisa's expertise in this steampunk universe narrative:

*"...And it had been all very nice and calm, until a crazy Chinese woman had come in through her back door, covered in blood and raving in a language she could not understand."*

*"...'No, please, be still,' begged Khairunnisa, 'someone will hear, I don't think you're even supposed to be here.' The woman stared at her, not understanding. She was immense, Khairunnisa realized, hulking shoulders, had to be nearly two metres tall. She wore odd clothes, dark blue and ill-fitting, torn in places through which Khairunnisa glimpsed scars lying thick on her flesh" (Ho, 2015).*

The quoted passage starts to provide overt description of the hybrid woman within this steampunk set story. To read the 'hybrid' in the steampunk narrative is to see what lies behind



the character of the said figure. This paper tries to situate the steampunk 'hybridity' under the critical frame of postcolonialism and colonial education. Mart (2011) criticizes the colonizers' attempt to educate the natives as a means of safeguarding the exploitation done by the colonizers. The need to educate the 'inferior' natives is the need of the colonial settlers to obtain skilled labors. This marks a continuum from an exploitation of economic control toward the mental and consciousness control of the natives' mind to prolong and justify the act of colonialism. In this way, colonial education paves a way for the educated natives to re-experience colonization under the western's mode of seeing. Although Mart's research is structured upon the British educational policy in colonial Africa, the idea is deeply correlated with the postcolonial subjects around the globe. It is not mentioned initially that Ning Lam herself is also a modified human. While she takes form fully as a human, her eyes are narrated as a "European make..." by the Malay native, Khairunnisa Al-Jazari (Ho, 2015). Now, try to position the quotation of this semi-hybrid as 'European educated' and the meaning would not part so greatly. 'European make' in this regard becomes a tangible quality which people can experience through their senses despite its largely being an imagined construct of supposed superiority. The parallel positioning of Ning Lam's body parts—eye—as 'European make' and 'European educated' could come into being as the story situates its setting in the colonial period. It is within colonial times that the discourse of European qualities have always signified its importance as the civilized and civilizing force to the barbaric entailment of native's qualities. Having European qualities incorporated in the lives of the natives means having succeeded to be reborn in an enlightened fashion of European civilization.

Ning Lam as the protagonist of the story reemerges in the course of the story as she commences to have a direct contact with the Chinese hybrid whom Khairunnisa takes care of. When the contact begins to occur, the hybrid is shown to have a towering body with a bizarre countenance. The hybrid is seen as a failed portrayal of a woman an artist has created. Ning Lam knows that what she sees is what the Kongsis are eager to repossess. The

calm appeal Ning Lam has offered turns into a series of brutal brawl between the two Chinese women:

*"Easy now,' she said. 'We're just going to take a little walk.'  
The woman moved towards her.  
'This is a crossbow,' hissed Ning. 'I will shoot you!' A lie: the kongsis would not pay for a dead woman. 'Oh, for—'  
The woman slapped the crossbow away.  
Ning turned to dive out of the window again, but the woman hauled her back.  
Then she punched Ning in the face. Stunned, Ning watched the world turn upside-down and bloom into agony" (Ho, 2015).*

The encounter between these two women underscores how both colonization and patriarchal system has disabled the rise of sisterhood that both Ning Lam and the Chinese hybrid could form as a resistance to the systems. Hooks (1986) formulates that the space for resistance among women has existed in the first place as a result of domination that an individual exercises toward women. The domination places women under the line of margin and orchestrate the idea that it is only through the established relationship with men that women could function:

*"Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another" (Hooks, 1986, p. 127).*

It is known that both Ning Lam and the Chinese hybrid are related to their association with the Kongsis and British authority. The two systems have positioned them as natural enemies that Hooks has stated. The resource of power within the economic and social domain has also been held by the two power. Women are left to submission to the structural discrimination. By having women submit to the will of those in power (re: colonization and patriarchy), women inevitably have to rely on

men's presence in order to 'function' as a person. The curtailed economic and social mobility the woman has also dismissed the chance for social resistance. Their orientation will most likely linger on making sure that the 'sustenance' from their male counterparts to not cease for their survival. This part can be shown with the quotation below:

*"The other woman (Ning Lam) rose from where she had been squatting in a corner. She was truly immense. Closing her fingers around Ning's throat, she rasped, 'Who sent you?'"*

*"I actually have no idea," said Ning. 'I'm just the delivery girl, right? I hand you over. They pay me. Nobody needs to lose any eyeballs. Speaking of which, can I have mine back now?'"* (Ho, 2015).

The quotations have validated Hook's statement that women 'cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. Nevertheless, it is in this course of story that the formation of resistance among the three double-colonized women begins to manifest. Ning lam is the first character to underline that the disorder which occurs earlier is wrong as it victimizes both her and the Chinese hybrid:

*"We're doing this the wrong way,' Ning went on blithely, ignoring the risk of being throttled. 'Let's be nice. Hello my name's Ning Lam. What's yours?'"* (Ho, 2015).

