

Alienation Effect in Kee Thuan Chye's *Wayang Kulit* Adaptations in 1984 *Here and Now* and *The Big Purge*

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies have acknowledged the respective influence of Brechtian epic theatre and the adaptation of *wayang kulit* in Kee Thuan Chye's plays, though largely keeping them as two separate entities. This paper focuses on Kee's adaptation of *wayang kulit* in his first two published plays, namely *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* to examine its functions in generating the Brechtian alienation effect in the selected plays. The rationales behind the increased scale of *wayang kulit* adaptation in *The Big Purge* compared to *1984 Here and Now* is also explored in tandem with Kee's alleged increase in theatrical subtlety. In the findings, the adaptation of *wayang kulit* in the selected plays correlates to the Brechtian alienation effect through the means of the incongruity of the *wayang kulit*, the role of the *dalang* or puppeteer and the fragmented plot structure of the *wayang kulit* metadrama. In *The Big Purge*, Kee's increased scale of *wayang kulit* adaptation reflects his swerve to a more subtle style of writing as a reaction to the public perception of *1984 Here and Now* and his first *wayang* adaptation in the play.

Keywords: Alienation effect, epic theatre, Kee Thuan Chye, political plays, *wayang kulit*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to delve further into the relationship between the adaptation of the general form of *wayang kulit* in the first two of Kee Thuan Chye's four published plays and Brechtian epic theatre. The adapted *wayang kulit* scenes in the selected plays are studied under the lens of Brechtian alienation effect to understand how Kee's *wayang kulit*

adaptation puts forth the issues of political manoeuvrings by initiating a state of critical reasoning in the audience. The increased scale of *wayang kulit* adaptation in *The Big Purge* is also analysed to examine Kee's attempt towards a subtler style of political playwriting.

Written in the 80s, both Kee Thuan Chye's first two published plays adopted the general nuances of *wayang kulit*, instilling elements such as the *wayang* screen, the *dalang* or the puppeteer and leather puppets traditionally used in *wayang kulit* performances. To date, there is no mention of a specific type of *wayang kulit* used by Kee. Instead, it is meant as a general reference to his cultural identity, as remarked by Kee in an interview by Quayum:

Later, in the 1980s, as I became more aware of the importance of reclaiming my Asian identity, I borrowed elements from Asian myths and traditional theatre for my plays and some of my poems. The play *1984 Here and Now* (1984) incorporated elements of the *wayang kulit*. And *The Big Purge* (1987) again had *wayang kulit* as a central motif (2005, p. 134).

Culturally familiar to Malaysians, *wayang kulit*, or sometimes called the Malay shadow play or shadow puppetry, is a traditional art form thought to have been brought in from Java to Southeast Asia through Cambodia, and was influenced by the Indian epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (Ibrahim, 2008). Traditionally,

leather puppets are manoeuvred by the puppeteer, or *dalang* behind the screen. He is simultaneously a playwright, director, actor and occasionally, singer. A *dalang* is typically also a *Dukun* or *Bomoh* (the Malay medicine-man and spirit medium) in the Malay community (Ibrahim, 2008).

The initially experimentative grafting of *wayang kulit* came along in *1984 Here and Now*, where a single scene is allocated to be depicted in *wayang kulit* style with human actors acting as puppets (Kee, 1987). It then gained expansion in *The Big Purge* where *wayang kulit* scenes were replaced with the *dalang* manoeuvring puppets behind a *wayang* screen (Kee, 2004). The standalone scene (scene fourteen) in *1984 Here and Now* revolves the meeting between the play's nominal oppressors, the Inner Party members where Big Brother shows up to announce his stance on curbing a public protest. In *Purge*, the *wayang kulit* scenes tell the workings between the iron-fisted Chief Minister and his corrupt cabinet members. Perceivably, both *wayang kulit* adaptations serve to portray political trickery, as the playwright notes in scene fourteen in *1984 Here and Now*: "Altogether, the atmosphere is one of foreboding" (Kee, 1987, p. 63). A similar atmosphere is rendered to the *wayang kulit* scenes in *Purge*, in which the Prologue opens with an actor ridiculing the *wayang kulit* adaptation as '*Wayang Sulit*' (Kee, 2004).

