

## *Centering Literature: Literature and The History of Environmentalism in Malaysia*

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### **Abstract**

Environmentalism in Malaysia, which has its roots in the British colonial administration, has evolved as a social and political force. Ranging from grassroots activists to ENGOs, the environmental movement is founded on the same aspirations: to increase environmental awareness, to preserve the environment and to ensure sustainable development. State-imposed constraints may be the Achilles' heel in the fight to ensure sustainability but this has not deterred the movement from developing. In the realm of Malaysian literature in English, writers have written extensively about environmental activism – although little attention has been given to this area in the local literary-critical practice. In this paper, I attempt to redress this dearth by examining and critiquing four contemporary Malaysian novels in English: Keris Mas' *Jungle of Hope* (2009), Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998), KS Maniam's *Between Lives* (2003), and Chuah Guat Eng's *Days of Change* (2010). These novels are selected due to their alignment to the key moments in the history of environmentalism and the plurality of relations and struggles depicted. This paper analyzes the environmental politics, past and present, found in the selected texts, and the solutions that their works present to ensure sustainability. It yields a keen understanding of irresponsible environmental degradation as well as illuminate agency and transformation. More importantly, it places literature at the core, thus demonstrate the indispensability of these works in the history of environmentalism in Malaysia.

Keywords: Environmentalism, Malaysian literature, history of environmentalism

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## Introduction

Environmentalism in Malaysia can be traced back to the British colonial administration. Protests in the form of armed resistance by the locals whose livelihood in the forest was threatened to British unjust laws that pertained to land rights and access were relatively common then, though not many records are available. Tok Bahaman's 1891-1895 rebellion in Pahang exemplified these protests (Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005). Haji Abdul Rahman from Terengganu, who represented 43 peasants who refused to bow down to the British system of getting permits to plant hill paddy, contested the British notion of land use at the Land Office (Mohideen, 2000). Discontentment over land rights grew, which eventually culminated in a Malay peasant uprising in Terengganu in 1928, led by To' Janggut. However, this resistance was quashed "swiftly and ruthlessly by British guns" (Idris, 2000, p. 7).

Environmentalism during colonial times was also crudely informed by scientific discovery and botanical studies that were carried out throughout the Empire. Scientific discovery and botanical studies were rooted in European Enlightenment values, which valorized the superiority of the rational human mind over non-rational matter, including nature. People and nature in the colonies, therefore, were seen as 'uncivilized' by the British Empire and in need of being brought to order and rationality, named and labelled so as to enlighten the rest of the world (Adams and Mulligan, 2003). Forest sustainability became a major concern throughout the British Empire due to hunting, commercial plantations, and scientific research. To this end, conservation was seen as extremely crucial. The inauguration of King George V National Park in 1939 (renamed as National Park in 1957), a forested area that stretches over three states, Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pahang, reached the pinnacle of conservation efforts carried out by Theodore Hubback, a British officer, who was deeply concerned about wildlife preservation and the survival of the Orang Asli (aborigines) in the forests of Malaya (Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005). Hubback's efforts were commendable but not uncommon during colonial times. Coinciding with forest conservation measures carried out throughout the British Empire, especially in Africa, India, and Burma, Hubback's efforts were premised on the philosophy of Empire at that time, which was "the concept that protection and preservation of the biological realm were congruent with good governance and the enhancement of political power" (Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005, p. 189). Indeed, conservation efforts, such as Hubback's, were an important part of colonial ideology by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and had spread to become a global concern in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Adams and Mulligan, 2003). This is evident from the creation of Kruger National Park in South Africa (1926), Hailey National Park in India (1936), Kivu National Park in Congo (1937), as well as other conservation parks and sanctuaries throughout the world (Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005).