The congenial offer Ning Lam shows to the Chinese hybrid is accepted in a light manner. The hybrid asks Ning Lam to call her 'Ah Hong'. Ning Lam sees that their new encounter will get along very well. Meanwhile, Ah Hong portrays the remainder of her suspicion toward Ning Lam as an agent of the Kongs:

*"There'll be more like her coming,' said Ah Hong to Khairunnisa. 'We ought to kill her. I can carry the body, easy.'" "Oh for your mother's sake,' muttered Ning." "I would really rather not kill anybody,' whispered Khairunnisa." "Me too,' added Ning. 'I wasn't going to kill anyone to begin with. I was just going to*

*have you so that the British or whoever made you get mad'"* (Ho, 2015)

The exchange of remarks between the three women once again emphasizes how the male-dominated system has made them fail to reach a consensus. Their attempt to form resistance requires a common narrative which they could share with their individual experiences. This narrative must have departed from the man-made narrative which only results in hostility among them. Hooks (1986) states that the shared oppression or victimization that women have experienced does not suffice in creating a resistance to the system. She insists that women must not rely on the popular ideologies set by the culture such as men as the 'common enemy' or the victimized selves of the women. She exemplifies how women should create a bond which works as the goal 'to end sexist oppression'. To achieve this women must come to terms that the popular dichotomy of men versus women should not be the thesis of their resistance. This choice is opted as the binary opposition between the two entities shows merely a reductionist underlying of women's fight. The resistance does not only encompass women activism toward male's antagonistic system. It also carries a transformation of women's consciousness that precedes the resistance. Hooks puts it, "Working together to expose, examine and eliminate sexist socialization within ourselves, women could strengthen and affirm one another and build a solid foundation for developing political solidarity."

The transformation of consciousness between Ah Hong and Ning Lam occurs as the former asserts her identity as a fully-functioning person and not a mere robotic human:

*"... Ah Hong said, 'I won't be given away. I won't be taken apart like a dead thing. I won't be bought and I won't be sold. You don't know what that's like'"*

*"Ning was silent for a while. Then she said, quietly, 'You'd be surprised.'"*

*"Ah Hong squatted in front of her, till she was almost nose to nose with Ning. 'If you had even the slightest idea, then you*

*wouldn't be about to do it to someone else"*  
(Ho, 2015).

During these conversations both come to know that they have shared and experienced discrimination. This is not to be mistaken as the limelight of the narrative. The shared discrimination opens up a space for the two women to 'strengthen and affirm' each of them. The solid foundation can only be founded upon trusts that must precede resistance. The exchanges of indirect discriminated past have shown to create a space for activism between the two along with Khairunnisa. The transformation process comes to terminate as the three women start to experience contact with British colonial power through the native informant known as the Gurkha. The Gurkhas are commonly referred to as Nepali soldiers who were recruited by the British Army to join forces of British troops. Their presence in the story resembles the likeliness of what is known in postcolonial studies as the native informant. As a native informant, the Gurkha acts as a collaborator with the British colonial power in the narrative.

Parashar (2019) examines the identity of native informants in a research setting. The classic segregation of native informants' identity as either an insider or an outsider is believed to be flawed. This happens as native informants posit a multitude of affinity when it comes to their identities. If it is seen in an insider-and-outsider dichotomy, a native informant can have affinity to the researched native's 'ethnic, cultural and even political identities'. Nonetheless, as an outsider, the native informants can be seen as a separate entity which relies on his or her position as an objective researcher without any affinity to particular identities. The binary option approach has to be repositioned as the native informants are involved in a negotiation of approaches which has to be set to be relevant for the societies observed. The multiplicity of identities imposed by the native informants within the societal contact must be signified and not be structured on the dichotomy.

Parashar's account on the identity of native informants becomes tantalizing to be applied in the course of the story. The Gurkha man's presence adds an intricate narrative

that showcases the hyper-multicultural encounters in such a tiny place of Singapore. The man poses no affinity to the three women although he is also subject to British colonialism as his insider role of a native informant. As an outsider, his role is also not overtly defined as he vacillates from being a colonized native and as British's subordinate. He is narrated to capture Ah Hong in Khairunnisa's house:

*"Number 24' repeated the Gurkha, 'everything is fine. I'm taking you home'"*  
(Ho, 2015).

