

## Cultural Diversity: Exploring Eco-Cultural Memories in Hilary Tham's *Tin Mines and Concubines*

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**Abstract.** Motivated by the theme of cultural diversity in Hilary Tham's *Tin Mines and Concubines* (2005), a Malaysian fiction that depicts various family stories of multiethnic Malaysians in the 1960s, this article examines the ways in which the author draws on her cultural memories of Malaysian society through the lens of ecocriticism. While cultural memories convey the memories embedded in physical monuments, eco-cultural memories signify memories implanted in ecological substances. Eco-cultural memories entwine both natural and cultural aspects and are essential to the subject of ecocriticism, which emphasises human-non-human links. The research sheds light on Malaysia's varied cultures by examining cultural memories incorporating animal, plant and culinary aspects. Tham's perceptions of cultural variety vary according to ethnic origins, cultural upbringing, belief systems, social classes, cultural practices and experiences. In general, examining Tham's eco-cultural recollections about bodily functions, weddings, superstitions, cultural alienation and social class reveals how the organic relationship between the animal, food and plant components fosters intercultural consciousness and interracial mutual understanding and misunderstanding in Malaysian society.

**Keywords and phrases:** cultural diversity, cultural memories, ecocriticism, Hilary Tham, Malaysian fiction

## Introduction

Each multicultural country has its own unique strategy for handling cultural diversity. As Noraini and Esmaeil (2017) noted, multiculturalism in Malaysia is used as an umbrella term to refer to all forms of ethnocultural diversity, in contrast to some foreign countries such as Canada and Australia, which use the term exclusively to refer to immigrants and Latin America which associates multiculturalism with indigenous groups. The authors emphasised that Malaysia's primary goal in establishing a multicultural nation is to maintain national unity, allowing many ethnic communities to coexist in one society while retaining their unique identities. Malaysia is a heterogeneous country with 32.7 million people as of 2021, with the primary ethnic groups being *bumiputera* (Malays and other indigenous people) making up 69.8%, 22.4% Chinese, 6.8% Indians and 1% others (Mohd Uzir 2021). In general, a multicultural society is composed of many ethnic groups with varying cultural practices, religions, belief systems, historical contexts, values and languages. According to Raihanah M.M. (2009), multiculturalism entails managing and appreciating variety in all its manifestations, including race, culture, gender and religion. A multicultural society's variety emphasises human commonalities while acknowledging and respecting others' differences. All ethnic groups coexist in a cosmopolitan society that shares a Malaysian identity but maintains distinct cultural traditions. While Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups coexist in a multicultural society, each group tends to socialise and operate within its own region, conducting activities and celebrating festivals together that do not entirely embrace the principles of absolute oneness. Consequently, managing variety and pluralism in a multicultural society is a significant undertaking in and of itself, as it requires controlling and tolerating differences among multi-ethnic groups. Numerous conflicting problems, both positive and negative in nature, are widespread in a multicultural community. Motivated by the theme of cultural diversity in Hilary Tham's *Tin Mines and Concubines* (2005), a Malaysian fiction that depicts various family stories of multi-ethnic Malaysians in the 1960s, this article examines the ways in which the author draws on her cultural memories of multicultural Malaysian society through the lens of ecocriticism. We will investigate how her cultural memories contribute to the construction of the dualities of culture and nature, as formed by the human mind and the environment, or the human-nature interaction in Malaysia's multicultural society.

## Literature Review

Tham's literary works convey recollections on a personal, gender, ecological and cultural level. Through the female portrayals in her works, a portion of her literary works demonstrate that she places a premium on personal liberty and selfhood. As shown by Tham's "Paper Boat" in her poetry collection *No Gods Today* (1969), Nor Faridah and Quayum (2003) asserted that the writer supports individuality and believes that a woman may attain personal pleasure only via self-support without male supervision. According to her, many women are victimised into unsatisfactory marriages that undermine their self-esteem. Additionally, while males are permitted to engage in different activities, women are subjected to cultural pressures. Tham draws attention to gender inequality and the pervasiveness of female subjugation in a patriarchal culture.

Tham is so concerned with gender issues that her literary works resonate with a feminist voice. Nor Faridah and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2002) examined Tham's memoir, *Lane with No Name* (1997), through the lens of feminism. They demonstrated how the Chinese Malaysian patriarchal family constructs strong female characters in her memoir. The cycle begins with the mother, who suffers from the husband's constant betrayal and disloyalty and is trapped in an agonisingly unhappy marriage. As a result, the mother-daughter bond is strengthened when the daughter recognises the mother's loneliness and strong survival instincts in a typical patriarchal society. Nor Faridah and Ruzy Suliza Hashim observed that the mother's character is viewed as weak and submissive from a Western feminist perspective, but good and loyal from an Eastern feminist perspective. In short, the characteristics of good women are viewed differently in Western and Eastern feminism's social contexts.

