

A Quest for Malaysian Environmental Justice in Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree*

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the environmental agenda in *The Flame Tree*, an English novel by Yang-May Ooi, a Malaysian-British author. The concepts of environmental justice and environmental racism are employed in the analysis. Through the main characters and incidents in the novel, Ooi suggests that Malaysian local people suffer greatly from a lack of environmental justice in their community as a result of the manipulation of a transnational corporation operated by a global capitalist, who commits crimes in different forms to win a mega project under the policy for the country's modernization. This mega project eventually causes an environmental apocalypse and a tragedy for the local people who do not have an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process regarding this project. Based on environmental racism, the local Malaysian people endure disruptions from the project initiated by the British race, the former colonizers of Malaysia, who aim to reap its full benefit. Despite the end of British Imperialism, the power relation between the British and the Malaysians persists. This novel protests against transnational environmental crime which leaves detrimental effects on the Malaysian land and people.

Keywords: Malaysian-British literature, environmental justice, ecocriticism, environmental apocalypse

1. Introduction

Malaysia, a house of different ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, offers literary works in four major languages, Malay (Bahasa Malaysia), English, Chinese, and Tamil since the population of Malaysia is mostly composed of the owners of those languages. According to Chin (2006), Malaysia is "home to culturally, racially and linguistically diverse populations that comprised Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians" (p. 5). Among the literary works in the above languages, those in English serve as an important voice articulating various issues happening in Malaysian society, reaching audiences outside the national circle. Due to British Imperialism which ruled Malaysia from 1874-1957, English became the second language in this country, and many authors choose this language to craft their literary works. In this study, I investigate *The Flame Tree*, a Malaysian novel in English, by a Malaysian-British author, Yang-May Ooi, who is also a podcaster, an activist, and a performer. I aim to examine the issue of environmental justice during the time setting of the novel (1990s), arguing that the journey of Jasmine, the female protagonist, from London to Malaysia eventually becomes a quest for environmental justice for Malaysian people who are detrimentally affected by a mega project of modernization in this country. In fact, this character shares some common qualities with Ooi, the author herself, who was born and raised in Malaysia, with Chinese heritage. Educated in England and now based in London, Ooi became a British citizen by choice (Ooi, n.d.). In England, "Ooi wears many hats: lawyer, social media advocate, writer and now story performer" (Mah, 2014, para 1). In addition, she gives inspiring talks with immense passion and creates many powerful performing projects. Similarly, in the novel, Jasmine was born to a Chinese-Malaysian family. She graduates with a degree in Law from a prestigious university in England and later works for a British corporation in London. It can be said that Jasmine serves partially as a representation of Ooi's experience in both Malaysia and the United Kingdom.

Since *The Flame Tree* was written in English by a Malaysian-British author, it is important to understand the background of Malaysian literature regarding language politics. Among the four major languages in Malaysia as mentioned above, Bahasa Malaysia or Malay is claimed as the official and national language, since it is viewed as "the basis for national integration." Although English is not the national language of Malaysia, its significance is emphasized by the Malaysian government which insisted that "measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught as a strong second language" (Ghazali, n.d.). The use of Malay as the national language is based on the concept that Malaysia needs to create a common identity in terms of the language since there are different ethnic groups in this country. This also results in the status of literature in other languages. As Chin (2006) put it, because of "the political biases surrounding language, only works written in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, are defined as national literature, while all literatures produced in other languages are considered as 'sectional' or 'communal' literatures" (p. 9). Being put outside the sphere of national literature, many Malaysian authors in English feel marginalized and sense the unhomeliness in Malaysia. This situation also brings about their anxiety in

writing and problems regarding their identity:

Caught in the clash of ideologies between Asia and the West, tradition and modernity, family/communal duty and individual freedom, English language writers revealed a different kind of anxiety in their writings: the ambivalence and challenges of negotiating identity and voice in a changing world where the limits of freedom have been redefined through the “guided” discourses of the nation. (Chin, 2006, p. 19)

Due to the conflict above, many Malaysian authors in English decided to leave the country in search of a real home, especially after the gazetting of Malay as the national language in 1969, which instigated their feeling of being more marginalized and excluded. As stated by Chin (2006), “The haunting feeling of being uprooted and displaced, the searing sense of ‘not-belonging’ which dogged many non-Malays following the post-1969 years, inevitably culminated in exile.” This group of writers includes Shirley Lim, who relocated to the United States and other countries to seek a homeland after the experience of “homelessness and displacement” (pp. 8-9). It can be said that Ooi, who resettled in England, also shares the same experience with the above Malaysian authors and finally chose to be a Malaysian-British citizen.