Kee Thuan Chye is a Malaysian playwright, actor, dramatist and journalist. Until 2019, Kee has published four plays, *1984 Here and Now* (1984), *The Big Purge* (1988), *We Could **** You Mr.*

Birch (1994), and *Swordfish+Concubine* (2004) (Kee, 2018). He also writes socio-political commentaries, authoring *Just in So Many Words* (1992), *March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up* (2008), *The Elections Bullshit* (2013), *The People's Victory* (2019) and many more. *1984 Here and Now* (1987) is a loose adaptation of Orwell's dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* written in 1949. Retaining its undertone of political suppression and basic plot structure, Kee's rendition employs various Brechtian techniques and *wayang kulit* adaptation for Big Brother's appearance to localise its content. First staged at Universiti Malaya Experimental Theatre in 1985, directed by Krishen Jit, (Gilbert, 2001) its second staging in Malaysia was conducted in Mandarin in 2016.

Meanwhile, *The Big Purge* (2004) is a metadrama that weaves in and out between *wayang kulit* and naturalist scenes. Set in the allegorical 'Equaland', the play tells the story of five characters from different ethnicities embroiled in a political scheme, implicitly referring to the May 13 racial riots and the 1987 Operation Lalang (Gilbert, 2001). *The Big Purge* was staged at Essex University Theatre in May 1988 as part of a Master of Arts course in playwriting (Lim, 2004) but has never been performed in Malaysia.

Overall, Kee's published plays show a proclivity to the Malaysian culture. Apart from the constant employment of cultural customs and practices, especially that of Malay origin such as *pantun* (A Malay verse form); *silat* (Malay Martial Arts); *joget* (a traditional Malay dance) and *gamelan*

(A traditional ensemble music), Kee's plays all adopt Malay traditional narrative forms, including *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) in *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge*; and romanticized historical narratives (legend and myths) in his two later plays, *We Could **** You Mr. Birch* and *Swordfish+Concubine*.

Kee's plays have been copiously read as being influenced by the epic theatre. Nevertheless, his adaptation of *wayang kulit* has not been comprehensively studied as a dramatic technique or as a part of his Brechtian strategy. Therefore, this paper intends to look into Kee's adaptation of *wayang kulit* through the core method of Brechtian epic theatre, which is the alienation effect. Apart from examining the *wayang kulit* scenes through a perspective of critical detachment or emotional distancing, this paper also intends to provide plausible explanations to Kee's increased adoption of *wayang kulit* scenes from *1984 Here and Now* to *The Big Purge* by examining the public perceptions of the plays and Kee's alleged attempt to create more subtlety in his political plays.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Brechtian Alienation Effect

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is a contemporary German playwright renowned for his reformative 'epic theatre' aimed to initiate social reform and his theatre company, Berliner Ensemble. He proposed the *Verfremdungseffekt*, generally known by Willett's translation as the 'alienation effect'. Brecht (1978, p. 91) referred it as

“part of the attempts being made to evolve an epic theatre” which comprised plays that did not depend on empathy.

John Willett contended that ‘epic theatre’ was a term borrowed from Piscator, upon which Brecht further denounced the entertaining quality of theatre and the naturalist conceptions of ‘catharsis’ and ‘empathy’. According to Willett, alienation effect is about “jerk[ing] the spectator out of his torpor and making him use his critical sense” (1968, p. 172). Brecht first introduced the term *Verfremdungseffekt* in his essay “*Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst*” or “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” (Brecht, 1978, p. 91), as a reaction to Mei Lan-fang’s performance in Moscow in 1935. The term *Verfremdung* was coined by Brecht to explain the means by which he achieves critical detachment, which he used to call ‘epic’ (Willett, 1968). The endeavours to translate it into English have led to numerous results, some of which are ‘distancing’, ‘estrangement’, ‘alienation’ and ‘disillusion’.

In the essay mentioned, Brecht proposed that for theatre to fulfil its instructive function, complete empathy from the audience must be hindered to retain “his attitude of observing or looking on” (1978, p. 93). This retention of critical detachment is achieved by deliberately pointing out the incongruous or “turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected” (Brecht, 1978, p. 143). To

further illustrate, Brecht drafted a chart of comparison between dramatic theatre and epic theatre in the notes to the opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, in which he proposed that the epic theatre should be more narrative in nature when compared to the plot-based dramatic theatre (1978). Brecht’s aversion to the typical Aristotelian five-act form arose from his belief that the typical theatre deluges the audience with emotions and impairs their reasoning power. Thus, the coherence of plot must be fragmented, as he famously expounded:

The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement. The parts of the story have to be carefully set off against one another by giving each its own structure as a play within a play (Brecht, 1978, p. 201).