Apart from addressing gender issues, Tham's works also highlight her cultural heritage. According to Fadillah et al. (2004), Tham situates most of her works within the rich Chinese-Malaysian cultural context of her upbringing. Her upbringing had influenced her gender and cultural experiences. Siti Aishah (2005) asserted that the Chinese women's diaspora is profoundly influenced by traditional cultural practices, as evidenced by her examination of the female psyche in Tham's memoir, *Lane with No Name* (1997). Tham's works examined the female psyche through the lenses of feminism, psychoanalysis and new historicism, employing concepts such as identity search, powerlessness, alienation, social displacement and marginalisation. The findings demonstrated that the female identity is constructed throughout life, beginning in childhood, continuing through adolescence and culminating in adulthood, with cultural upbringing playing a role in shaping the female character.

Tham's literary works also incorporate an ecological theme. To demonstrate the ecology's implicit meanings, she employs the agent of nature, which assimilates life, the environment and gender issues. Fadillah et al. (2004) noted that most of Tham's poems, such as "Sitting in Grass" and "Vocation" in her poetry anthology *No Gods Today* (1969), incorporate elements of nature that reflect her Malaysian upbringing. "Sitting in Grass" depicts a young woman's journey of self-discovery, using the *lalang* as a metaphor to demonstrate the parallel between the wilderness of the plant and the young woman's growth. *Lalang*, derived from a Malay noun, is a type of grass with razor-sharp blades capable of easily severing unwary trespassers. Meanwhile, "Vocation" employs the crow to depict humans caught between two worlds. The poem reflects the adaptability of crows and humans to new environments, as crows are considered the smartest and most adaptable of birds. By incorporating the *lalang* and crows, Tham demonstrates the domestication of her poetic landscape. Humans have always been inextricably linked to natural elements. Nonetheless, only a few of her works discuss her combined use of environmental and cultural memory elements. Thus, by merging the ecocritical theory into memory studies, this article aims to reconcile that divide.

Typically, Tham's literary works aid in restoring, reflecting, and creating memories from her past. She was a writer of Chinese Malaysian-Jewish-American background. Most of her literary works describe her Malaysian upbringing and married life in America, as well as her memories of both her native and adoptive countries. Her 2005 book of short tales, *Tin Mines and Concubines*, was set in 1960s Malaysia, which also included Singapore. The historical setting of Singapore's participation in 1960s Malaysia dates back to September 1963, when the current Federation of Malaysia was formed by the merger of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the two states on Borneo Island. However, Singapore withdrew from the federation on 9th August 1965 (Goh 2014). *Tin Mines and Concubines* is a collection of 17 stories about the lives of Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysians. It begins with the story of Mr. Tang Ah Choon, a traditional and wealthy 60-year-old Chinese Malaysian tin miner who owns Tanjong's largest tin mine, several estates and mine supply stores. For a long time, he was Tanjong's lone commercial magnate sans concubines. On his birthday, however, he surprises his wife by bringing a 16-year-old concubine named Yee Ah Ling into the family. Mrs. Tang rejects the concubine and spends her final years in anger over her husband's treachery. The other stories depict a variety of connections, including those between family members, employers and employees and neighbours. The central characters comprise various members, friends and servants of the big, prosperous and fractious Tang family. Mr. Tang, Mrs. Tang, Mr. Tang's son Henry, Henry's best friend Mani, the naive young

concubine Leng, the five gossiping grandaunts and the sly old gardener, Gopal are among them. However, Henry and Mani remain the primary characters that are prominent in this collection. Their relationship appears to exemplify the connection between the Chinese and Indian Malaysian communities. The cultural diversity associated with animals, plants and food, as represented in various interconnected stories, serves as the foundation for the consideration of eco-cultural memories.

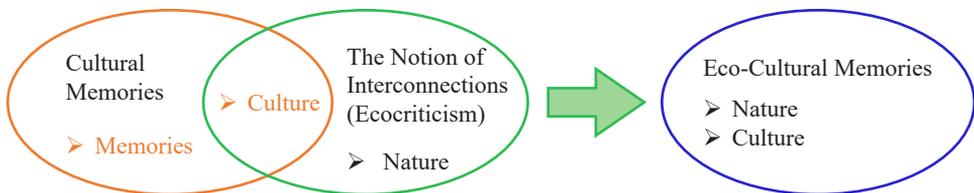
### **Ecocriticism as a Lens**

This study applies ecocriticism as a lens for exploring the cultural memories in a multicultural society. Ecocriticism engages in the integration of humans, animals and nature in literature to bridge the common thread between humans and non-humans to demonstrate in various ways that both entities can coexist. Rueckert (1996) remarked that scholars who apply ecocriticism employ ecological concepts to study and explore the insights of the literature with an environmental vision. Ecocriticism entails the interaction between literary texts and the physical environment. In addition, ecocriticism can be an instrument for connecting the elements between nature and culture. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) asserted that the notion of interconnection implies incorporating the relationship between nature and culture, humans and non-humans and the ecological landscape with literature. Generally, the notion of interconnections implies blending the study of the natural ecosystem with the human social system. This concept also meets the synchronisation between nature conservation and cultural preservation. Thus, the aspect of cultural preservation is significantly and vividly integrated into the study of cultural memory.

