
The Violence of Othering and (non-)Indigenous Revival: Aamnton Alias' *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent* as Postcolonial Speculative Fiction of Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract

This paper examines an Anglophone Bruneian novel, *The Last Bastion of Ingei* (2016), by Aamnton Alias, as postcolonial speculative fiction. Employing the double lines of enquiry provided by the Orientalist colonial gaze and ideology of progress, I discuss symbolic and materialist aspects of the violent processes of othering experienced within the Bruneian nation. The novel delineates the way that a colonial mindset undermines indigenous and minority identities. I contend that the hybridity of human-*hantu* relations functions as a strategy of resistance by collapsing demarcated boundaries between self and alien other. A further revival of the cultures of indigenous Malays, non-indigenous Ibans, and Penans within Brunei exhibits the extent to which the novel's project of decolonization is promoted. Furthermore, a dystopian world of conflict is rejected in an ultimate desire for utopian peace and happiness as the novel calls for a suturing of social and racial divisions. To this end, a unified nation is yearned for via speculative scenes of reconciled relations of its family members. Hence, I argue that this novel offers a valuable critique of the conditions of postcolonial identity through contested powers, spaces and voices through its speculative narrative plot.

Keywords: Anglophone Bruneian fiction, postcolonialism, orientalism, othering, hybridity, revival of indigenous culture

Introduction

In the continuing debate on defining speculative fiction (Rieder, "On Defining" 191), the term has been increasingly used to address a host of disparate genres, such as science fiction, alternate history, magic realism and horror fiction (Dunlop 202). Even as scholars have distinguished between speculative fiction and science fiction in terms of the former's future orientation and emphasis on social and cultural changes while the latter deals with scientific and technological advancements (Oziewicz 21), I heed Nicholas Dunlop's and China Mieville's views on the necessity of avoiding strict definitions when employing these terms interchangeably. In *Ariel's* issue on "Speculative Fiction and the Politics of Postcolonialism," Nancy Batty and Robert

Markley stress the “permeability and instability of generic categories” when calling out rigid demarcations as “habits of mind that establish hierarchies and [...] reinforce and are reinforced by a narrow, parochial nationalism” (8). Using their argument as my point of departure, I engage in a discourse of inclusive transnationalism as applied to anti-imperial themes addressed in speculative fiction. By enquiring into strands of hierarchical identity that tragically strain social interactions, I examine the way that the image of the raced “other” is perpetuated and challenged. In Bruneian author Aamnton Alias’ debut novel, a syncretic model of speculative fiction is embraced by incorporating elements of indigenous knowledge, altered history, and fantastical undercurrents within ideological conflicts that are otherwise probable in the Malay world. Tropes of ghosts and demons elicit a dystopic horror, which threatens to expose the frailty of social organizations constructed for imperialistic goals. While social othering may evoke ethnic nationalism, Aamnton Alias’ *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent* (2016) deals with a racial hierarchy dating back to a colonial past delineated in a binary between occident (West) and oriental (East). By reclaiming identity of “lost races” (Rieder, “Fantasies” 34), this Bruneian novel exposes a thin veil of nationalism that obfuscates an intrinsic desire for collective peace shared by multiethnic characters.

Along this line, this paper aims to examine *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent* using a framework of postcolonial science fiction, which was consolidated at the turn of the twenty-first century. Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan first employed this term in their anthology *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Four years later, John Rieder’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* would come to highlight two key concerns within science fiction: the colonial gaze and the ideology of materialist progress. In this perspective, he posits that science fiction is necessarily a product of colonialism, which is reiterated in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s “Science Fiction and Empire”. Moreover, Jessica Langer and Eric Smith have both weighed in on the necessary bind between postcolonialism and science fiction (SF). While Langer is preoccupied with SF’s representational discourse in the colonial gaze, Smith stresses the dangers of overlooking historical critiques offered by postcolonial SF, as these texts trace a struggle to transition between “a precolonial past and a post-industrial present” (Smith 11).

This divide between the discursive and materialist ideas of progress is explored in my analysis of *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent (LB)*. Firstly, I argue that the violent processes of othering embedded within colonial discourse find their reiterations within this Bruneian SF novel. The binary construction of human/*hantu* or self/other is represented by the physical conflict between human characters and the *Orang Bunian*, or whistling people who are hidden spirits with a humanoid form according to Malay traditional folklore. An alienation of these ghosts by humans, and vice versa, reveals the injustice of stereotyping others, which leads to instances where the novel attempts to undo these colonial assumptions within the nation's neocolonial spaces. Secondly, the ideology of progress that drives the modernist project of colonialism resonates with contemporary contexts of late capitalism. It follows that SF's historical and spatial aspects facilitate interconnectivity between past, present, and future and collapse fixed boundaries, such as in the territorial boundaries of a nation. In turn, fluid and open channels for identity exchanges and communications are created. Consequently, I contend that *LB* asserts a revival of indigenous (non-white, non-Western) culture. The reclamation of native identity (indigenous Malay and non-indigenous Iban and Penan) is a response to deracination at the hands of a colonial master.

Significantly, *LB* pays attention to an inclusive notion of Bruneian identity as a way to break through and, crucially, move beyond social othering and racial stereotyping of native subjects, which is informed by Brunei Darussalam's historical legacy as a British protectorate for most of the twentieth century. Set in Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei), this novel invites a multifaceted narrative discourse through its portrayal of indigenous Malays, non-indigenous Iban and Penan subjects, and Bunians as Malay folkloric figures. Amongst its many narrators, it only features one foreign narrator who is an Englishman called John, who does not take up "the white man's burden" (Kipling) and thus defies the discourse of white colonial authority and power. In addition, Aammton Alias subdues John's own narrative as it is sandwiched by several Malay indigenous and non-indigenous voices. The novel, hence, gives prominence to these local voices.