The oldest and largest environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Malaysia, The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), was established in 1940 by a group of British expatriates committed to preserving the country's natural heritage. With the publication of *Malayan Nature Journal Volume 1* in 1940, the MNS set out to be Malaysia's premier environmental NGO, promoting conservation and environmental education, tasks they have continued to pursue until today. Decades of environmental work has made MNS the largest environmental NGO in Malaysia, surviving from colonial times until now. Amongst its greatest achievements are saving the Endau-

Rompin Forest in the '70s, preserving and managing Kuala Selangor Nature Park in the '80s, introducing School Nature Clubs in schools in the '90s, and gazetting the Royal Belum State Park in Perak in 2007 (Malaysian Nature Society, 2011). NGOs working on environmental issues mushroomed from the '70s onwards. The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) was established in 1970, WWF-Malaysia was set up in 1972, and Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) was founded in 1977. These NGOs have been acknowledged as the pioneers of the environmental movement in Malaysia, which continued to grow in the '80s and '90s (Ramakrishna, 2004). To date, other than MNS, CAP, WWF-Malaysia, and SAM, Malaysia has 14 registered environmental NGOs (MENGOs) dealing specifically with the environment, such as the Environmental Protection Society Malaysia (EPSM), EcoKnights, Borneo Resources Institute Malaysia (BRIMAS), Sustainable Development Network Malaysia (SUSDEN), and Water Watch Penang (WWP). MENGOs in Peninsular Malaysia are mostly concerned with resource conservation and quality of life issues, whereas MENGOs in East Malaysia are focused on the needs of the forest and the indigenous people that inhabit it (Ramakrishna, 2004). These MENGOs differ not only in their concerns but also in their approaches in influencing political and governmental decisions related to the environment. Conducting and presenting research results, presenting viewpoints, contacting government officials, and lobbying through the media are popular tactics used by the MENGOs (Mohd and Sonn, 1999). Broadly speaking, however, they share the same aspirations of increasing environmental awareness, promoting activities that aid the preservation of the environment, and encouraging and developing policies geared to sustainable development (Ramakrishna, 2004).

MENGOs have been successful in some of their campaigns. CAP, SAM, and MNS have managed to halt a few development projects that were deemed environmentally destructive, such as the redevelopment of Penang Hill, the building of Tembeling Dam at Taman Negara, and extensive logging at the Endau-Rompin forest, but failed miserably to lobby for the termination of the Bakun and Selangor dam projects, the gazetting of Pulau Redang as a state marine park, and many more unsustainable development projects that involved logging, deforestation, and the building of road, bridge, and hill projects (Weiss, 2005). Many of these MENGOs have the scientific knowledge, skills and expertise which they have sometimes utilised to cooperate with the government to draft environmental policies. Regional and international support has also worked to these MENGOs' advantage in addressing environmental issues. However, Vincent and Mohamed Ali (2005) in their book *Managing Natural Wealth: Environment and Development in Malaysia* doubt the degree of the ability of these MENGOs to influence the pace and direction of sustainable development and political outcomes in Malaysia. Ramakrishna also has the same opinion, arguing that MENGOs generally have "inadequate power" and "a weak voice," preferring non-confrontational methods over aggressive ones (2004, p. 135). This is partially attributable to state-imposed constraints (Ramakrishna, 2004). A major constraint related to this argument is the Society Act (1966) and the Internal Security Act (1960) (replaced with Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (2012) in April, 2013), legislations that work in favour of the government in implementing its development policies. The Society Act for instance, requires every club, organisation, society, or political party to secure a licence, thereby granting the government the exclusive right to block or impede the formation of any organisation which it considers detrimental to the country. Whereas, the Internal Security Act gave the government and the police

absolute power to arrest and detain whoever they think is a threat to national security, without trial.

Malaysia's dynamic private business sector, which is the key economic growth driver and carries out much of the economic activities in the country, including agriculture, mining, and commerce, has also played a role in addressing environmental issues. Nowadays, more and more companies and multi-national corporations in this sector have included "green initiatives" in their corporate social responsibility, in line with governmental efforts in leading green initiatives nationwide (Jeong, 2010). To illustrate, Digi, one of the leading telecommunications providers, embarked on the "Mangrove-saving Project" in 2008 to help stop the devastation of mangrove forests in Selangor (Digi, 2008). Sime Darby, the Malaysian-based diversified multinational involved in key growth sectors such as plantations, property, motors, and industrial equipment, embarked on a three-year "Plant a Tree Program" in 2008 with the aim of planting 300,000 trees (Yayasan Sime Darby, 2017).