This resistance to coherence is to show men and their interrelations in specific circumstances by presenting itself as “a montage, in which each scene has a self-contained life, and, like the segments of a worm, each is capable of life even when cut off from its neighbour” (Leach, 2004, p. 117). In short, Brecht’s plays are presented in the form of episodic fragmentation so that each of the ‘episodes’ can be critically perceived on their own. This is opposed to the traditional naturalistic theatre, for Brecht argued that traditional theatre tends to be overly sentimental and make audiences misidentify the events as their own. To

Brecht this kills their ability to see existing social issues as it is, as expounded by Esslin, "To do social good the theatre, Brecht felt, must be able to convince its audience that its examples were typical and of wide applicability" (1961, p. 21).

Brecht's practices rose to popularity in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s after his production visited London in 1956. It has since then inspired Feminist theatre and 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Leach, 2004). In the context of post-colonial drama, Brecht's alienation effect saw the incorporation of indigenous music and dance, nonlinear timeline and self-commenting characters used to challenge European systems that decimated aboriginal culture (Gilbert & Tompkins, 2002), a trend with which Kee Thuan Chye's works might be identified.

In tandem with Brecht's method stated above, this paper examines the adaptations of *wayang kulit* as a means to generate the alienation effect in the first two of Kee Thuan Chye's published plays, *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge*. In the selected plays, scenes that adapt *wayang kulit* are analysed to examine their roles in distancing the audience to fulfil Kee's calls for political awareness. The scenes that adapt *wayang kulit* in the selected plays include scene fourteen in *1984 Here and Now*; scene one, four, ten, thirteen, eighteen and twenty-one in *The Big Purge*. Other scenes are also included in the discussion when necessary. The selected scenes are close read mainly from three perspectives according to the aforementioned attributes of alienation effect: the incongruities foregrounded by

wayang kulit, the episodic *wayang kulit* metadrama and the epic acting of the *dalang*. The ways through which these aspects of Kee's *wayang kulit* adaptations contribute to the generation of Brechtian critical detachment are explored.

In addition, reviews from researchers, critics and audience who attended the staged performances of the plays are also sourced to understand the public perception of the plays. To also explore the relationship between Kee's increased adoption of *wayang kulit* elements in *Purge* and his attempt towards a subtler form of political play, critics' reviews and interviews of Kee are also examined to look into the rationales behind Kee's change in writing style through the adaptation of *wayang kulit*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary studies have dwelled mostly on the thematic aspects of Kee's plays, for instance, from existentialist, feminist and political perspectives (Bakar et al., 2016; Rajoo, 2001; Tneh, 2016). The infusion of *wayang kulit* has also been discussed closely with the subject matters of the plays which often manifest a clash between cultural identity and the dominant culture. Helen Gilbert (2001) in the anthology *Postcolonial Plays* remarked that the *wayang kulit* scene in *1984 Here and Now* functioned to delineate the role of tradition in the strengthening of Malay cultural and political power. Amy Lai (2009) likewise contended that the scene served to underline both ethnic-based oligarchy and the tradition of obeisance in politics.

This is echoed by David Tneh, who has done several studies on Kee's cultural infusion. According to Tneh, the role of *wayang kulit* in Kee's plays is to foreground Malay hegemony through the mythical effect of the *wayang* screen (Tneh, 2017). All these studies have categorized Kee's adaptation of *wayang kulit* as a form of racial identification, suggesting a resistance against the dominant culture by highlighting it. Differing from these pejorative interpretations is Susan Philip, who read Kee's *wayang kulit* adaptation as "a subtle way of expressing hope of empowerment for the people" (2012, p. 367).

As can be seen, *wayang kulit* is generally viewed as a tool to the thematic aspects of the plays, though how it works as a dramatic technique remains, for the most part, unexplored. Meanwhile, Kee's plays have been put in the tradition of the Brechtian epic theatre. Researchers including Helen Gilbert, Robert Yeo, Shirley Lim and Amy Lai who have noticed both the Brechtian influence and cultural proclivity in Kee's plays have mostly discussed them as two separate entities. Among them is Shirley Lim who contended that *The Big Purge* showed obvious influence of Brecht's (2004) alienation strategies through its breaking of the fourth wall and its episodic effect. Amy Lai (2009) had further elaborated Lim's arguments by including *We Could **** You Mr. Birch* in her discussion. Robert Yeo in his introduction to the 1994 publication of *We Could **** You Mr. Birch*, also acknowledged that "Brecht's practice provides Kee with a model he could use

to shake theatrical illusion" (1995, p. 17). These studies blatantly put Kee's plays in the tradition of the epic theatre but found little correlations between that and Kee's infusion of cultural elements.