Historical Contexts: Brunei Darussalam and its Anglophone Literary Scene

Brunei became a de facto colony upon signing a "Treaty of Protection" with the British in 1888 (Hussainmiya, *Brunei: Revival* 6). From then, the British assumed authority over its administrative affairs. Although an "advice clause" (Suryani, "Brunei" 127; Hussainmiya, *Sultan* 146) states that

local customs and religion should remain the purview of the ruling monarch, the British would interfere in local matters, including an imposition of British civil law undermining Sharia codes (Suryani, *Overview*; Horton “British Administration”; Hussainmiya, “Islam in Brunei” 232). By appointment from London’s Colonial Office, a colonial manager served as a British resident from 1906 until 1971 within Brunei (Horton, “Negara Brunei Darussalam” 39). Colonial powers created divisions between different ethnicities and a colonial mentality resulted in indigenous ethnic and cultural inferiority. Consequently there was a struggle for the survival of the Sultanate, which has been established since the fourteenth century (Talib 134). British protectorate rule lasted for almost a century, as national independence was eventually gained on 1 January 1984, when Brunei became the forty-ninth member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

Brunei is situated within the Southeast Asian region, which is historically fraught because of its extensive experience of colonialism. Neighbouring Malaysia and Singapore were under British colonial rule, while others were once ruled by European colonisers and American imperialists. Upon national independence, several of these nations joined the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN) to pave the way forward to disassociating themselves from Western colonizers. On 7 January 1984, Brunei joined ASEAN as its sixth member and, in doing so, forged closer relations with its regional counterparts, while also expressing its strong commitment to transnationalism away from imperialism. This new political alliance served to build ties with other Southeast Asian nations, as they each partake in a common vision for the future. ASEAN’s motto “One Vision. One Identity. One Community” (Murti) emphasizes a united family of nations.

In sovereign Brunei, a Malay Islamic Monarchic or what is more commonly known as MIB (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) identity was proclaimed as the national ideology to replace British identity under its previous terms as a British protectorate. On independence, British passports ceased to be valid, as Bruneian citizenship was automatically handed out to the nation’s seven indigenous ethnic groups, comprising Brunei Malay, Tutong, Belait, Kedayan, Murut, Dusun and Bisaya. According to Brunei’s Nationality Act of 1961, these “*rakyat jati*” (indigenous groups) are encompassed under a Malay racial identity. The dominance of Malay identity is further underscored in the promotion of a Malay national language. The other two fundamental pillars of its tripartite model of national identity are Islam as the official religion, and its monarchic rule.

Writing on its marginalizing effects, Naimah Talib states that the Malay Muslim dominance is problematic, as it excludes racial and religious minorities who permanently reside in Brunei (145).

In this respect, the contemporary Bruneian Anglophone literary scene provides an opportunity to engage with the national discourse of identity. More crucially, it offers an avenue to explore alternative representations of self that are often overlooked by official configurations of national identity. As a nascent literary field, Anglophone novels by Bruneian writers first appeared with Selamat Munap's *The Wild Men of the East* (2009). Today, there are still fewer than ten novels in English, including three novels explicitly marketed under the genre of science fiction. These are Amir Falique's *Forlorn Adventure* (2013), Aammton Alias' *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent* (2016) and its sequel *Killing Dreams* (2019). Both Alias' novels are subsumed under an ongoing series called *The Bunian Conspiracy*. While Amir Falique's novel resonates with the official rhetoric of nationalistic identity in its faithful portrayal of a Malay Muslim nation, especially in its "representations of Islam" (Kathrina 193), I am interested in the dystopian/utopian impulses charted in Aammton Alias' novels that highlight inclusive identity. In so doing, I contend that his novels offer a critique of social differentiation along both claims to the nation and identity.

Aammton Alias uses Anglophone literary space to write back to a colonial empire and respond to neocolonial authorities' demarcations of an exclusive center set up as a national model of identity. The author advocates for underrepresented cultural identities by paying attention to non-indigenous (non-Malay) groups who are subjected to assimilation in the nation-state. Furthermore, his novels address alternative meanings of Malay identity informed not so much by materialist culture, as much as folkloric beliefs that transcend national boundaries across the Malay world. My study focuses on *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent*, his debut novel, which espouses an inclusive view of Bruneian identity in its portrayal of a common humanist desire shared by its characters in Brunei—a nation metonymically represented by Bumi (Earth). Set in no specific year, the novel traces these characters' contact with non-bumi Bunians who belong to an ethereal world. In the alienated figures of Bunian ghosts from an alternate Malay world, a neocolonial brand of orientalism is delineated as this novel significantly warns against perpetuating the colonial ideology of "self versus other" within an independent nation-state.

Reading Bruneian Fiction: Postcolonialism and Contemporary Speculative Fiction

Using a postcolonial lens, I read the contemporary SF novel by Aammton Alias as a literary text articulating the anxieties of othering. With John Rieder and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. stating that SF is fundamentally a product of colonialism, it would be a gross blunder to fail to highlight the colonial reiterations and subsequent resistive forms within *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent*. With a critical discussion of *LB* using this approach, it is hoped that this article will make scholarly contributions to both postcolonial studies and contemporary speculative fiction. Chua Beng Huat explains that “Southeast Asia, one of the most colonized regions in the world, is conspicuously absent in the expanding archive of Postcolonial Studies” (231). As this novel is part of the wider corpus of Southeast Asian writings in English, a critical analysis of *LB* at the intersection of postcolonial fiction and speculative fiction facilitates understanding of the metonymic symbols encoded into this dystopian/utopian SF that is set in Brunei. Added to this discursive frame of colonialism, the historical/materialist progress is examined in the novel’s portrayal of social conflict along race differentials, represented by human and Bunian characters within the nation.