Regarding the context of *The Flame Tree*, the 1990s, the time setting of this novel, is marked as the era of economic and industrial development in Malaysia, as the nation was being transformed from an agriculture-based country to an industrialized and export-oriented one. This era is also known as the era of mega projects, in which multi-billion projects were operated to enhance the country’s economic capacity. Unfortunately, such transformation came with environmental expenses as a consequence of oil-palm plantations, logging business, and many other mega projects. Those expenses included relocation of people, destruction of rainforests, and biodiversity deterioration. Several tragedies also occurred in this era due to the hill-land developments, including “Highland Towers Tragedy in Kuala Lumpur in 1993, the Genting Highland landslide tragedy in 1995 and the North-South Highway landslide near Gua Tempurung in 1996” (Zailnal, 2015, p. 164). These tragedies resulted in a massive loss of lives, property damage, and environmental destruction. These situations can be viewed as Ooi’s inspiration to write *The Flame Tree*, since this novel directly addresses environmental issues and a disaster resulting from a mega project in a rural area of Malaysia. Of course, the rural people in this area unavoidably suffer from this project. To investigate these problems as portrayed in the novel, it is necessary to understand the concept of environmental justice which can describe how the local people suffer from the mega projects initiated by outsiders who seek benefits from the project of modernity without any concern about the environment and the locals.

Broadly defined, environmental justice is the concept of the rights of all people regardless of race and social status to live in a healthy environment, to share the resources fairly, and to take part in the decision and management regarding the environment and resources in their community. According to the Environmental Protection Agency:

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies ... It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work. (The United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2022)

Based on the definition above, environmental justice aims to protect people from hazards resulting from the management of the environment. Initially, this concept stemmed from the movements in many communities in the United States, starting in Warren County, North Carolina in 1982, where people set out a movement against a toxic landfill in their community. Other movements with the same purpose, to assert people’s rights to live in a healthy environment, were also carried out, especially by the underprivileged, grassroots people (Murdock, 2001). Apart from the above definition, there is a concept that helps define environmental justice as argued by the Central European University Center for Environmental Policy and Law:

A condition of environmental justice exists when environmental risks, hazards, investments, and benefits are equally distributed without direct or indirect discrimination at all jurisdictional levels and when environmental access to investments, benefits, and natural resources are equally distributed; and when access to information, participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental-related matters are enjoyed by all. (as cited in Filcak, 2012, p. 37)

From the above excerpt, we can see another environmental justice aspect added to the previous definition. All people should enjoy the rights to equally share and benefit from natural resources. Usually, only those in power such as capitalists, elites, and other groups such as politicians can take advantage of the natural resources, leaving the locals to suffer from the depletion of nature and the environment. In addition, those people lack the right to access natural resources due to the government’s policies regarding the use of the resources which are common property not belonging to particular groups of people. Therefore, environmental justice also asks for the rights of all people to equally benefit from the resources and to participate in the decision-making process regarding their usage. With this significance, the term environmental justice is more frequently used in environmental activism, political discussions, academic studies, and policy-making in different parts of the world (Walker, 2012). The widespread use of this term indicates that it has become a global agenda.

When referring to spaces in terms of environmental justice, most people might think of only the wilderness, the land with forests, or empty spaces far away from the city. However, this concept also encompasses other areas where people live, work, or even play together, as those people need safe spaces to spend their lives. This aligns with Sze (2002), who argued that “Environmental Justice defines the environment as a site where people live, work, and play. This definition rejects the mainstream representation of environment—as green

empty space—as ahistorical, classist and antiurban” (pp. 164-65). According to this argument, it is clear that no matter where people are—in the urban, rural, or wild area—they deserve the right to spend their lives in a healthy and safe environment. This is the basic right which all people, no matter who they are and where they live, should possess. This right must be protected by the authority in order to maintain and promote true justice for all.