David Tneh's (2016) doctoral thesis provides a more in-depth analysis of Kee's relation to Brecht by specifying Kee's use of Brechtian historication (the adaptation of historical narratives, proposed in Brecht's theoretical essays) to challenge dominant national narratives. Again, this has put Kee's cultural infusion as a means of racial identification. Nonetheless, it has given substance to the use of history as a Brechtian strategy in Kee's ensuing plays, *We Could **** You Mr. Birch* and *Swordfish+Concubine*. In contrast, the significance of Kee's adapted *wayang kulit* scenes from a Brechtian perspective remains a dearth.

Regardless, discussions on Kee's *wayang kulit* adaptations have suggested a connection to the tradition of Brechtian theatre. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins noticed that "shadow puppetry and gamelan music were combined with various Brechtian techniques to produce a highly politicized text rooted in local experience" (2002, p. 266). Studies done on *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* have related Brecht's 'play-within-a-play' approach to Kee's *wayang kulit* adaptations which create a multi-layered narrative structure (Gilbert & Tompkins, 2002; Lai, 2009; Lim, 2004; Tneh, 2017). Reviews made on scene fourteen in *1984 Here and Now* (which is in the form of *wayang kulit*)

also suggest a sense of critical detachment through the use of puppets to represent key characters: “human shadows replace puppets in traditional *wayang kulit* and the aloofness of Big Brother was achieved by his appearing only on screen” (Kee, 1987, p. 128). This is echoed by Tneh, who argued that Big Brother’s visual representations in *1984* “achieves a level of invincibility and detachment” (Tneh, 2017, p. 125). Thus, interpretations of the *dalang* and the use of puppets in selected scenes of Kee’s plays seem to provide an inkling of the alienation effect.

Hence, a deeper look into the alienating functions of Kee Thuan Chye’s adaptation of *wayang kulit* is necessitated, not only by the lack of studies done through the perspective, but also by the need to read Kee’s works as dramatic oeuvres that entail more technical aspects of presentation than subject matters alone. The use of the shadow screen, the addition of the role of *dalang* and the puppets in *Purge*—all these would have a bearing on how Kee’s political ideas are conveyed to his audience through the form of drama. Brecht’s vision of theatre as a means of initiating political reform is similar to Kee’s. Therefore, a juxtaposition of Brecht’s methods and Kee’s *wayang* adaptation could potentially add more profundity to Kee’s infusion of cultural elements and perhaps that of other Malaysian playwrights. Meanwhile, since the alienation effect entails a generalizing of subject matter, the increased scale of *wayang* adaptation in *Purge* may be a means to enhance political subtlety and

hence should be studied along with Kee’s alleged turn towards a softer approach in playwriting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transcending the Conspicuous

Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be it will now be labelled as something unusual (Brecht, 1978, p. 144).

Both *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge*, written in a gap of less than four years, deal with the issues of racial hegemony and Big-brotherism (Gilbert, 2001; Lim, 2004; Philip, 2012). The similarity of subject matters distinguishes Kee’s *wayang kulit* adaptation in his first two published plays from his later shift to historical adaptation¹ to address deep-rooted issues in the Malay culture. The manoeuvred nature of *wayang kulit* was consciously tapped to foreground official corruption and manipulation, as noted by Kee in hindsight,

I incorporated these elements in *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* to depict the shadowy world of manipulative powers. In a sense,

¹ Kee’s ensuing plays, *We Could **** You Mr. Birch* and *Swordfish+Concubine* adapt the assassination of colonialist, J.W.W.Birch and myths from the *Malay Annals* respectively.

ruling politicians are like the *dalang* who is all-powerful because he dictates the story, the script, the performance. He manipulates. He theatricalises reality. What you see is what he conjures. The *Wayang Kulit* is for me, therefore, a powerful metaphor of power play (Quayum, 2005, p. 135).