Grassroots campaigns, usually organised by ordinary people fighting for a common environmental cause, have also emerged in the past few decades. Their campaigns, though they were successful and worked to their favour, proved to be a long, difficult battle. The Bukit Merah Action Committee, founded in 1984, is an example. The committee, which represented about 10,000 residents of Bukit Merah, Perak, sued Asian Rare Earth Sdn. Bhd. (ARE), a Japanese-Malaysian joint-venture plant, in 1985 for its irresponsible dumping of radioactive waste. Prior to this, numerous complaints were received from the community about their failing health and increasing incidents of leukaemia, infant deaths, congenital diseases, and lead poisoning since the setup of the plant in 1982 (Consumers' Association of Penang, 2011). In 1992, the people of Bukit Merah won their suit against ARE. The factory was ordered by the Ipoh High Court to shut down within 14 days. This long battle was a feat considering residents in the community had to deal with health risks, countless false assurances by the government, and the police force, which were quick to arrest them when they set out to protest (Consumers' Association of Penang, 2011). The Bukit Merah Action Committee set the first precedent in Malaysian legal history for being the first community to tirelessly fight over an environmental issue in order to protect their health and environment from radioactive pollution.

Grassroots environmental movements in the past, especially in the '80s, were seen predominantly as racially motivated, which was simply because an environmental issue usually started off as an issue that affected a certain racial community, was fought for by that community, and was later championed by racial-based political parties (Tan, 2013). This, according to Hezri, a prominent researcher in sustainable development and environmental policy in Malaysia, is the outcome of racial-based politics, which has played a large role in Malaysian politics for decades (Tan, 2013). This, however, has changed. For the past few years, Malaysia has witnessed countless protests, demonstrations, and arrests involving the establishment of a rare earth processing plant project by Australia's Lynas Corporation in Gebeng, Kuantan, Pahang. What started off as a talk drawing less than 200 people in Kuantan in March 2011 quickly garnered thousands of supporters "from a much wider spectrum of society" as they learned of the impending radiation exposure and its effects on health, safety, and the environment (Gooch, 2012). This grassroots movement reflects the public's growing awareness of environmental issues and their rights for a safe and

clean environment, the power of expressing their views publicly and in urging business corporations and the government to be more transparent and accountable to the people, as well as a shift from racial-based politics to environmental-based politics.

Although state power and its enforcement have been feared, in recent times, many have come forward to question and challenge the state's environmental decisions and implementations. Indeed, state governments have been accused of abusing and exploiting their power to launch land grabs for their state-backed corporations' profiteering agendas. A case in point is the over-acquisition of land in Pengerang, Johor, which raised concerns over the displacement of the community to make way for the state's cronies' development projects (Chua, 2012). Recently, too, the Negeri Sembilan state government has also been accused of excising huge pieces of forest reserve land for logging, plantations, and numerous development projects that benefits its cronies, resulting in the loss of 53 areas of forest reserves (Teoh, 2012).

The government responded to environmental degradation in many ways, one of which was through legislation. There are currently 43 environmental-related laws in Malaysia. Following the Environmental Quality Act (EQA) in 1974, the government also set up the Department of Environment (DOE) in 1975. In 1988, the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure was introduced. However, in his overview of the developments of environmental law in Malaysia, law expert Azmi Sharom (2002) asserted that "the problem with environmental law in Malaysia is not the lack of laws. Instead it is the lack of true political will to put those laws to their full use" (p. 889). Citing the controversial Bakun Dam Case in Sarawak, which triggered a great hue and cry regarding the lack of transparency in its EIA as an example, Sharom contends that a more cohesive approach to environmental protection and management is needed in Malaysia (p. 889).

Environmentalism in Malaysia has evolved as a social and political force. In this paper, I use a definition of "environmentalism" referring to concern about and action aimed at protecting the environment. It is a social movement that involves actors (agencies) such as the state, multilateral institutions, businesses, ENGOS and grassroots activists. I will be using the term "environment" in the sense given by Mukherjee in his book *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Borrowing from Mukherjee (2010), the concept of environment is not only restricted to living and non-living things, but it is also "inclusive of culture", which inevitably entails economical, political and historical matters (p. 4). "Environment", writes Mukherjee, "is the surroundings we find ourselves in, from ecosystem to biosphere, where humans and non-humans exist or co-exist naturally; and these are inclusive of culture" (2010, p.4). The term environment used in this study is essentially different from "nature," which I take to mean non-humans, and distinguished from the work of humanity.