According to the above discussion of environmental justice, all people should have the rights to live in a healthy environment and equally share the natural resources in their communities. Unfortunately, there are a huge number of people worldwide who cannot obtain those rights because their races do not belong to the mainstream. Those people are not recognized by the government which ignores their well-being concerning the environment. In the United States, for example, people of color or those with ethnic origins different from the mainstream are forced to live in toxic areas and at the same time cannot access natural resources. Those people suffer from “environmental racism,” another term related to environmental justice. Environmental racism can be defined as follows:

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. (Chavis, 1993, p. 3)

People who suffer from environmental racism unavoidably live in an unhealthy and toxic environment due to their inferior races. In addition, they are excluded from any process of policymaking regarding the management of the environment and natural resources in their communities. It is clear that they are often marginalized and denied the opportunity to benefit from the resources and to protect their environment. This idea is in the same vein as Bullard (2018), who proposed that environmental racism refers to “any policy, practice, and directive [regarding the environment] that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or colour” (p. 98). That is to say, people who suffer from environmental racism, in fact, tolerate environmental injustice. At the global level, the native people in many countries have to give ways to transnational corporations to exploit their natural resources, while they have to face environmental problems as a consequence. The transnational corporations and the elite groups in those countries possess political and economic power to manipulate the local governments to allow and facilitate their businesses, while the local people cannot protect their rights over the resources in their communities due to the lack of power. Therefore, while the transnational corporations and native elites enjoy the profit from the resources which belong to the indigenous, the indigenous sink deeper into poverty and inevitably suffer from pollution and toxic waste generated by industrial activities in their communities.

Since a large number of people suffer from the lack of rights to live in a healthy and safe environment and to equally share the natural resources in their communities, there are movements worldwide to ask for those rights and call for environmental justice. Along with those movements, according to Adamson et al. (2002), there are literary works by writers in different parts of the world, attempting to “organize, mobilize, and empower themselves to take charge of their own lives, communities, and environments.” Those writers point out the connections between degradation of environments in their communities and economic exploitation, and at the same time emphasize “the local, regional, and cultural complexities of the struggles taking place in those sites” (pp. 5-6). That is to say, literature also plays a significant role in requesting environmental justice for people and fighting against environmental racism. An important role of literature in this area is to function as an important method to analyze and criticize environmental problems, especially regarding environmental racism, as suggested by Sze (2002), “Other methods, such as narrative analysis of cultural text, offer an alternative strategy to analyzing the roots of environmental racism” (p. 165). The ideas above assert that literature serves as an important lens to analyze the problems of environmental justice and environmental racism. It also raises an awareness in readers that those problems are urgent and need prompt attention. In the following section, the concepts of environmental justice and environmental racism are employed to investigate Ooi’s *The Flame Tree* and discuss how the local people in Malaysia suffer from a disaster caused by a mega project operated by a British transnational corporation, an outsider.

2. A Quest for Environmental Justice in *The Flame Tree*

The Flame Tree depicts a huge conflict in Kampung Tanah, a rural area in Malaysia, where a mega project by a British transnational corporation is operated. It can be said that this novel is inspired by the experience of Yang-May Ooi, the author herself, since the female protagonist, Jasmine, shares many characteristics with her, and the main incident in the novel is similar to natural disasters happening in Malaysia in the 1990s. Firstly, both Ooi and Jasmine were raised by Chinese parents in Malaysia, so they grew up with Chinese heritage. Ooi studied law at St. Hilda’s College at Oxford University and later became a lawyer in London. Similarly, in the novel, Jasmine wins a scholarship to study law at a university in England and after graduation works as a lawyer in London. Regarding the main incident in the story, the mega project by a British corporation leads to the collapse of a tower which is under construction in Kampung Tanah, a rural area in Malaysia. This disaster claims thousands of lives and destroys the area dramatically. This tragedy coincides with the landslides and collapses of towers happening in Malaysia as discussed in the previous part. In addition, this novel also reflects an attempt to move Malaysia towards modernity which results in detrimental effects on the environment and people in the rural area. The environmental issues in this novel are interwoven with the conflicts of love and identity of the main characters, making the plot of the story captivating. However, this study will focus on environmental justice and environmental racism, which serve as an important agenda in the community of Kampung Tanah under a mega project.