Assman (2008) asserted that cultural memory is a form of collective memory shared by a group of people or community, which helps shape their cultural identity. The construction of one's cultural identity comes together with his or her upbringing in the cultural community and thus the cultural memories are innately implanted within the individual. Besides that, the cultural memories that are often stored in objects and external substances, such as texts and other symbols, play a critical part in the preservation of cultures. Merck, Meymune and William (2016, 285) stated that cultural memories are preserved via the creation of "cultural formations" such as texts, rites and monuments and "institutional communications" including recitations, practices and observances. Without these memories, the essence of the cultural inheritance from past generations could not be passed down. Cultural memories permeate the consciousness of a culture's continuity and provide a vehicle for transmitting customs, rituals and group history from one group to another while sharing shared cultural values. Nonetheless, when viewing those texts and monuments

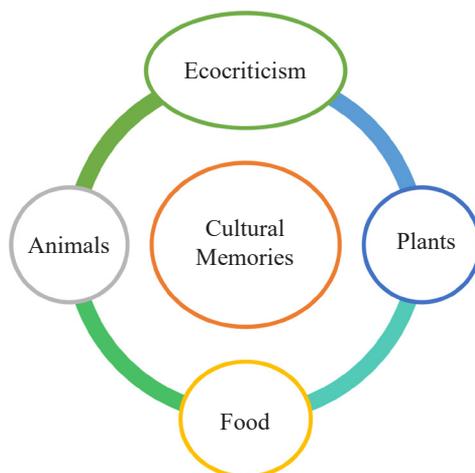
externally, they do not contain any memory. Hence, all the “figures of memory” play a stimulant role in recalling memories that are specific to a culture. While cultural memories convey the memories embedded in physical monuments, eco-cultural memories signify memories implanted in ecological substances. In this context, the ecological substances are focused explicitly on animals, plants and food derived from ecocriticism.

Eco-cultural memories are the assimilation of ecocriticism and cultural memories. Ecocriticism and cultural memories entwine both the elements of culture and nature, which are centralised in the field of ecocriticism that highlights human and non-human connections. In other words, eco-cultural memories evolve through the formation of the notion of interconnections in ecocriticism and the cultural memories that merge to share the mutuality of culture and nature. These interconnections in ecocriticism bridge the elements between nature and culture in the study of eco-cultural memories. Furthermore, these linkages also create a platform for dialogue between the natural and cultural worlds by examining cultural memory. Inevitably, the conception of interconnections in ecocriticism is compatible with the context that consolidates the core issue of culture, as shown in Figure 1 which illustrates the interrelationship between cultural memory and the notion of interconnections with the construction of eco-cultural memories.



**Figure 1.** The interrelationship between cultural memories, the notion of interconnections and eco-cultural memories

Ecocritically derived elements such as animals, plants and food are particularly useful for probing the many dimensions of cultural memory in a multi-ethnic society. Animals, plants and food are all interdependent and interwoven within our ecosystem’s cycle. For example, the idea of food organically connects the notions of animal, nature and culture, as food may originate from a variety of natural or animal sources and various societies have diverse food cultural practices. Figure 2 illustrates the combined methodology, which employs an ecocritical lens to examine cultural memory via the lens of animals, plants and food.



**Figure 2.** Methodology of eco-cultural memories

## Results and Discussion

*Tin Mines and Concubines* (2005) is a collection of short stories inspired by Tham's poetry. Multiculturalism is a recurring motif in this anthology, which realistically depicts the many cultures and customs of 1960s Malaysian society. Complicated human connections are exemplified in Malaysia's multi-ethnic families, each born with a unique destiny in life. This article is premised on a thematic analysis, which divides the cultural memories into several cultural themes that encompass animals, plants and food. The following subsections cover the cultural themes: recollections of bodily functions, superstitions, weddings, cultural alienation and social class.

### Memories of bodily functions with animals, plants and food

Every community acquires its beliefs in the power of specific plants and foods that carry the effects of revitalising bodily functions. Through Tham's cultural memories, she clearly shows the intake of many aphrodisiac foods in the Malaysian communities' cultural practices. Aphrodisiacs are associated with "the art of culinary seduction and the use of oils and perfumes" (Dell 2015, 8). They are used to boost one's sexual pleasure. Two stories in this fiction, "The Second Mrs. Tang" and "Durian Season," illustrate this practice. Three kinds of food are described as having aphrodisiac properties: durian, ginseng and rhino horn. In "Durian Season" (Tham 2005, 129), Mani accompanies his mother to buy some durians and Granny Durian, who is the durian specialist and seller, explains the benefits of durians:

Mother asked her to pick three good fruits for us. Granny flashed a smile, showing her gums and said, “All durian good. My durians all best, *lah*.” Granny Durian wrapped a rag around her hand to shield it from the thorny rind and hefted one of the olive-coloured, football shaped fruit. Deftly, she slit a triangular window in its hard skin to show the creamy yellow custard insides. We have a proverb: “*Sarongs drop when durians perfume the air*” indicating that durian season is our equivalent of the European spring fever or mating season. The durian is said to be an aphrodisiac.