State-imposed constraints may be the Achilles' heel in the fight to ensure sustainability but this has not deterred the movement from developing. In the realm of Malaysian literature in English, writers have written extensively about environmental activism – although little attention has been given to this area in the local literary-critical practice. In this paper, I attempt to redress this dearth by examining and critiquing four contemporary Malaysian novels in English: Keris Mas' *Jungle of Hope* (2009), Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998), KS Maniam's

*Between Lives* (2003), and Chuah Guat Eng's *Days of Change* (2010). These novels are selected due to their alignment to the key phases in the history of environmentalism in Malaysia. The first phase is during British rule (1824-1957). This phase is what I would refer to as "hard times" as the locals struggled against unjust laws that threatened their livelihood and dependence on the forests. The second phase is the period between 1970-1990. I would refer to this phase as the "growing awareness" phase as many environmental laws were introduced and numerous ENGOs were established during this period and worked to promote environmental awareness, justice and sustainability. Grassroots activism also emerged during this period. The third phase is the period between 1990-2000. This is when the "environmental movement was born". This decade saw massive degradation of the environment as well as the rise of civil society that became more assertive and critical. The fourth phase is the period from 2000 onwards. I would refer to this phase as the "marching forward" phase as globalization and the Internet further accelerate environmental awareness, cooperation and lobbying. This paper analyzes the environmental politics, past and present, found in the selected texts, and the solutions that their works present to ensure sustainability. It yields a keen understanding of irresponsible environmental degradation as well as illuminate agency and transformation.

#### **"Hard Times": Keris Mas' *Jungle of Hope***

*Jungle of Hope* (henceforth, *JOH*) represents environmentalism during the colonial times. In *JOH*, Keris delineates the human-environment interactions in the Malayan environment in the '20s-'30s. These relations are largely linked to political, economic, and cultural domination. To accentuate the power of colonial capitalist enterprises, Keris broadens this domination to include the success of the colonial rulers and capitalists in manufacturing consent among the Malays to embrace the capitalist tin-mining and plantation economy. Zaidi and a score of other villagers in Ketari exemplify this consent. Even though Zaidi adopts this ideology, he does not do so 'blindly.' A self-made man, he makes sincere efforts to salvage the Malays' land in Ketari, built upon a vision of social justice for the Ketari villagers and change in the villagers' practices and attitudes. Zaidi's hard work, however, is undermined since it is hardly able to stop the menace of mining from eating up the land in Ketari and the surrounding areas. Nor is he able to stop the breakup of the Ketari people into two factions – one that takes up rubber planting and the other that is displaced and has no choice but to flee to the jungle. Environmentalism in *JOH*, as represented by Zaidi, involves embracing and giving consent to the capitalist ideology, but this is done with a clear conscience of alleviating displacement and landlessness among the Malays as well spurring the Malays' political and economic autonomy to faster growth. Zaidi's empowerment however, becomes a problem since the transformation that he aspires for is crushed by the counter-hegemonic struggle of his brother, Pak Kia, and some folks from the village. He is not really successful in convincing Pak Kia to take up rubber planting and not leave Ketari. Pak Kia's sullen resistance also represents the fragility of environmentalism during colonial times. Environmentalism, to Pak Kia, includes significant resistance to overt attempts to alter his livelihood, lifestyle and tradition. In the end, however, his resistance proves to be futile, leaving him with no choice but to flee from Ketari and settle in the jungle.

### **“Environmental Movement Was Born”:** Yang-May Ooi’s *The Flame Tree*

Yang-May Ooi’s *The Flame Tree* (henceforth, *TFT*) is set in Britain and Malaysia in the ‘90s. *TFT* revolves around the construction of Titiwangsa University, a complete town and campus in the rainforest-covered hills of Malaysia, set to be the grandest, most visionary project in Asia. Jordan Cardale bids for the construction of the new university town in Malaysia and is awarded the contract. Luke, an environmental consultant hired by Dr Chan, on the other hand, is adamant to prove Jordan’s design of the new university town would be damaging to the environment and the people of Kampong Tanah.