The concept of environmental justice has it that all people should have the right to live in a healthy and safe environment and the right to take part in the decision-making process and creation of policies regarding their environments. Unfortunately, people in Kampung Tanah do not have this right, and the decision on the mega project to create Titiwangsa University and to turn this area to be the most modern university town in Asia is made without their participation. This project of modernization does not go along with the traditional life of Malaysians who live harmoniously with nature. There has been a tradition indicating the relationship between people and nature which is shown when Mrs. Fung, Jasmine's mother, worships a shrine outside her house: "Across Asia, homemade shrines dotted the landscape. They honoured the spirits of the trees and rivers and forests" (Ooi, 2014, p. 33). This excerpt suggests that people in all of Asia, not only in Malaysia, have a strong relationship with nature. In addition, it evinces how the native people respect and worship nature and the environment. Agriculture, which has been practiced before the idea of modernization, does not generate any conflict between people and nature. Therefore, modernization might not be the answer to their happiness in life. However, since the transformation of Malaysia into modernity is needed in the eyes of the government, many mega projects, including the Titiwangsa University project, have been initiated. A committee consisting of only business tycoons and billionaires, not including local people, in Malaysia is set up to drive this university project, which is believed to be a futuristic economy of the country as described in the story:

They called themselves Consortium 2000. They proposed to launch a university for the twenty-first century, the first Asian university to rival the reputations of Oxbridge in England and the Ivy League institutions in the United States. Its curriculum of business, economics, politics, science and technology would be the envy of its Asian neighbours and, more importantly, of the West. Its students would be among the best in the world. As a private university, its revenue would come from fee-paying foreign students and international contracts for Research and Development services to industries and businesses. Wealthy benefactors, ranging from multinationals to private individuals, would be attracted from around the globe to bestow impressive endowments. (Ooi, 2014, p. 84)

According to the above description, this project is believed to boost the country's income. In addition, it is claimed that the communities around the university will greatly benefit from this project, since housing and shopping complexes, restaurants, and other business attractions will be built. The government has strong faith in this project because the country is enjoying economic growth, as there are many new successful businesses emerging: "The country currently enjoyed double the economic growth of Britain and a minimal percentage of unemployment" (Ooi, 2014, p. 86). With this economic trend, they are certain that the Titiwangsa University project will be highly fruitful. However, although this mega project sounds promising, it does not come from the decision of local people who do not have a real chance to participate in the decision-making process. Therefore, it does not comply with the concept of environmental justice. Furthermore, this project will disrupt the ecosystem in the area because Titiwangsa consists of forests with biodiversity which should be conserved.

It can be seen in the story that Ooi incorporates, intentionally or unintentionally, the concept of environmental justice into the story, especially the involvement of the community members in the management and decision making of the project. She creates the male protagonist, Luke McAllister, a foreign environmentalist, who has a strong bond with Malaysia, since he was raised in this country, to get involved with the university project. Firstly, he insists that the members of the Kampung Tanah community must take part in any decision to be made regarding their community, as he announces in a meeting with the locals, "But most important of all [...] is the involvement of local people. Local skills, local knowledge of the land, local labor. Everyone has a stake, no one is alienated. Not just for the short-term gain but for future generations" (Ooi, 2014, p. 123). By saying this, Luke also suggests that the local people must be part of this mega project at every step. The government must listen to the local people, ask what they really want for their communities, and provide thorough information about the effects on the community in all aspects. Once the project is started, it will bring drastic change to the community, so the government must ensure that people in the community and the next generations will not be negatively affected. Unfortunately, the voices of the locals are ignored by the committee and the government. In fact, Luke plays an important role in stopping many businesses that will result in the destruction of the environment not only in Malaysia, but also across Asia: "A number of Asia's progressive enterprises were being curtailed because of Luke's consultancies: logging prohibited, dams scaled down, factory production interrupted" (Ooi, 2014, p. 200). Based on his actions, he is a key person asking for environmental justice for the locals. However, his request regarding this mega project is never heard by the committee because he is not its member, and in fact, the committee tries every way to exclude him from any process of this project because he is seen as a hindrance to it.

Although Ooi foregrounds the locals' involvement in this novel, she also indicates that the power of transnational corporations can manipulate anything. In the story, Luke closely intervenes in the Titiwangsa University project to ensure that the local people will be safe and equally benefit from it, based on the concept of environmental justice. However, Jordan Cardale, the owner of the British corporation, makes every effort to win this mega project without thinking about the locals, since he views it as a huge source of profit. He is involved with bribery, murder, and other crimes which will facilitate the project. For example, he sends his people to propagate to the locals that their lives will greatly improve after the project is completed. Although the locals will be relocated, they will receive huge compensation and live in modern housing complexes arranged by the corporation: "New Kampung Tanah offers local residents new houses with modern facilities" (Ooi, 2014, p. 218). His strategies in manipulating the locals are effective, as they are convinced that they will have more opportunities to be wealthy: "Farmers who were once doubtful began to picture the profit from selling their land. Market traders planned to move to retail space. Everywhere else in Asia, it was boom-time. Why not for them, too?" (Ooi, 2014, p. 176). Unfortunately, the locals receive just one side of the information; they are never informed of the possible detrimental effects on their community. More terribly,