Tham’s sensual depiction of durian and libido through the use of the durian’s aroma and texture establishes connections between nature, human physiological functions and society. Although the epithet “creamy yellow custard insides” refers to the fruit’s luscious flesh, durian is regarded as more than a fruit; it is a cultural emblem veiled in indigenous mythology. Granny Durian ascribes to the Malaysian adage “sarongs fall when durians perfume the air” by infusing this comment with both explicit and tacit implications. Literally, the expression refers to people dispensing their sarongs as a result of the sexual stimulation impact of durians. In a figurative sense, the durian season is the breeding season, as durians contain an aphrodisiac that increases one’s libido or sexual drive, therefore increasing the fertility of previously infertile women (Hassandarvish 2019). Another less explicit sexual implication concerns durian gatherers wearing sarongs to collect as many durians as possible when durians fall to the ground. Tham’s usage of the sarong and its associated symbolism shows the importance of the fruit to Malaysians, or durian devotees. Mani, a second-generation Indian Malaysian, however, does not find Granny Durian’s sexual innuendo amusing. Mani’s unsettled thoughts are a reflection of his alienation from Malaysian sexual banter, which reflects his entire demeanour towards his own hatred for his birthplace.

“The Second Mrs. Tang” presents another perspective on the Chinese mindset. The Malaysian Chinese believe in reviving physical energy and libido through the consumption of wild animals and plants. For example, following his marriage to Leng, his 16-year-old concubine, Mr. Tang is challenged by his friends to take “ginseng, rhino horn and other aphrodisiacs” (“The Second Mrs. Tang” in Tham 2005, 3) as the ideal culinary match for improving his vigour, particularly in light of his future old age marriage to a young bride. According to Alves, Oliveira and Rosa (2013), the Chinese gained faith in the therapeutic use of animal-derived medicines as a result of their cultural practices. Certain wild creatures and flora, according to this culture, act as “sexual rejuvenation” and energy boosters. Since ancient times, ginseng has been revered in traditional Chinese medicine as one of the most helpful herbs for boosting energy and overall well-being. The

consumption of these plants and wild animals is often expensive and reserved for the Chinese upper class. Nevertheless, regardless of how sumptuous the aphrodisiac meal supplied to Mr. Tang, Leng stays unmoved, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Mr. Tang spent most of his nights with her. He insisted she sleep nude beside him though he himself always wore pajamas. Often she woke to find him naked, fumbling to part her legs. His body was flabby in places, wrinkled in others. She would close her eyes quickly and pretend to be sound asleep while he thrust and thrust himself into her. She could not understand why this gave him pleasure. She thought this must be how it felt to be a drainpipe being cleaned with a plumber's snake. The first few times, her secret place, that her mother had warned her to let no man except her husband touch, had felt swollen and battered but it seemed to have become used to Mr. Tang assaults. She was always glad when he finally finished and she counted the minutes till he began snoring. Then she would rise quietly and go to the bathroom to scrub herself clean. *So this was what married people did*, Leng thought. If she had known what a concubine's job was, she would have said "No" loudly and firmly to her father and Mr. Tang. She would rather be a servant in this house than a concubine. ("The Second Mrs. Tang" in Tham 2005, 5)

Tham portrays Leng as a naive young girl who is absolutely disgusted by her husband's body and desire. In her conjugal connection with Mr. Tang, she feels uncomfortable, insecure and helpless. Physically, she appears to be completely subordinated to the male's control in this relationship but mentally, she is scathing of his nightly endeavours. Tham's reference to Chinese aphrodisiacs highlights the power disparity between men and women, as well as the divide between wealthy men and poor women. It also demonstrates how desire is manufactured, as rather than portraying Mr. Tang as a man with authority, he is depicted as a man who is not only unattractive but also woefully deficient in physical prowess.

Again, bodily functions are manifested in the Chinese Malaysian funeral traditions that incorporate the concept of food. Offering delightful food is a tradition used to assist the departed in their transition to the afterlife. Mr. Tang's concubine is assigned the most laborious chore of the funeral ceremonies in her case, as Mrs. Tang died of illness. She is responsible for ensuring that the food for worshipping Mrs. Tang and drinks for the visitors are provided properly at the wake and funeral. Simultaneously, she must follow numerous orders from old Tang's aunts. For example, she must ensure that 800 eggs are cooked and two pigs are slaughtered, followed by the packing of parboiled one-pound slices in fresh banana leaves and newspaper for post-funeral presents.