The British's labeling of Ah Hong as numbered objects has induced a commotion in the setting. The Gurkha is able to escape the overpowering capacity of Ah Hong to fight, which transpire from the expertise of British technology and Khairunnisa's skills. The story then changes its setting to the laboratory owned by the British named Bradford. The native informant reports what he witnesses during the commotion that creates disbelief to Ah Hong's improvement:

*"But such work from a native,' marveled Bradford" (Ho, 2015).*

Despite Khairunnisa's expertise on improving the British's supposed hybrid, she is still underlined as a native who excels the colonial's capability. The binary of native and the colonial emerges directly as the contact between the white man power and the natives has been introduced. When Khairunnisa's body is disposed off of the table because Bradford has people waiting for him (Mr. Stroud and Mr. Murchison), she sees the impaired and 'lifeless' Ah Hong along with the remaining bodies stacked in a pile waiting to be transformed into hybrid humans. The stacked lifeless bodily pieces of meat, arms, thighs, and livers are found in the cabinet where Khairunnisa hides. It becomes clear that earlier Khairunnisa is to be modified into another hybrid by Bradford in his laboratory.

Later in the story, Bradford's guests, Mr. Stroud and Mr. Murchison, turn out to be the people who fund Bradford's laboratory project in creating scores of hybrid humans. The number 24 hybrid has turned into a menace

while they want a tame golems—a human robot. They insist that Bradford has created a time bomb rather than a fully functional hybrid. This problem makes them associate the uproar into the British Governor in Singapore:

*“...’All this uproar has got the attention of the ... shall we say more liberal factions under the Governor. There’s already been talk of an investigation”* (Ho, 2015).

They have decided to repatriate Bradford’s to the British land for his project failure. The discussion among British men reveals how the project of colonization is never a project of one’s own. It just operates under one communal flag. Problems also occur among the smaller colonial community which could weaken their pursuits to exercise their power to the natives. Internal conflicts have shown to provide spaces for the native’s resistance as the colonizers are engaged with the internal disputes.

The climax of the conflicting actors is initiated with Stroud’s shooting Bradford in the chest. Bradford’s other native assistant, Narayan, is ordered to dispatch the hybrids including Khairunnisa. Seeing a fragile woman praying with blood in her eyes, Narayan resists the order and tells Murchison to do it himself. He tells him to do the ‘dirty work’ for himself. The classic label of incapable native reemerges as Stroud gets furious of Narayan’s resistance:

*“...’Bloody natives. Can’t rely on them for anything”* (Ho, 2015).

Ah Hong leaps into Stroud’s figure and ‘crushed his lower jaw, then strained until it ripped free from his face’. On the other side of the place, Ning stabs Murchison in the eyes and witnesses his death. The bicker among Ah Hong and Ning Lam reappears as Ah Hong still has her doubts with Ning Lam. Khairunnisa comes to tell them that the laboratory room is engulfed in fire and they need to depart from there. In this part of the story, the colonial power has been symbolically defeated by the formed resistance of the colonized. Nevertheless, there remains the head of the Kongsu who asks for Ning Lam’s presence. In the Kongsu’s abode, Grandfather has refused to

pay Ning Lam for her service initially as she has been ‘indiscreet’. He says that the Chinese hybrid—Ah Hong—is no longer valuable and deemed ‘worthless’. The British man who would pay ransom for Ah Hong has died and the whole project has wasted his time:

*“You have the audacity, Miss Ning,’ thundered Grandfather, ‘to ask for payment at this stage?”* (Ho, 2015).

Ning Lam furthers her argument by stating a mockery on how ‘the secret societies of Kongsu have fallen’ as they could not pay her. Grandfather is angered by her remarks as it taints his reputation and status as the head of the Kongsu. He decides to provide compensation for the medical bill and wounds she possesses. Ning Lam demands to keep Ah Hong somewhere while Grandfather warns her that the British will come after her in the future. Ning Lam chooses to work together with Ah Hong as an agent in the ‘market’. Khairunnisa offers Ah Hong to have her introduced with the other *Samsui* women—the Chinese immigrants in Malaya and Singapore. Nonetheless, Ah Hong declines the offer as she is yet to accept the hybridity of her half-robot body. The story comes to an end with the three women having their breakfast and sunrise on the island.

## Conclusion

The great deal of multi-layered complexity found in the analysis of Olivia Ho’s steampunk short story *Working Woman* accentuates how intricate the colonial material history is. The three seemingly contesting themes of Chinese migration, double colonization, and resistance could not stand for itself and act as an independent sub-historical phenomenon. The three themes can only be understood through a holistic framework. The British’s embarkation to the land of Singapore has shown to attract Chinese to migrate and occupy the land. Their occupation allows colonial discourses to emerge and resistance to follow. In the discussion, the secret societies of Kongsu represent a growing power of the Chinese society in British’s colonial land. Its presence is juxtaposed with the pervading Confucian values embedded within the Chinese gender

discourses. Chinese female characters as the focus of this research are shown to be the victims of both British colonization and Confucian patriarchy. The character's resistance toward the antagonizing system is thus a multifaceted resistance as the analysis finds that internal disputes in resistance and colonization are prevalent. It is through the warring internal conflicts among British colonizers that resistance could be manifested.

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