The mythical nature of *wayang kulit*, along with its visual appeals of the shadows, enables a dramatization of reality as a means of estrangement, showing the absurdity of the otherwise seemingly commonplace political scenario. As Jacqueline Lo argued: “The *wayang* performance gave the impression of a shadowy realm where manipulation took place and conjured an ambience different from that of the common people” (2004, p. 90). While this defamiliarizing *wayang kulit* metaphor pervades both plays, the primitive form of *dalang* or the all-powerful narrator comes first in the role of Big Brother in Kee’s appropriation of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In 1984 *Here and Now*, the experimentative scene fourteen which consists the only *wayang kulit* scene throughout the play, employs actors mimicking puppet movements behind the screen, accompanied by percussive *wayang kulit* music and *serunai*, a traditional Malay wind musical instrument (Kee, 1987). Big Brother enters in an Inner Party meeting where he imparts his scheme to curb the people’s demonstration with more draconian measures. The scene sees Big Brother’s only physical appearance on-stage throughout

the play, albeit as a shadowy figure. The representation of Big Brother is made entirely symbolic throughout the play by the means of televised media, as directed by Kee in scene one: “Upstage left is a huge picture of Big Brother. Both the TV set and the portrait remain as permanent features of the set” (Kee, 1987, p. 1). By hindering his direct appearance on stage, Big Brother’s characterization is alienated from himself and real-life politicians, subdued to a symbol of god-like ruling power that can be applied to both nobody and anybody.

As argued by Helen Gilbert, “Big Brother appears to be omnipotent because he is paradoxically everywhere and nowhere. His remote image transmitted through the wonders of capitalist technology signals the realization of a police state in which disciplinary practices are internalized by the citizens” (2001, p. 251). The *wayang kulit* finesse which hinders Big Brother’s direct appearance is a continuation of the non-naturalistic strategy, maintaining a critical distance that strikes the audience as both otherworldly and poignantly relevant. Tneh also remarked, “By not appearing in person, he achieves a level of invincibility and detachment that is further strengthened by his control and repeated appearance on television” (2017, p. 124).

Each aspect in scene fourteen puts forth the sense of incongruity. The scene, which is technically a rough adaptation of *wayang kulit*, achieves its semblance to the art form primordially through the utilization of the shadow screen that denies the convenience of perceiving the actors or characters simply as they are. As Helen Gilbert remarked:

The inner party members are played by actors behind a shadow screen, which serves to magnify their physical dimensions while also introducing a disjunctive element since traditional *wayang* characters are not humans but rather mythical beings such as gods and demons (2001, p. 251).

This is accompanied by Kee's adoption of Brechtian acting strategy, or 'epic acting' which demands that the actors stay separated from and clarify an attitude towards the roles they play (Butler, 1991). In *1984 Here and Now* the distancing is achieved by the characters mimicking puppet movements: "Their dialogue is delivered in heightened manner, their physical mannerisms broad, puppet-like" (Kee, 1987, p. 62). The self-revealing actions of the Inner Parties characters necessitate a skeptical judgement of their characters, answering to the stealthy tone of the scene and its theme of political maneuvering. As observed by Brecht regarding the role of actor, "acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's sub-conscious" (1978, p. 91). The Inner Party members strike the audience as odd through their blatant lack of visual recognizability on screen. This is echoed by Kee simply naming them IPM 1, 2 and 3, suggesting the characters' lack of power in contrast to Big Brother's entrance whose "shadow looming larger than the rest, towering over all" (1987, p. 63).

Therefore, with the finesse of *wayang kulit*, scene fourteen compels the audience to critically detach itself instead of going entirely into the plot by deliberately accentuating the incongruous. It is thus in this stupor-denying setting that the three IPMs finally give voice to the oppressive undertone of the play, quoting Orwell: "Freedom is slavery"; "Discipline is strength!" (Kee, 1987, pp. 63-64). In Brecht's terms, the *wayang kulit* adaptation in *1984 Here and Now* underlines the workings of politicians in power as something that is absurd and demands questioning. By jerking the reasoning power of the audience to work, the incongruous ensures that nothing that one's accustomed to is taken for granted.

***Wayang Kulit* for Subtlety**

A few circumstances vary, the environments are altered, but Man remains unchanged. History applies to the environment, not to Man. The environment is remarkably unimportant, is treated simply as a pretext (Brecht, 1978, p. 97).

The 'play-within-a-play' *wayang kulit* structure has considerably developed in Kee's following oeuvre, *The Big Purge*, in which the single puppetry scene grew into a full-fledged frame story that encapsulates a more realistic inner story. Though the *wayang kulit* scenes have almost identical nature in both plays, both showing corrupt politicians in the middle of plot-hatching, the scale of adaptation and faithfulness

towards the authentic form of *wayang kulit* has drastically increased in *Purge* with the additions of the *dalang*, or *wayang kulit* narrator, and puppets representing characters.