Resistance, as exemplified by Luke’s and Dr. Chan’s efforts to stop the destructive project, is pitted against Jordan’s “power over” in *TFT*. These antagonistic relations imply that the capacity of grassroots movements depends in part on their capacity to counter the power of capitalists. In *TFT*, Luke and his friends fail miserably to stop the environmentally-damaging project. A year after construction begins, the university tower that is being built collapses, causing a massive landslide that causes a massive environmental damage, adversely affecting tracts of forest and the Kampung Tanah people (p. 304). In Kampung Tanah’s case, Luke’s awareness campaign fails to persuade the people to contest Jordan’s proposed project. Dr. Chan’s attempts to let the public and the authorities know about the flaws of Jordan’s design is also easily countered, backed by the ideology that Luke’s attempts are ‘interference’ by those representing the First World country or First World environmental movement, encroaching on the rights of Malaysians to enjoy the benefits of progress. This ideology, coupled with the ideology of progress-and-development, which have been propagated by the state and internalized by the rest of society for many decades, come in handy for Jordan to advance his interests. In *TFT*, Ooi seems to necessitate the need to focus more on ideological rather than coercive domination. To sum up, *TFT* represents the environmental politics during the ‘90s, at a time when civil society was only developing, constricting progress-and-development ideology was rife, and globalization was treated with distrust and suspicion by Asian leaders and authorities.

### **“Marching Forward”:** KS Maniam’s *Between Lives* and Chuah Guat Eng’s *Days of Change*

K.S. Maniam’s *Between Lives* (henceforth, *BL*) is located imaginatively in colonial and contemporary Malaysia, probably in the late ‘90s or early 2000s. Sellamma, an old, poor, rural woman battles to keep her land from being acquired and developed as a theme park. Sumitra, a young woman and social worker, is entrusted with the task of persuading Sellamma to give up her land. Maniam delineates the human-environment interactions in the postcolonial Malaysian environment, foregrounding his indictment of state control and domination whilst highlighting the problems of resistance and empowerment. Both Sellamma and Sumitra exemplify resistance and empowerment, the former using her knowledge and memory to resist the displacement from her land, whereas the latter uses her skills and connections to help save the land from being grabbed by the developer. In Sellamma’s case, resistance poses a problem as she is denied the right to live on her land. Sumitra’s indifference towards Sellamma’s predicament in the beginning of the story demonstrates the extent of the power of the state’s progress-and-development ideology. Maniam probes into this ideological domination, pointing out the need to pay more attention to ideological

rather than coercive domination. Sellamma's resistance, which is limited to the private sphere, needs to be advanced, which is why Sumitra is given the role by Maniam to extend it into the public sphere. Maniam underscores what happens when strongly-held personal and cultural views come into conflict with those of the state. Through these power relations in *BL*, Maniam also affirms the contradictory roles of the state, as the protector and destroyer of the environment. The state's complicity in making decisions and taking subsequent actions to evict Sellamma from her land attest to these opposing roles.

Maniam also delineates the nuanced and dynamic image of the Internet as an arena for resistance — an arena to protest and garner public support, away from the constricting “power over” of the state. In semi-democratic Malaysia, the media and the state have a symbiotic relationship. Mainstream media are often controlled and owned by the state. Laws related to the operation of media often give the state the power to censor or stop the transmission of information that is deemed as going against state policies. This symbiosis naturally manifests in pro-state press and broadcasting coverage, often sidelining alternative voices struggling to gain a hearing. However, in the past few decades, the proliferation of new media in Malaysia has provided a venue in which more basic political conflicts are waged. Alternative media and the Internet have become the arena for those who want to be heard and need a less constrictive democratic space. Maniam accentuates this political liberalization through Sumitra's efforts to raise the society's awareness of the injustice suffered by Sellamma. The Internet, Maniam elucidates, provides greater freedom of expression and political participation and challenges the existing power structures in ways that have been limited before. This measure may serve as “an example of the countervailing implications of the globalization process, where intensified market penetration and appropriation of hitherto peripheral environments are accompanied by expanding communications networks and new political possibilities for resistance” (Hirsch and Warren, 2002, p. 4).

Chuah Guat Eng's *Days of Change* (henceforth, *DOC*), is set in Malaysia, spanning several decades from colonial times to the early 2000s. It revolves around the life of Hafiz, a 55-year-old self-made Malay man. When the story begins, Hafiz is suffering from amnesia. To trigger his memory, Hafiz uses the I Ching, the Chinese ‘book of changes,’ to recall his past. He then remembers his battle with his friends against a major corporation bent on appropriating his land at Ulu Banir, and his efforts to bring development to Kampong Basoh, a poverty-stricken village in Banir Valley.