This section provides an explanation of my use of postcolonialism, before discussing the intersections between postcolonial theory and Southeast Asian studies, and the dual signifiers of race and nation in speculative fiction. In line with Hopkinson and Mehan’s definition of postcolonialism, I employ this term in its broad sense. Postcolonialism, thus, refers to a study of previously colonised people, also referred to as the “colonizee” (Hopkinson and Mehan 9), and of “survivors—or descendants of survivors—of sustained, racial colonial process; the members of cultures of resistance to colonial oppression; the members of minority cultures which are essentially colonized nations within a larger nation” (Hopkinson and Mehan 269). In this way, postcolonial SF may be considered the exclusive realm of non-white writers. With its historical past as a British protectorate, Brunei embraces a postcolonial identity due to having been subjected to the Western colonial gaze. At present, the formation of minority cultures as a result of the dominant Malay Muslim identity also instantiates marginalized communities existing within the nation’s body politic. The survival of minorities with respect to this racial colonial process is thus explored in Aammton Alias’ SF novel, as *LB* addresses this additional aspect of postcolonialism.

Postcolonial Theories and Southeast Asian Literary Studies

In reading *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent*, I draw on Edward Said's theory of orientalism and Homi Bhabha's double concepts of hybridity and mimicry to analyse the novel's subversive acts against the binary discourse of self/other. In addition to postcolonial discourse, I tap into a sustained materialist ideology of progress to trace a new modernity in the novel's motif of indigenous revival, which deconstructs the West as the centre and "produces a historylessness" (Bhabha, *Location* 57). In this way, "freedom is not about the oppressed people making history by becoming its agent, but about them serving to deconstruct historical causality itself by their unrepresentable otherness" (Mizutani 41). My discussion on ghostly representations of Bunians in the analysis proper will shed more light on this point.

Through the orientalist lens, otherness is a signifier of racial and cultural differences measured against the West, which has established itself as the self through colonial conquests. As Said states, "Orientalism is an exercise of cultural strength" (48). Furthermore, Said conceptualizes "Orientalism as a form of thought for dealing with the foreign" to "polarize the distinctions [between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority] and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies" (54). As a means to justify British colonial processes in their expansion of Empire, Orientalism historically served as a discourse to deny the subjective identity and cultures of indigenous people who were violently subordinated by a European colonial authority seeking to gain political and capitalist advantage.

It follows that Southeast Asian postcolonial fiction responds to this racial differentiation of identity, which is underscored in the othering of (non-)indigenous cultures that are deemed unworthy of, and at once defying, representation. In a bid to untangle the binary of the superior self and inferior other, writers have turned to fiction as an avenue to challenge orientalist frames of thought. Employing "the master's tools to dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 16), authors from postcolonial nations have taken to fiction writing in English to expose this colonial gaze that persists into the neocolonial period. For instance, the first Bruneian Anglophone novel, Selamat Munap's *The Wild Men of the East* (2009), plainly demonstrates this discourse of social differentiation. As the title suggests, it simultaneously draws on a European legend of wild men, who are mythical forest figures, and appropriates them into characters belonging to the East.

Aammton Alias' *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent* adopts a similar theme through its characterization of mythical forest figures, but this time originating from Malay cultural folklore that carries relevance in a transnational space of Malay nations in Southeast Asia. As a piece of fictional work that also explores the relationship with nationalism, Malay indigenous beliefs serve as a symbolic counter-response to a previous silencing by a Western/Occidental power. Considering that “[hybridity] is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (Bhabha, “Signs” 154), this process is evident in the novel’s rejecting of essentialist identities. Coupled with hybridity, *LB* thus delineates the ambivalence of colonial mimicry, which may be defined as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, *Location* 86), which is epitomized by Bunian characters who adeptly take on the humanoid form.

In “Postcolonial Literature in Southeast Asia,” Rajeev Patke points out that “there is something claustrophobic about a good deal of the fiction from Malaysia and Singapore: the very helplessness of the authors to change what they so obsessively note and annotate about the real or perceived ills their nations are prone to” (378). I would argue that Aammton Alias’ novel portrays the limitations of national identity while exposing a persistent colonial ideology that sustains a dualistic structure of society, but with Malay characters demonizing others (Bunians) and, in turn, Bunians reciprocating by othering their human counterparts. Even as this cyclical process of othering may seem closed-ended, hybridity and mimicry are interwoven into the novel to serve as discursive opportunities for resistance and test thresholds of change. Such implicit cries of resistance characterize *LB*, which uses speculative fiction as a platform to call for a non-dualistic outlook on humanity to overturn persistent processes of othering within the nation’s social fabric.

Race and Nation in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

Othering along the lines of racial and cultural differences has been a dominant theme in contemporary SF narratives. Writing on SF and fantasy novels, Dunja Mohr states that dystopian fictions “explore the pathology of our society’s racism taken to extremes, [through] the colonial attitudes of the Western world” (15). In this respect, race is represented as a divisive subject resulting in “extreme dualism” (Moylan 13). Furthermore, Tom Moylan notes that contemporary SF provides “a space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference

and multiplicity” (190). This reminds us of Said’s concept of Orientalism that is premised on racial difference, yet Moylan’s “difference” cautiously dismantles the dichotomy of a Western self and Eastern other. In addition, the multiplicity that is evoked here resonates with Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and mimicry, which function as tools of resistance within the postcolonial nation.