Jordan is also behind the murder of Dr. Chan, a key person who attempts to stop the project. In the tender process, Jordan bribes and manipulates the committee in many ways to win the project. Throughout this course of action, Jasmine, as the head lawyer of the corporation, has no idea about the detrimental effects of the project as she is not informed. Therefore, she tries her best in her duty to support the corporation to get through the process. That is to say, Jasmine, a Malaysian woman, is used by a British corporation to take advantage of her own country. All these incidents indicate that no matter how hard the locals try to search for environmental justice in their community, the transnational corporation will not give in, but will try in any way possible to profit from the local community.

As part of the university project, the construction of the Titiwangsa Tower is the most important incident revealing that environmental justice does not exist in Kampung Tanah, since it is not from a true, genuine consensus of the local people. Similar to the university town, there is propaganda that this tower will result in great prosperity for the community, and everyone will benefit from it. This landmark is aimed to become a new fascinating site which attracts more people to the area. During a meeting to propose this project, it is claimed that this tower will be the tallest tower in the world which bestows great pride on the nation, as stated by Jordan:

It will be the tallest tower built on the highest site in the world. [...] Until recently, the twin Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur were the tallest building in the world. Just after they were completed, the Shanghai World Financial Centre in China snatched the record from Malaysia. Imagine the blow to national prestige. (Ooi, 2014, p. 88)

In addition to national prestige, the Titiwangsa Tower is claimed to bring many business opportunities and huge income to Malaysia, based on the high number of people, whether they are tourists or business persons, expected to come to this site. However, it is very ambitious to build this tallest tower, since it involves great danger and a huge effort. According to the physical characteristics of this area, it is highly risky and dangerous to construct a tower like that because the area is based on limestone which is fragile to support a high tower. That is to say, the tower tends to collapse and harm people's lives and the environment. To push the project forward, Jordan bribes Tsui, the geophysicist of the committee, to guarantee that it is safe to construct the tower on that site. In addition, he sends his men to steal the data and facts about the possible danger of the project studied and collected by Luke, who tries to argue that a landslide might occur in that area and the tower will collapse. When the data and facts disappear, Luke cannot provide strong evidence to terminate the construction project. Eventually, Jordan wins the project and starts to build the tower. As stated by Zainal (2015), "Jordan's devious material power, facilitated by the involvement of capitalist local cronies, far outweighs the 'power to' that Luke holds in his capacity as an environmental consultant" (p. 170). The "power to" in this case refers to the power of the people to prevent something, especially against the "power over" held by the capitalists. Based on this incident, it is clear that the transnational corporation ignores the safety of local people and the possible destruction of the area and its environment, but aims only at gaining profit from the construction project; it lacks environmental ethics and accountability.

Through *The Flame Tree*, Ooi also warns people of a disaster as a consequence of a lack of environmental ethics and accountability and suggests that humans will never win over nature. This incident occurs when Jordan ignores all the warnings and orders the Titiwangsa Tower constructed after his corporation wins the tender through his conspiracy. After the tower has been constructed for a while, it rains heavily for many days. With limestone as a poor foundation of the site, the tower collapses. This disaster causes thousands of deaths and injuries as well as great damage to the area. The gruesome scene is vividly depicted in the story: "Broken bodies lay everywhere, contorted into impossible positions, half buried in earth, rivulets of blood mingling with the muddy run-offs. Limbs torn off by the impact of the rubble protruded from crevices between boulders" (Ooi, 2014, p. 310). The victims include the workers on the construction site and also local people around the site. Especially for the local people, they are victimized by the project that they did not initiate. Some of them die with the dream of wealth from the propaganda which conceals the facts about possible catastrophes. It is obvious that they die because of a lack of environmental justice in their community.

Through the concept of environmental racism, the above disaster indicates that the Malaysian people are severely affected by a mega project of a British transnational corporation aiming to seek profit on their land. Viewing the Malaysians as people of another race, this British corporation ignores their safety and puts them in a risky situation. Jordan and his corporation members are aware of the possible harm of constructing the tower on a fragile foundation. However, as the local people are not British, they are not important enough for the corporation to protect. In other words, in this situation, the Malaysian people are simply the "other," not deserving the rights under the concept of environmental justice.