As a gesture of thanks for attending the funeral, each participant will get one pack of roasted pork with two hardboiled eggs. Additionally, she is responsible for ensuring that the servants prepare enough tea for the guests. When she returns from the graveyard, Old Tang Auntie Five reminds her to prepare water for the bereaved to wash their hands and feet. It is thought that the water cleanses the mourner's spirit of filth and evil carried over from the graveyard. Managing the burial under the "monitoring system" of the Old Tang aunties is such a strain on Leng's youthful age in the family. Apart from the necessary responsibility assigned to the concubine, Mr. Tang's son, Henry, also plays a significant role in the burial ceremony. Mrs. Tang's body was stored in ice during the funeral preparations before being transported to a magnificent casket fashioned entirely from a mahogany tree trunk. Then, Henry was instructed to undertake the rite of washing his deceased mother's face with tap water and inserting silver coins in her eyes and tongue before proceeding to Mrs. Tang's burial. According to Old Tang Auntie Two, this practice assures the passage of the dead to the afterlife; otherwise, their spirits would stay trapped in limbo. Following Chinese custom, only the son is permitted to undertake this rite. Tham suggests that the Chinese Malaysian burial rites are heavily influenced by Confucianism and Taoism. The concept of filial piety began in Confucianism and is interwoven with the Taoist concept of belief in life after death. Chan and Chow (2017) noted that Taoists believe in endless life and immortality, despite the fact that death and change are necessary parts of existence. Taoists adhere to the concept that they will remain Taoists throughout their lives and beyond death. The meal rituals demonstrate the care with which the family sends Mrs. Tang on her ultimate trip. Two characters are contrasted here: Leng, the concubine, who retains her servant status despite assuming the role of the tycoon's primary wife. On the one hand, Leng does not get to enjoy her new position; she remains inferior in the view of the "well-meaning aunts". Henry, on the other hand, is assigned the simpler task. The most ironic aspect of these rites is that Mrs. Tang died a bitter lady and no matter how grandiose her farewell to the realm of the dead, it could not erase her sadness near the end of her life.

### **Memories of weddings with food and plants**

Tham's cultural recollections also include Chinese and Indian Malaysian weddings. She discloses that the two-generational weddings in Tang's family, which are those of Leng and Henry, are performed involuntarily and freely, whereas Mani is married in the typical Indian arranged marriage fashion. At Chinese marriages, a tea ceremony is required. At her wedding, Leng is seen wearing a coarse samfu, cotton slacks and tunic and bringing Mrs. Tang a cup of tea at her wedding to commemorate Mr. Tang's 65th birthday. Mr. Tang has

planned this surprise wedding for his wife as a birthday present, but she refuses to accept the new marital arrangement. The class divide is evident in the clothes worn by the wedding guests, who don vibrant cheongsams with coiffured hairstyles, while the servants and destitute relatives wear samfu at the Tang Mansion on this auspicious day. Mrs. Tang grudgingly accepts the cup of tea with a forced smile. She realises that accepting this cup of tea equates to her family's consent to this concubine, which also serves as a metaphor for the start of her miserable existence. Similarly, Leng feels compelled to accept this marriage as a loan to help her father pay off his gambling debts. Both of these women are shackled in miserable marriages. While Leng is the envy of other women for marrying into Tang's Mansion in order to benefit from the tangible wealth and her father's image of a nice life, she is emotionally and sexually dissatisfied. Apart from feeling uneasy wearing the cheongsams, she is treated poorly by all members of the Tang family except Mr. Tang. She is regarded more as a servant than a family member, despite the courtesy title of Little Mistress. Rather than having wealth, she would rather retreat to her attap-attached cottage with corrugated zinc walls to enjoy her own space and girlhood, even if she lived in a substandard environment with lizards, mice, scorpions and mosquitoes. The disparity generated between the affluent and poor, the powerful and weak, reflects the Chinese Malaysian community's reality. Wealthy men are afforded the privilege of pursuing any goal and achieving happiness. The poor, on the other hand, is helpless and frail in determining her own fate.

The author contrasts the viewpoints of Malaysia's minority ethnic groups on Chinese and Indian wedding practices. Following Leng's painful wedding, Henry's pre-wedding rituals are described as more sombre than Mani's lighter and more joyous wedding. Chinese and Indian Malaysian weddings are steeped in tradition, with several established procedures and beliefs, but Henry defies the pre-wedding rituals' laws and beliefs. On the contrary, Mani cheerfully observes wedding customs. For example, when Henry was assigned to deliver wedding cakes, for example the marrying-off-the-daughter-cakes, to the bride's family for the bride to distribute to her family and friends as a pre-wedding announcement, he expressed his frustration to his grandaunts by saying, "I don't know why we need to make people fatter with baked biscuits stuffed with bean paste filling. You'd think the wedding invitations would be enough to inform people of the impending nuptials" ("Bending Traditions" in Tham 2005, 148). Moreover, Henry is required to obtain two red woollen blankets, a sewing machine and a chamber pot brimming with fruit and money, in addition to performing the bridal bed installation ritual in the presence of a Good Luck Woman. The Good Luck Woman must be a living member of the groom's family with a husband, children, or grandchildren. Her role is to set the bridal bed in

the bridal room at an auspicious hour and to spread it with new auspicious pink or red bed linens. Nonetheless, Henry is enraged:

(I) have accepted two red woolen blankets, a sewing machine, God knows why a sewing machine, when Alice doesn't know how to sew and I certainly don't and one bright red-and-green, enameled, very ugly, chamber pot, filled with fruit and money?... What is the point of a chamber pot? We are not living in cavemen times anymore! We have flush toilets. ("Bending Traditions" in Tham 2005, 148)