Within SF literary scholarship, transgression is commonly discussed as a process that “subverts meanings derived from binarism – in the language of binary logic, meaning is referential and to define the dominant term requires a subordinate other – and emerges from the interstices of feminist, postmodern, and poststructuralist discourses” (Mohr 10). Here, I would argue that postcolonial discourse is likewise vital to subverting binarism. Dunja Mohr’s main argument that “postmodern dystopias initially present a dystopian world, and then move on to a point of transition where we catch glimpses of the historical processes that lead from dystopia to utopia” (9) is helpful when considering *LB*’s rejection of generic distinctions between white Western superiority and non-white Eastern inferiority, which is drawn out as a conflict that is situated beyond a colonial historicity as it persists into the present day. Transgressing limits of indigenous identity, *LB* also imagines a utopian world that accommodates technological innovation of indigenous groups previously denied a role in the nation, thus debunking the Western myth of techno-orientalism.

Furthermore, Eve Darian-Smith’s “Decolonising Utopia” articulates a call to reclaim indigeneity and colonized perspectives as part of today’s utopian imaginaries. In addition, if a “utopian subtext is interwoven as a continuous narrative strand within the dystopian narrative while the collapse of generic boundaries essentially produces hybridized ‘utopian dystopias,’” (9) then the project of decolonizing utopia becomes even more urgent in dystopian texts. Coupled with subverting binarism, a reclamation of previously silenced identities can be traced in dystopian SF narratives even as they foreground a continued oppression. In this vein, *LB* displays non-Malay and alternative Bunian presences, and seeks to explore utopian imaginaries where peace prevails.

The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent as Postcolonial Speculative Fiction

In this section, I first examine the author’s socio-cultural background and provide a brief overview of his novel. I then proceed with my analysis of *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent*, but not without discussing the significance of Ingei as the eponymous venue. Ingei is the location to which

warring factions each lay claim as their home. Thus, it features as a contested physical, mental and social space to demonstrate ideas of domination that remain active during the neocolonial period.

A Bruneian Author

As a Bruneian Malay with Scottish-Irish roots, Aamnton Alias does not fit neatly into the category of a postcolonial author, but he certainly writes from the position of the outsider. There are three ways in which he exemplifies an othered status. Firstly, he uses English over the national language as his written medium, which establishes a peripheral position for his works in the context of Malay socio-political-cultural dominance in Brunei. Secondly, he resorts to online publishing platforms rather than local press houses when “marketing the margins”, to use Graham Huggan’s phrase. Thirdly, his identification of himself as “a writer, a poet warrior” (Alias, *LB*, About the Author) lies outside his clinical profession as a medical doctor, within which he refuses to be bounded. Consequently, positionalities from without, rather than within, are discussed in relation to the novel’s dystopian impulses, which offer a critique of self/other and human/*hantu* dichotomies, as these become superseded by hybrid and utopian representations of identity.

A Bruneian Novel

I begin with the novel’s physical setting and characters, then briefly address its plot and structure. In the novel, locales are prominent as they are iterated in all sixty-four narrations by fifteen different narrators. Earthside action occurs within the national borders of Brunei, even as its actual name is elided. Readers are presented with specific geographical markers and Bruneian place-names, such as the Jerudong fish market, Melilas, Sukang and Labi. Physical settings mainly subsume rural areas within interior forests, which is a nod to Brunei’s green coverage spanning 81% of its total land area (CBD 4th National Report). An urban exception is the capital city – “Location: The Water Village, The Capital” (Alias, *LB* 118), which is a famous landmark in Brunei. To this day, the Water Village (*Kampong Ayer*) holds a reputation as the world’s largest settlement on stilts; it is situated in the capital, *Bandar Seri Begawan* (Wong and Tham).

Human characters living on Brunei’s bumi are diversely represented in *LB*. While Malays comprise the dominant race, non-indigenous Ibans and Penans are prominently featured. Adib is a local Malay student who is writing up his PhD thesis on protecting the “Sungai Ingei Forest”

(Alias, *KB* 43). Nurul, a local Malay, serves as a rural medical doctor and is also an environmental conservationist. Meanwhile, John is described as a “local Englishman who is more familiar with the local scuba-diving sites than most locals, but somehow had gotten himself involved with the group’s endangered wildlife protection activities” (Alias, *LB* 54), which brings him into contact with the former two characters. Collectively, this trio joins an expedition into Sungai Ingei Forest Reserve led by Professor Simon Muller (Alias, *LB* 212). In Ingei, they meet Manis, an Iban girl, who is the sole survivor of an attack on her family by “hidden spirits that live in the jungle” (Alias, *LB* 228). A mute Penan issuing a “Penan reminder” to Nurul also serves as a channel to help fend off “faceless demons” (Alias, *LB* 260) from a Bunian world who set up their last bastion in Ingei.

Non-human counterparts exist in the Bunians, or ghosts, dwelling in a parallel universe in the Ingei jungle. These forest folk people are typically invisible to humans. In the novel, they are divided into two races, the Hilagaans and Azzahans who have been warring for a protracted time—“There were two cities in this world, Azzah and Hilaga. There was always a war between the two cities, struggling for territory” (Alias, *LB* 330). The Hilagaans are more intelligent as they have “tricked” (Alias, *LB* 331) the Azzahans and absorbed both cities into one nation, which is governed by a Hilagaan Supreme Council with patrol guards securing its new borders. With complete charge of a transportation portal that links them to the human world, they are also more technologically advanced and scientifically knowledgeable than both the Azzahans and humans. Lord Jahat, who leads a Hilagaan nationalist rebellion against humans to curtail man’s intrusion into the Ingei, states “I have been sending covert kill teams to protect the Ingei region in Bumi, our last bastion” (Alias, *LB* 62). His superior leadership is challenged by Jawad, who was previously a Hilagaan, but has since been moved to advocate for the Azzahans. Starting a family with an Azzahan woman against whom he previously fought, Jawad is also known as “the great powerful warrior-conjurer” (Alias, *LB* 33) who challenges the Hilagaans’ territorial progress.