The collapse of the Titiwangsa Tower is considered an environmental apocalypse caused by humans' interruption of the environment. Apocalypticism has existed in human society since ancient times, portrayed in different religions. With the drastic increase in the human population, it is argued that the end of the world is imminent (Garrard, 2004). An apocalypse refers to an event that generates massive destruction and changes in humans and their surroundings. In fact, apocalyptic narratives, or stories regarding great destruction or even the end of the world, have been deployed to warn human beings of possible catastrophes which will lead to disasters for their lives. In terms of environmental apocalypse, Garrard also stated that there are many narratives portraying disasters as a consequence of the destruction of the environment. Among those narratives, Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is an important, pioneering work revealing the detrimental impacts of pesticides used by humans in agriculture. Many people and species die or suffer from such impacts, and many areas become unlivable. This book is probably the most widely read, indicating that humans themselves cause this apocalypse. Considering the collapse of Titiwangsa Tower, Ooi's *The Flame Tree* can also be read as an apocalyptic narrative revealing a horrible consequence of humans' interruption of the environment. In fact, the apocalypses in both *Silent Spring* and *The Flame Tree* stem from the same cause, human greed and disrespect of nature. While the farmers in the first book want to increase their production, Jordan, as a

global capitalist in the second book, seeks a huge profit from an illegitimate and unethical mega project. The consequence is a catastrophe destroying humans and the environment.

After the disaster of the Titiwangsa Tower, Jasmine realizes that she, a Malaysian woman, has helped foster environmental crime in Malaysia by advocating the Titiwangsa University project and the Tower. Gaining consciousness, she collaborates with Luke to reveal the truth and the cause of this catastrophe. Eventually, she quests for environmental justice and successfully brings it to the Kampung Tanah community, as Jordan's corporation is brought to the lawsuit for the disaster of the Titiwangsa Tower. In addition, after the quest, she realizes that her life belongs to Malaysia, not to England, a foreign land where she initially plans to spend the rest of her life pursuing her dream. She finally decides to abandon her dream and resettle in Malaysia. Throughout the story, her journey to Malaysia as a lawyer for a British corporation has eventually become a quest for environmental justice for people in her home country.

3. Conclusion

Through *The Flame Tree*, Ooi illustrates that the local people in Kampung Tanah suffer from a lack of environmental justice. They do not have an opportunity to take part in policymaking regarding the land in their community, but are bombarded with propaganda of a better life, especially the economic prosperity claimed by the British corporation. To win the Titiwangsa University project, Jordan, as a representative of global capitalists, ignores environmental ethics and refuses the concept of environmental justice. In addition, he commits many crimes for his transnational corporation to achieve its goal. Based on environmental racism, the local people in Malaysia are exploited environmentally, since their resources are monetized for the British corporation's profit. In fact, as a former British colony, Malaysia can easily become a source of profit for England due to the power relations between the two countries, allowing Jordan to manipulate Malaysian people and organizations. Eventually, the apocalypse regarding the Titiwangsa Tower indicates that the Malaysian local people are victimized, while the British people never face any consequences.

Jasmine's journey from London to Malaysia can be viewed as a quest for environmental justice for the Malaysians. Although she initially serves as a lawyer for Jordan's corporation and tries to push the project forward, in the end, she is enlightened and realizes that she must serve the Malaysian people. Her trips to Malaysia to represent Jordan's corporation have finally become a pursuit of environmental justice for them. In addition, she discovers her true identity after realizing that she belongs to Malaysia, not England. Therefore, she abandons her dream to become a British citizen and to succeed in her career, returning to her Malaysian roots. In the same vein, Luke also quests for environmental justice for the community of Kampung Tanah. He strives to fight against the power of a transnational corporation. Although Jasmine and Luke cannot terminate the Titiwangsa project, they finally reveal the truth and bring justice to the local people after the disaster of the Titiwangsa Tower.

The Flame Tree depicts a grave concern about the detrimental effects of modernity on the environment and the local people in Malaysia. This novel also suggests that any mega projects should involve the locals as an important part of decision making regarding their community. In addition, they should be provided with true knowledge and information to ensure they will revel in environmental justice and be protected from environmental racism.

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Dr. Kittiphong Praphan was responsible for the research design, text analysis, discussion, and conclusion. Dr. Surasak Khamkhong was responsible for evaluating the analysis and discussion, adding important discussion points, and proofreading the manuscript. The proportion of contribution is 70/30.

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