Henry does not appreciate the traditions. Apart from that, he becomes even more enraged when he learns that his new wedding bed, which would be draped in crimson sheets and strewn with red dates, lotus seeds, mandarin oranges, pomegranates and sweets, would serve as a prize-collection competition venue for the clan's youngsters. The youngsters would gather and simultaneously jump and play on the bed. He is unaware that the bed installation rite, which involves the giving of red dates and chocolates, entails a blessing of sweetness and togetherness for the marriage. Allowing youngsters to jump on the bed following its installation symbolises the couple's fertile state (Wong 2016). Meanwhile, mandarin oranges convey wealth, while lotus seeds and pomegranates signify that the newlyweds' union will be blessed with fertility. Additionally, the Chinese believe that pomegranate leaves can ward off evil (Phan 2019). Henry refuses to accept this setting for his marriage despite being advised that red attracts better luck in Chinese culture. Indeed, Chinese weddings are typically connected to the colour red, which is viewed as a fortunate hue associated with pleasure and prosperity (Murooj 2019). In Chinese tradition, food is associated with lucky sounding names and auspicious shapes, such as the lotus seed, but Henry mocks his grandaunts' interpretation of the lotus seeds:

The Chinese word for lotus seed, *Leen Tze*, sounds the same as the words for "year" and "child" so the message is, "Child in a year". The Chinese don't marry for love, they marry for children, right, Grandaunts? ("Bending Traditions" in Tham 2005, 152)

Henry seems utterly unaware of the splendour of this wedding rite. The preceding instances demonstrate that Henry appears to be oblivious to the cultural implications associated with his lucky background. He desires a straightforward and modern wedding, as opposed to the convoluted, conventional pre-wedding ceremonies associated with petty cultural activities. He is unaware that he was raised in a traditional Tang clan and understands that "custom dies hard". His boldness in rebelling against these cultural conventions is insensitive to his traditional Chinese background. In this passage, Tham elucidates the divide

between old and young Chinese. The elderly wish to preserve tradition, while the young perceive little value in outmoded customs. By highlighting Henry's rage against Chinese traditions, Tham demonstrates how cultural memories are sometimes couched in ambiguous words.

Conversely, Mani chooses to adhere to his parents' arranged marriage in order to preserve his own heritage. The Indian Malaysian community places a premium on caste and social status. His parents make certain that the girl is keeping up her class, prestige and family. His conventional wedding was joyfully celebrated and sounded more satisfying, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Tradition decreed bride and groom move here, there, bow, pace in circles like marionettes. In truth, Vimala and I were puppets at our wedding, without the relief of sharing even a conspiratorial glance, for Vimala was covered from head to hip in bright scarlet and gold veils. I was luckier and only carried fifty pounds of gilt wire, frangipani and jasmine garlands. ("Durian Season" in Tham 2005, 132)

Tham emphasises the "Indianness" of the Indian Malaysian wedding ceremony by combining vibrant flowers with the dazzling celebration and complicated traditions that surround the bride and groom's matrimonial involvement. Floras are traditionally associated with femininity rather than masculinity, yet Mani's bridal gown is adorned with frangipani and jasmine garlands. This is because flowers play a crucial role in the wedding rite. According to Bais (2017), the bride garlands the groom to start the wedding ceremony in traditional Indian weddings. Additionally, the exchange of flower garlands between the bride and groom is symbolic of the western wedding ceremony's ring exchange. Besides that, the flowers also symbolise the unbreakable link and love that exists between the married pair as they embark on a new life together. Without flowers, a traditional Indian Malaysian wedding ritual is considered incomplete. Singh (2017) said that flowers are an intrinsic part of the Indian community's life on a variety of occasions, including weddings, birthday celebrations, religious rituals, social gatherings and house decorating. Both Tang's mansion and Mani's family adhere to their wedding rituals to ensure the cultural legacy is passed down through generations. When seen in this manner, Henry's pre-wedding rituals continue to uphold traditional conventions regardless of how adamantly he resists cultural practices. Mani, on the other hand, adheres to his traditional wedding practices. He is regarded as a devoted son who will do whatever it takes to help his parents retain their Indian Malaysian customs. He even agreed with his father's assertion that Indian traditional marriages work better than American marriages, which record the highest divorce rate in the world. Mani despises

liberal weddings in the West and is proud of Indian traditional marriages, although a great marriage is contingent on the couple's marital behaviour.

### **Memories of superstitions with food and plants**

Superstitions are culturally specific. By merging legends and superstitions, Tham connects her recollections of traditional Malaysian beliefs to certain plants and cuisines. Malaysians have various superstitions around the banana tree and durian. For instance, the durian myth is a commonly accepted belief in Malaysian society. Tham injects innovation into durian and durian legends, connecting the nutrient-dense king of fruits with their cultural superstitions ("Durian Season" in Tham 2005). Granny Durian advises Mani not to drink alcohol, particularly brandy, after eating durian; otherwise, he may pass out from a heart attack ("Durian Season" in Tham 2005). Granny Durian's comment echoes the widespread belief among certain Malaysians regarding the lethal consequences of eating durian together with alcohol. Nonetheless, Henry was sceptical about the durian myth when Mani sought his medical counsel over a fatality caused by durian and alcohol consumption. Henry mocked Mani, implying that he would prefer to die in this nice manner if durian consumption combined with alcohol would in fact result in death. The discomfort associated with consuming durian and alcohol concurrently may be a result of the durian's high carbohydrate content. Durian is recognised as a nutritious tropical fruit that increases energy owing to its high carbohydrate, sugar and protein content.