The plot unfolds over four consecutive days in December, as this timeline organizes the novel’s structure. The novel’s sections are named after Malay numerical equivalents – “SATU” introduces the escalating conflict between earthly inhabitants and the Hilagaans, “DUA” highlights an ambush attack on Manis’ Iban family during their hike into the Ingei jungle to pay respects to their grandfather and great-grandfather who are buried there, “TIGA” describes the demonic Hilagaan ghosts’ launching of another violent assault on Adib’s expedition team into Ingei, and

“EMPAT” illustrates friendly human-ghost relations that illuminate hybridity as a subversive tool to counteract the colonial gaze and also challenge other forms of social oppression and conflict.

Ingei—An Embattled Territory in Brunei

Situated in the recesses of the southern point of the Belait district, the Sungai Ingei Fauna Biodiversity site stretches over 18,000 hectares and has garnered prominent attention in Brunei. Lying across the administrative regions of Mukim Melilas, Mukim Sukang, and Mukim Labi, the Ingei forest within this rural part of Ulu Belait has attracted the attention of local conservationists and international organizations, such as the World Wildlife Fund, in collective efforts to protect its endangered species. Brunei’s Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism reports that, “The Sungai Ingei Faunal Survey Expedition commenced in July 2010 in the Sungai Ingei Protection Forest in the Belait District with the aim of documenting the wildlife of the area for science and to provide a basis for conservation management” (MPRT, 2011). To counteract the formidable threat of poachers and loggers in this area, a successive project was launched there in 2014. This second phase was incorporated into the 10th National Development Plan and exclusively funded by His Majesty’s Government as part of the “Heart of Borneo” conservation initiative.

My analysis proper will focus on events that result in, and develop from, a territorial battle over Ingei. I examine the ideological conflicts played out in polarizing representations of self and other, which eventually lead to territorial battles that violently engage all the characters of the novel. As I will demonstrate, the similarities between humans and *hantus* of Ingei are recognized by both parties, but quickly dismissed in their pursuit of the colonial gaze and materialist ideology of progress. Conversely, elements of shared humanity between the Hilagaans and Azzahans enable a reading of their “hybrid” connections. With *LB* also featuring non-indigenous Ibans and Penans, an inclusive rather than nationalistic Bruneian identity is, therefore, accentuated in the novel.

The Orientalist Lens in the Colonial Gaze: Dystopic Violent Othering

The colonial gaze that separates the familiar self and foreign other is played out and challenged in the characters of Jawad and Lord Jahat, who leads Master Selym, an ancient Bunian. Jawad is an Arabic name denoting generosity and mercy as it is linked to Nabi Muhammad, the Islamic prophet. In contrast, “Lord Jahat” (Alias, *LB* 93) means an evil chief, a name procured through his

proposal of the “Kill Man” mission (Alias, *LB* 64) that Selym fronts. In *the Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent*, these leaders take on opposing camps as war rages within their Ingei homeland in the Bunian world. However, these characters also reject what Abdul Jan Mohamed has identified as the “economy of Manichean allegory” (59). Both protagonist and antagonist, here, feature as non-white colonizees embodying dualistic oppositions, yet they are also depicted as both self and other at various moments that display their synchronous representations. Instead of one-dimensional oriental villains, the novel portrays Selym as suffering from a guilty human conscience (“hallucinations,” Alias *LB* 198) while Jawad, a Hilagaan, is no longer othered by the Azzahans. As one of Jawad’s sons explains, “My father’s actually from Hilaga. He’s a great powerful warrior-conjurer, until he met and fought with my mom. [...] they met each other several times on the battlefield as sworn enemies” (Alias, *LB* 330). Jawad finally stops fighting with this Azzahan woman upon discovering that they have “more in common” (Alias, *LB* 330) and sign a peace treaty – the Amanah (or Trust) (Alias, *LB* 331) that aligns these warring factions and brings about a temporary cessation to the violence of othering.

Even as racial dichotomies persist between the Hilagaans and Azzahans, these warring oppositions share an ability to shape-shift into the image of humans. Such parallels between themselves and others on Bumi serve as an attempt at, as Said articulates, “advanc[ing] a little in the process of what Raymond Williams has called the ‘unlearning’ of an inherent dominative mode” (28). The Bunians, even though inherently ethereal, acquire “a more human form” (Alias, *LB* 47) in their own world. In their humanoid forms, these ghosts appear “like the humans” (Alias, *LB* 47), and by their own admission, this resemblance stretches beyond the physical outlook – “our achievements mirror that of man, we build cities just like them, our people have jobs and have a society of structure, except in times of war. And like Man, we too have wars” (Alias, *LB* 47). However, on earth, they lose their human semblance to appear as shadows or “karins” (Alias, *LB* 100) and “faceless demons” (Alias, *LB* 260). On Bumi, Bunians and Man thus regard each other through a process of alienation where each dehumanizes the other. In the conquest of Ingei, the Hilagaans appropriate the colonial gaze by casting themselves as authoritative over humans: “It is our Bumi, not Man’s – their arrival to this world destroyed our civilisation” (Alias, *LB* 61). Here, the discourse of “them versus us” becomes evident as Lord Jahat rallies the Hilagaans to the cause of destroying mankind and conquering Bumi-an others, thus promoting violence.