Chuah conveys her optimism towards solving environmental threats through resistance and empowerment. The protesters lined up by Hafiz's friend, Yew Chuan, are all educated, urban citizens intent on raising public awareness and making the Banir Valley issue heard, despite the daunting obstacles that await them. There are Dr. Mohini, a physician; Hector Wong, a journalist attached to a regional newsmagazine based in Hong Kong; Faridah, a psychologist; and Sundram, an engineer who works with the Waterworks Department and also is a chairman of the Malaysian Nature Society's local branch. These characters embody empowerment, each with his or her expertise and knowledge, which are then played out collectively in the public sphere to stop the proposed project.

When news regarding Hartindah's plans for the Banir Valley receive coverage in the local and regional media due to Hector's role in drumming up media interest, the



protest group organised by Yew Chuan relentlessly lobbies for its case. Hector's position as a journalist attached to an external press service proves advantageous and liberating considering the media in Malaysia has either been co-opted or is controlled and constantly reinforces the state's ideology regarding development. Hector writes about how the development project is merely a pretext to log the forest in Banir Valley whilst

Sundram gave interviews, wrote letters to editors and even articles explaining the importance of forest reserves and the ecological impact of the proposed theme park. Faridah, the psychologist, did the same on the issue of the sociological and psychological impact of displacing people from their ancestral homes. (p. 60).

The media exposure led to some conspiracy theories, which were "picked up by journalists writing for regional newsmagazines, and they began to probe into Hartindah, its finances, and its political connections" (p. 61). Months of intense lobbying pays off when, a few months later, Hartindah announces that the project is shelved until a thorough environmental impact assessment has been made.

Yew Chuan's group's fight against Hartindah's proposed project is a manifestation of empowerment. After decades of progress in economy and education, Yew Chuan's group is convinced of their right to freedom of expression and the right to participate in issues that concern the land threatened with social and environmental degradation. The community-based group proves to be a formidable player in the controversial Banir Valley project, challenging the moral character of the state and business corporations. Chuah suggests that if the public sphere realises its unique potential in resistance and empowerment, and work together irrespective of ethnicity, race, or religion to shape the course of action and decisions related to the land, it would be able to create more equitable relations and structures of power. More equitable relations and structures of power here means the public would be able to challenge the role of the state in managing the various aspects of environmental well-being, and thus able to pressure the state and its backed business corporations to modify or stop practices that contribute to land and community degradation. Yew Chuan's group's struggle to fight the ecological injustice brought by a development project implies that when an environmental issue is fought for, per se, like in *DOC*, without exploiting communal or racial politics that are central in contemporary Malaysian politics, it would help an environmental issue to be resolved. The group's civil society-based protest and lobbying reflects what Weiss has noted as a "reasonably diverse and vibrant" civil society in Malaysia, which has "expanded dramatically since the 1980s" (Weiss, 2009, p. 742).

Yew Chuan's group's resistance also serves as a significant political intervention that proves "civil-society activism has succeeded in influencing state policies and political norms" in Malaysia (Weiss, 2005, p. 78). This, I believe, also reflects what capitalist modernisation in Malaysia has brought over the years, such as more equal access to education, occupations, and wider access to information through the media, all of which play major roles in advancing knowledge of environmental issues, as well as sensitivity to local environmental conflicts and resistance. It also signifies what Bryant and Bailey have identified as "a new politics of the environment in the Third World" (1997, p. 131). This "new politics of the environment" is evoked by Chuah on

two levels. On one level, the Malay-agenda politics played out by Abu Bakar and the lobbying by Yew Chuan's group represents Malaysians' revulsion to the manner in which the state and its cronies exercise their power to realise environmentally-destructive projects, denying freedom of expression, right to information, participation in decision-making, and right to justice — traits associated with liberal democracy. At another level, these politics also signify the erosion of the state's hegemony and authoritarian rule over the society based on rapid economic development and the rise of civil society in Malaysia, which has matured over the years.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, these novels represent the different phases of the history of environmentalism in Malaysia. *JOH* represents environmentalism during the colonial times. *TFT* represents the politics involved when the environmental movement was born whereas *BL* and *DOC* represent environmental politics from 2000 onwards. What these works suggest is that environmentalism is at its best when it becomes a collective effort and fought for in the public sphere. These works express a deep-seated responsibility to environmentalism which can be mediated through a strong and resilient civil society. As a firm believer in such a tenet where literature and history illuminate each other, I argue that these works intersect with the history of environmentalism, thus making them indispensable in the discourse of environmentalism in Malaysia.

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