Tham relates the banana tree to the rituals of Chinese and Indian Malaysians, revealing how both cultures view the banana tree differently on a cultural level. When Gopal the gardener offered to plant a new grove of banana trees for his lady employer, Old Mrs. Tang, she rejected it by responding, "*Jangan, Jangan, Never, never. The banana tree attracts ghosts. They bring bad luck*" ("Gopal's Garden" in Tham 2005, 23). Gopal is inspired to grow the banana tree after witnessing his grove thrive with an abundance of fruits and leaves that could be used to make disposable plates and wrappers for his family's food. Indian Malaysians have traditionally used banana leaves for serving meals. Siti Radhiah and Siti Nazirah (2018) mentioned that Indian heritage foods are often made using a clay pot on the ground, a pan and a banana leaf. However, not all Indian Malaysians serve their food on banana leaves. Only certain Indian foods are served on banana leaves in Malaysia and diners usually eat with their hands, without using silverware. Tham exemplifies the two populations' diverse cultures via their perception of banana trees in terms of cultural rituals and beliefs. The Chinese believe that the banana tree is notorious for attracting bad spirits. The belief in banana tree spirits among Chinese Malaysians is related to the Malay

folklore of *puntianak*. *Puntianak* is a female vampire and the spirit of a lady who died after childbirth in Malay folklore (*Collins English Dictionary* 2022). According to Wardani (2019), the *puntianak* is well-known among Malaysians and is frequently considered the most terrifying supernatural monster in Malay mythology owing to its strong religious and superstitious origins. The banana tree frequently appears in *puntianak* mythology and it is stated that the spirit of a pregnant woman spends the day in the banana trees. Furthermore, the *puntianak* is commonly shown as a white-skinned ghost with long hair and all-white attire. She may also pass herself off as a normal and gorgeous lady in order to entice men. She is notorious for dismembering her victims and consuming their organs, as well as for haunting pregnant women to induce miscarriages. The *puntianak*'s objective is to take revenge or retribution on those who have wronged her (Lee and Balaya 2016). Nonetheless, Old Mrs. Tang and Gopal cohabit harmoniously despite the cultural divide generated by Gopal's usage of banana leaves and Old Mrs. Tang's superstition about the banana tree. The recollections of Gopal and Old Mrs. Tang regarding the banana tree exemplify the tropical plant's opulence in the Indian Malaysian culinary culture, while also providing insight into Chinese Malaysian superstition. Possibly, the banana tree is a potent reflection of Tham's desire to highlight a multicultural society via the engagement of diverse consumption patterns and values.

### **Memories of cultural alienation and food**

Cultural alienation is an unavoidable outcome of interethnic social interaction, much more so in Malaysia's multicultural setting. Tham shows Mani as a sugarcane juice enthusiast as he would purchase the drink at roadside kiosks or consume it at Henry's house when he has a craving for sugarcane juice. Mani is, however, bewildered because he is constantly provided sugarcane juice when he visits Henry's house, despite the fact that his mother never prepares the beverage for him at home ("Bending Traditions" in Tham 2005). Rather than using herbal drinks, the Mani family's cooking tradition relies heavily on herbs and spices. For instance, his mother prepares korma chicken for him at home and during his visit, his Aunt Laksami offers him *vadai*, for example, spicy bean cakes ("Picture Bride" in Tham 2005). Traditional Indian Malaysian cuisine is well-known for its innovative use of herbs and spices. Cultural alienation is comprehensible given Mani's distinct cultural upbringing and customs in comparison to Henry. To quell Mani's curiosity, Henry reminds him that Chinese families believe herbal beverages assist in hydration and the elimination of body heat in Malaysia's hot and humid environment. Henry's second grand aunt continues to educate him:

We Chinese believe the human body is healthy only when it balances hot and cold influences. In a hot climate like Malaysia, we have to eat more cooling foods like watermelon and tree fungus. In China, where it is cold in winter, we eat more heating foods like spices and ginseng... Most Chinese households in Malaysia have sugarcane water or boiled barley water... Or chrysanthemum tea. (“Bending Traditions” in Tham 2005, 147)