The nation is split according to territorial claims and racial divisions, which are heightened by a colonial prism of binarism that maintains the Hilagaans' hegemonic power. When claiming, "We were here first, this is our world, both Bumi and Hilaga, it is one existence" (Alias, *LB* 61), the Hilagaans demonstrate their orientalizing of humans to justify an expansion of Hilaga to subsume the earthly nation. Having previously absorbed "*the last villages of Azzah city*" (Alias, *LB* 332, original emphasis) into one nation during a "war of peace" (Alias, *LB* 332), the Hilagaans assert a tactical superiority over the Azzahans too. From this perspective, Hilaga epitomizes a postcolony with excessive nationalism creating a new structure of oppression embodied by Hilagaan aggressions against humans and the Azzahans. Recalling a caveat of neocolonial power that emerges in newly independent nations (Fanon, "Pitfalls" 162), the Hilagaans push back against Man's colonial gaze and colonial domination: "We have lost almost everything. Everything. We have given up our lands to Man, we have given up our mountains to Man, we have given up our hills to Man, and we have given up our rivers to Man" (Alias, *LB* 61). Lamenting on their dispossession of Ingei, Lord Jahat evokes Man's colonial rule as "violence in its natural state" (Fanon, "Concerning" 61) since, as he succinctly articulates, "Man takes and destroys" (Alias, *LB* 61). Man's divide-and-conquer rule dismantles a precolonial "one existence" between Bumi, reserved by Man, and the Bunian world that is relegated to the Hilagaans and Azzahans. Engaging in dystopian acts of territorial occupation, the Hilagaans also participate in Man's violent terrorism and endorse identity binarism to separate themselves from the others residing on Bumi. Precisely because of their dystopian acts of neo-colonialism, they imagine a utopian peace upon expressing "a desire for a reformed Other" (Bhabha, *Location* 86), which I elaborate in the next section.

Hybridity in Human-*Hantu* Relations and Mimicry as Resistance

Denoting "cultural differences [that] are interactive and refractive" rather than "taxonomical" (Bhabha quoted in Rutherford 221), hybrid slippages between humans and *hantus* (ghosts) are instantiated through the humans' interactions with Jawad's sons, Eeqil and Eedi. In "Signs Taken for Wonders", Homi Bhabha writes "Hybridity reverses the *formal* process of disavowal so that the violent dislocation, the *Entstellung* of the act of colonization becomes the *conditionality* of colonial discourse" (156, original emphasis). In this sense, hybridity diminishes the presence of a colonial authority to a point where it becomes indistinguishable, such as in Adib and his friends'

encounter with Jawad's family at the borderlands of their *intercultural* contact. By defining hybridity through a "third space," Bhabha goes on to explain that "hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (quoted in Rutherford 211) through which "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" ("Cultural Diversity" 157). Thus, hybridity challenges facile binary oppositions, while rejecting a linear progress of (Western) history to inscribe a spatial plurality dispelling a "fixed horizontal nation-space" (Bhabha, *Location* 142). In *LB*, nowhere is the temporal dimension of imperial progress challenged more, than in the revelation of a linear disruption signaled by the age disparities of Eeqil and Eedi, who are described as "fair-skinned young boys, with large dark eyes and mild facial hair" (Alias, *LB*, 323) by Adib's expedition team whom Jawad saves from an embattled Ingei. Transported into a Bunian world, Adib, Nurul, John and Manis discover that Eedi, who appears to be "12 years old" (Alias, *LB* 323), is actually "125 years old" (Alias, *LB* 326) and Eeqil, who "looks like he's 6 years old," (Alias, *LB* 325) celebrates his seventieth birthday on the day they encounter both the Azzahan brothers. As Adib exclaims, "Happy Birthday Eeqil! I can't believe you are 70 years old!" (Alias, *LB* 328). Despite the non-linear time within the Bunian nation-space, humans and *hantus* reach a point where they decide "to trust" (Alias, *LB* 326) each other even though they have established racial differences between themselves. The artificiality of these racial distinctions is exposed in the description of their common skin. Prompted by their physical likeness, both parties commit to an "Amanah" (Alias, *LB* 331) treaty that deconstructs a binary between "human [self]" (*LB* 328) and *hantu* others. Trust that is signed off here dismantles dichotomized representations of identity, which are replaced by images of themselves as kindred spirits who both seek "safe[ty]" (Alias, *LB* 326), familial "love" (Alias, *LB* 331) and respite in "soft bed[s]" (Alias, *LB* 333). Here, the colonial authority of Man implodes on itself as it confronts "a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" (Bhabha, "Signs" 155) through encounters with Jawad's Azzahan family, which invites a syncretic view of racial, cultural and national identity. Considering that "hybridity helps the postcolonial critic to upset the discourse of imperialism that would otherwise remain 'unmixed', uninfluenced by anything other than itself" (Mizutani 4), it becomes evident that interactions between the humans and Azzahans undo differences established along a racial spectrum to open up a cultural continuum that jettisons the bifurcated colonial discourse within the nation's space.

Furthermore, mimicry as a form of resistance to discursive structures of colonial power takes on an additional layer of meaning compared to hybridity, which signals cultural syncretism. While hybridity is a “discourse [that] desires, dreams, and does the work of colonialism while also ensuring its demise” (McClintock 64), Bhabha’s concept of mimicry involves concrete actors who embody “a reformed Other [or] a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, *Location* 86). In *LB*, Adib’s karin is a “mimic man” who is the “impossible object” that serves as “a *metonymy of presence*” (Bhabha, *Location* 90), that is to say his identity is denied from the start since he “camouflages” (Bhabha, *Location* 91) himself as human. In the chapter “Karin: Love. Location: Adib’s house, Bumi,” two karins talk over a sleeping Adib. The “Karin [named Satu] who is always by Adib’s side” (Alias, *LB* 100) receives a visit from his karin brother as they reflect on the fact that “[Adib] was once our enemy. Our lives had been about watching him” (*LB* 102). Serving as “double visions” (Bhabha, *Location* 88), these karins “produce a historylessness: a ‘culture’ of theory that makes it impossible to give meaning to historical specificity” (Bhabha, *Location* 41), thereby disrupting man’s authority by overturning his position as the historical observer who holds the colonial gaze. No longer the observed, these karins regard themselves in relation to man, who they emulate as they “love him [Adib] more than ourselves” (Alias, *LB* 102). As the karin brother turns to look at Satu, he defines them both apropos Adib—“Another me, another Adib. No, another Karin. We are shadows of the same man. Doppelgangers” (Alias, *LB* 100). When Satu jokes that his brother will be known as “Scarface” for sustaining facial wounds from having fought Selym, the latter opines that “the face is the most important thing for any being, whether it is for humans, my kind and animals” (Alias, *LB* 101). The karins’ similar facial countenance to Adib functions as a signifier of their imitative representation of man that emphasizes their modelling of themselves after the “same [face], but not quite” (Bhabha, *Location* 86). It follows that their “unrepresentable [otherness]” (Bhabha, *Location* 217) is veiled in their subversive mimicry of man. Here, the karins “disclos[e] the ambivalence of colonial discourse [to] disrupt its authority” (Bhabha, *Location* 88) as Adib is revealed to be a “fragile human” (Alias, *LB* 102), who is no longer “the puppet master” (Alias, *LB* 102) in “control” because of new and powerful “chains” (Alias, *LB* 102) laid down by the technologically advanced Bunians.

Indigenous Revival: Bunians Troping Folklore Culture and Disputing Techno-Orientalism

A revival of Malay indigenous culture is signaled in the characterization of Bunian ghosts, who are unseen by humans while acting as “chains trying to control the [Bumi] world” (Alias, *LB* 102). In this section, I shall deal with the significance of the rise of Malay cultural folklore that highlights the “spiritual domain” (Chatterjee 3) of a Malay postcolonial nation, before moving on to discuss indigenous technological advancement that highlights the “material domain” (Chatterjee 3). Through Alias’ novel’s investments in these domains, the Bruneian nation may be conceptualised beyond the official discourses of a distinctive Malay dominant identity. I analyse the substantial characterization of the Bunians, Malay folkloric figures which inhabit many nations across the Malay world; I also examine the Hilagaans’ technological advantage over Man to undermine the use of an orientalist lens. Thus, I demonstrate that a nation’s fixed boundaries of identity premised on binarism, which lead to exclusion and retrograde humanism, become untenable.

When contending that the “spiritual sphere of the colonial world” is the first “domain of sovereignty” before “a political battle over a material domain,” Partha Chatterjee points to the value of “an inner domain which marks cultural identity [and] colonial distinctness” (3). In this view, an inner domain does vital work for the sovereign state of a nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 6). With Bunians as part of an indigenous Malay folklore tradition, they are integral to the oral tradition within a Malay nation and larger Malay world. Bunians may be referred to as “elves” (Radzi et. al 194; Yahya 25), but their “human features and social life” (Amin et al. 37) justify descriptions of them as *orang*. Viewed as “ghosts,” their “main occupation is to annoy humans” by making “frightening noises” (Fanany 22-23), and to “kidnap people” (Prasetyo et al. 628) who trespass into their forest dwellings on Borneo island (Aris 192). Believed to be descended from *jinns*, specifically Muslim *jinns* (Nicholas 26), they are thus associated with the Malay-Muslim world across Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Linked to Malay identity through folkloric strands, Bunian *hantus* are an informal and non-material part of Malay culture that are excluded from official discourses of identity in the Malay world in (post)colonial Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, the material domain of progress is emphasized, as Bunians are portrayed as technologically superior to their human counterparts. As the novel clarifies, “the humans have inferior technology” (Alias, *LB* 314) compared to the Hilagaans. In this vein, the presence of Bunians serves to dispute, even as it articulates, the claim of techno-orientalism. In other words,

Hilaga's technological advancement does not suggest "a collusive, futurized Asia" (Roh et al. 7), but rather "in articulating its own futurity, a disavowal of the racism of techno-Orientalism" (Bahng 165) takes place. Even though the novel incorporates techno-orientalist features, such as the Hilagaans' violence and dehumanization against Man ["the scourge of Man" (Alias, *LB* 48)], their technological knowledge does not undercut their humanist traits. In controlling a MATA portal (Alias, *LB* 48) that facilitates spatial travel across the temporally disparate worlds of Bumi and Bunian, the Hilagaans challenge the statement that "Even as these Alien/Asians conduct themselves with superb technological efficiency and capitalist expertise, their affectual absence resonates as an undeveloped or, worse still, a retrograde humanism" (Sohn 8). Challenging the view of these *hantus* as "techno-oriental [others]" (Morley and Robins 6) with non-emotive and robotic tendencies, Selym is neither "cold, impersonal [nor] machine-like" (Morley and Robins 169). He is capable of emotional sensitivity (Alias, *LB* 185; *LB* 198) and rationalizes his "murder" of humans as a service to Hilaga or, in his words, acting as a "hero to my people" (Alias, *LB* 198).

(Non-)Indigenous Revival: An Iban's Survival and Penan's Breaking of Silence

The significant foregrounding of Brunei's non-indigenous groups of Ibans and Penans signal an attempt to redress the imbalance within a national identity that has resulted in their identity erasures. Detailing the destruction of her Iban family in Ingei by Bunians, Manis' narration appears in three out of the four sections in the novel. In addition, Penans are visibly represented by Johari, a guide who leads Adib's expedition into Ingei. He has asked Nurul to treat his mute grandfather, who is also a Penan. As "members of minority cultures which are essentially colonized nations within a larger nation" (Hopkinson and Mehan 269), Ibans and Penans are excluded from the dominant Malay identity in sovereign Brunei. Even so, Manis is not hesitant to assert her Iban identity when asking, "If we do not live our lives as Iban then who will?" (Alias, *LB* 124). She desires a utopian peace and harmony within her family, since her uncle has converted into Islam (Alias, *LB* 123), which clashes with their "*Iban* 'Adat'" (Alias, *LB* 124). With a desire for cohesion, Manis regards the encroachment of a dominant Malay Muslim Adat or "way of life" (Alias, *LB* 124) not so much as a threat, but as an opportunity to forge cultural syncretism. As she explains, "I too want to join the same faith as my uncle, and yet I have no intent on abandoning my father to be the last that holds on to our *Iban* 'Adat'" (Alias, *LB* 124). Manis' mother's last words

implores her to “live for the rest of us” (Alias, *LB* 172), signal not only encouragement for Manis to go on with her life in the face of destruction and elimination, but also uphold the value of her Iban identity. Coupled with her stubborn act of survival, Manis’ affirmation that “I am a modern-day Iban, the head-hunter tribe of Borneo” (Alias, *LB* 124) marks a crucial moment that signals the revival of non-indigenous Iban identity.