Tham reveals that drinking sugarcane juice at roadside vendors is not just a component of Malaysian culture, but also of the Chinese Malaysian family’s herbal drinking habit. The majority of Chinese Malaysian households are familiar with herbal treatments and use them as home cures. For instance, Henry’s family is accustomed to using home remedies such as various types of herbal tea and cooling foods to balance the yin and yang energies in the human body as well as seasonal variations. The Chinese believe that good health is achieved by balancing yin and yang, the opposing dual energies that constitute the structure of life’s essence and must coexist harmoniously. Yin and yang are dichotomised as internal versus external, cold versus heat and deficiency versus excess. Imbalances in the yin and yang will hinder the passage of energy through our bodies, resulting in health concerns. Although Mani and Henry live within the same Malaysian society, Mani feels culturally alienated from the Chinese Malaysian family’s herbal drinking habit. On the other hand, he feels a sense of familiarity when observing a Punjabi family eating Indian chapattis with a yellow dahl bean dish, while he and Henry were loafing at the night bazaar (“Picture Bride” in Tham 2005). These instances suggest that Malaysia’s many ethnic groups lack understanding of one another’s cultures. As a result, food acts as a cultural agent, connecting and strengthening mutual understanding in intercultural relationships.

### **Memories of social class and food**

Tham’s cultural sensitivity about the Indian Malaysian community’s socioeconomic status and diet is heightened by her portrayal of toddy consumption. Toddy drinking reflects the Indian Malaysian community’s educational level. Govind is portrayed as someone who drinks toddy (palm wine) to demonstrate his inferiority and low self-esteem in comparison to his good friends Mani and Henry, who come from better family situations (“Picture Bride” in Tham 2005). Govind works as a law clerk for Mani’s father, while Mani and Henry are attorneys and physicians, respectively. Mani and Henry are married. Three of them were close friends, but Mani began to despise Govind when the latter started to consume toddy. Mani describes toddy as an inexpensive

alcoholic beverage avoided by educated Indians and he feels that toddy drinkers have a disproportionate share of the blame for wife-beating in his community (“Durian Season” in Tham 2005). Toddy is frequently consumed by impoverished Tamil Indians and is described as a type of wine created from the sap of a coconut palm, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Toddy is a non-alcoholic, innocent drink when it first oozes out from the cut top of the palm. A three-year-old child can ingest the sweet liquid then. But after an hour or more in the tropical heat, it ferments itself into arrack. By three o’clock in the afternoon, it will have so much muscle, it can take on your Scotch whisky or Russian vodka and beat them in minutes on its way to pure ethyl. It doesn’t need brewer’s yeast and oak barrels; all it needs is to be left alone on a hot day. This potent stuff is the chosen nemesis of many poor Tamil Indians. (“Picture Bride” in Tham 2005, 28)

Tham’s interest in food intake symbolises the Indian community’s segregation by caste and socioeconomic level. Mani’s contempt for his own race is common in this culture. As Srinivas (2011, 38) stated, Indian food serves as an “identity marker for caste, class, family, kinship, tribe affiliation, ancestry, religion, ethnicity, and increasingly, secular group identification”. Tham ingeniously interweaves the coconut between plant and food or beverage as part of the Indian Malaysian community’s culture. The tale seeks to depict the ingenuity of lower-caste Tamil Indians, who manufacture alcoholic beverages by blending a natural component produced from the coconut palm with their traditional habits and the tropical climate they enjoy. In addition, the anthology indicates that rich Indians toast happy occasions with Remy Martin and Hennessy brandy, whereas middle-class Indians toast with Guinness Stout or Anchor Beer (“Picture Bride” in Tham 2005). The higher one’s social status, the higher the grade of alcoholic beverage consumed. However, generalisations that toddy is only consumed by lower-caste Indians are inaccurate because toddy is also consumed by other ethnic groups, such as Chinese Malaysians, who take pleasure in drinking it regardless of their social status. Hence, Mani’s scorn for toddy demonstrates his alienation from his own ethnic race.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Tham’s eco-cultural recollections in *Tin Mines and Concubines* (2005) demonstrate how cultural differences between diverse ethnic groups contribute considerably towards honouring Malaysian society’s cultural diversity and strengthening their cultural identities. Tham’s cultural and identity awareness is inextricably imprinted on the community’s unique eco-

images of animals, plants and food. Her perceptions of cultural variety vary according to ethnic origins, cultural upbringing, belief systems, social classes, cultural practices and experiences. In general, examining Tham's eco-cultural recollections about bodily functions, weddings, superstitions, cultural alienation and social class reveals how the organic relationship between the animal, food and plant components fosters intercultural consciousness and interracial mutual understanding and misunderstanding in Malaysian society. What is considerably more intriguing is the significance ascribed to Tham's use of eco-cultural memories. Food, plants and animals convey more information than rituals and superstitions do. They truly educate us about the characters. Mrs. Tang's bitterness, Leng's ruminations about her former life in her dilapidated house, Mani's rejection of toddy and Henry's repudiation of Chinese customs are all highlighted via the manifestations of fauna, flora and food. As such, they serve as symbols for us as we continue to perceive the alienation of connections. Malaysia's reputation as a melting pot of diverse peoples and cultures reveals that memories of the homeland are tinged with sarcasm, anxiety, sorrow and humour. This psychological limbo, which is a characteristic of works by persons who have left home but returned with fresh eyes, serves as a technique for embracing cultural resilience and healing.

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