The process of colonial racialization is sustained in the production of strangers within not only strange lands, but also the communal home of the sovereign nation. When Manis arrives with Adib, Nurul, and John at the house of “the Bunian family of Jawad’s” (Alias, *LB* 342), she ruminates, “I rest on this soft, soft bed in a strange house, in a strange land, surrounded by human and Bunian strangers who are now friends” (Alias, *LB* 342). This metaphor of “strangers” in a “strange land” evokes Jessica Langer’s contention of two signifiers shared by science fiction and postcolonialism (8). Here, “strangers” denote an unfamiliar body and racialized other. “Strange land” signifies the Bunians’ alternative world, while also denoting physically colonized spaces since Jawad’s house is situated in Hilagaan-occupied Azzah. Despite this discourse of strangers in strange lands, Manis, the (Malay) humans and the Bunians share experiences as “survivors – or descendants of survivors – of sustained, racial colonial process” (Hopkinson and Mehan 269). Manis survives the attack on her Iban family by Bunians (Alias, *LB* 168). Adib and his expedition members survive an ambush by Hilagaan “loud cackl[ers]” (Alias, *LB* 253) in Ingei. Jawad and his Azzahan family survive “a war of peace” in which “[the Azzahans] are killed slowly, as their way of life and freedom are taken away from them whilst they are unaware of it” (Alias, *LB* 332). Thus, in actuality, there are more commonalities than differences between these strangers. In attempts to decolonize Ingei from Man, Hilagaans assert their superiority over all three parties—the Ibans, Malays and Azzahans. That they eventually become friends underscores an earlier message from Selym’s father to Selym himself. As Lord Ramesh explains, “Our [Hilagaan] people and people of Azzah. And even Man – we all actually want to live in peace. That is the key to happiness” (Alias, *LB* 186). The novel’s message of decolonization is, hence, served by a utopian impulse for peace to offset processes of othering that deleteriously create strangers in strange lands of a nation.

In another instance of non-indigenous revival, a restoration of a Penan’s voice saves Nurul. This saving act serves as a reminder of the integral role of non-indigenous groups within

the nation, thus calling for the social inclusion of Penans. As the Bunians launch their mission to kill Man, Nurul recalls the spoken advice of Johari's grandfather who has been mute for twenty years. In her imagined verbal exchange with this Penan "octogenarian" (Alias, *LB* 151), Nurul hears him break his silence to offer "the Penan reminder" (Alias, *LB* 288)— "You were born from water, and it is water that will save you" (Alias, *LB* 151). Even though "[h]is lips did not move and I heard a voice in my head, which I assumed was his" (Alias, *LB* 152), Nurul acknowledges his voice. Recollecting his utterance while besieged by Bunian *hantus* in Ingei, she follows his advice and seeks refuge behind waters to fend off her Hilagaan attackers. It is significant that, at this time of distress, she listens to the silenced voice of an often silent Penan. Furthermore, when delivering his life-saving Penan reminder, he significantly engages in a vocal activity that is accompanied by a physical response as he actively grabs Nurul's hand. His bodily action suggests a physical reawakening that, with his voice recovery, signals a reclamation of Penan identity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to use a postcolonial lens to inform my reading of Anglophone Bruneian speculative fiction. Insofar as science fiction is a useful genre for postcolonial writers to engage with in the literary project of decolonization, Aammton Alias's *The Last Bastion of Ingei: Imminent* is a literary tour de force that reveals deep anxieties within the postcolonial nation vis-à-vis the process of violent othering, which results in a muting of indigenous and non-indigenous culture that may not be intentional processes but are, nonetheless, a product of progress. Using science fiction's double lines of inquiry within the Orientalist colonial gaze and ideology of progress, I have thus addressed the discursive and materialist domains of (post)colonialism as instantiated within this novel. Notwithstanding the motif of violence displayed in physical battles fought over Ingei, a new kind of modernity is conveyed in intricate messages of inclusive identities buttressed by a humanistic philosophy. Through the characters' utopian aspirations for peace, both commonality and communality within friendships are forged while racial differences are blurred. With the end of the era of Western colonialism, nationalist rebellions and further responses to decolonization in the discourse of hybridity and act of mimicry pave new futurities in Southeast Asian nations. As this novel instantiates, efforts to relate with non-indigenous Ibans and Penans and additional alliances built with non-nationals signified by Bunians, reflect significant cultural

and racial reconciliation. In sum, Aamnton Alias' novel challenges Orientalism's dualistic prism that sharply demarcates the boundaries between foreign other and familiar self. In fact, as Alias' fiction illustrates, the self may be found within indigenous humans, non-indigenous Ibans and Penans, and the Hilagaans and Azzahans of the Bunian world. Manis' reflection on human-*hantu* friendships, a father's articulation of a communal desire for peaceful unity, and Nurul's taking heed of a Penan reminder collectively upend the reductive binary lens adopted by colonial and neocolonial powers. Ultimately, this SF novel rejects a dystopian world of conflict and articulates a humanistic desire for peace, in its imperative call to suture social and racial divisions in the nation's family.

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