The rationale behind this is likely multifaceted, some of which could be deduced from the public perception of *1984 Here and Now* which critiqued Kee's dichotomous racial stance and his lack of subtlety, as Nagara remarked, "The play ignores the fact that real inequalities within each race are greater in extent and variety than formal and circumstantial inequalities between the races" (as cited in Kee, 1987, p. 138). This is an iteration of Fadzillah Amin's view, which opines that the play fails to delineate injustices that "cut across racial lines" (as cited in Kee, 1987, p. 129). Even Kee himself has admitted to *Asiaweek* that "The play was loaded heavily on the side of the Proles" (as cited in Kee, 1987, p. 129). In fact, the public disfavour has much to do with Kee's Orwellian appropriation. The direct borrowing of the party-non-party dichotomy from Orwell's novel led Kee to the dilemma of race-based self-identification.

Moreover, Orwell's model is essentially a western one, which is, to some audience, too far-fetched to the Malaysian political state of affairs, as criticized by Kua Kia Soong: "This is where the play tended to grate in places... it blunts the object of our own critique of the Malaysian reality" (as cited in Kee, 1987, p. 114). It was perhaps these criticisms, that led to Kee's drastic localization of his play since *The Big Purge*,

as argued by Lim, "In *The Big Purge*, Kee abandons the 'authority' of the British canonical pretext of his first play for the 'authority' of the Malay traditional pretext of the *wayang*" (2004, p. 11).

These critiques drove Kee's overall swerve towards more political subtlety. If the timespan in which Kee's four published plays were written was to be divided into two phases according to Susan Philip's dating (2012, p. 358), grouping *1984 Here and Now* (1984) and *The Big Purge* (1988) in the first phase: 'the 80s'; and *We Could **** You Mr. Birch* (1994) and *Swordfish+Concubine* (2004) in the second: 'the 90s and onwards', there would be seen between the phases a distinct change of core strategy from the adaptation of *wayang kulit* to the parodic retellings of historical episodes. While both answering to the alienation effect, historical adaptations enable Kee to put forth his political commentaries in a more elliptical way because it essentially indicates a distinct time period. Nevertheless, *Purge* has already shown an earlier endeavour to enhance 'implicitness' through the interference of the *wayang kulit* universe. In Brecht's terms, the environment from which the playwright's issues originated is displaced by the metaphorical Equaland which comprises the mythical power of the *dalang* and his puppets. As Lim also remarked:

The theatrical performance of Malaysian realpolitik as puppetry offers a performative distance from real-life political commentary, while drawing upon the teleological

meaning of the static universe of good and evil... (2004, p. 11).

Consequentially, *Purge* is deemed a mellowed-down iteration of the playwright's first published play, *1984 Here and Now* (Lim, 2004; Philip, 2012). Moreover, it signifies Kee's return to the more dramatic side of theatre despite his emphasis on politics. This uncannily mirrored the dramaturgical evolvement of Brecht (1978) himself, who in his last published collection of writings entitled "Die Dialektik auf dem Theater" (Dialectics in the Theatre), proposed to change his earlier naming of the 'epic theatre' to 'dialectical theatre' because the former sounded too serious for the type of theatre he wanted. Wulbern (1971) viewed this as Brecht's rediscovery of the importance of 'naivete' (the dramatic side of theatre), which however, was not actualized due to his soon followed demise. When asked about the reason behind his softer approach during his recent talk in Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2019, Kee, likewise, attributed it to having realized the importance of a less grave approach:

When I wrote my first political play, I did it in the form of an agitprop. It is very direct. It is in your face. But I later learned that that might not be the best way to get things across because people don't like the playwright haranguing them. They want to be able to make up their own minds. This play in a sense is quite didactic. It is trying to teach you something or

persuade you to think in a certain manner. Audiences don't like that. They think this is low art. So, as I continued to write more political plays I realized (that) (Hoo Poh Ying, personal communication, October 14, 2019)

Providing an alternative to presenting political issues, the dramatic environment of the *wayang kulit* came timely as Kee resolved to a subtler approach in playwriting. The shift from the naturalistic story by Orwell to embracing the narrative potentials of *wayang* also signifies Kee's maturing employment of Brechtian strategies. Consequentially, the standalone scene fourteen in *1984 Here and Now* saw its expansion into a six-scene frame story in *Purge* while both focus on depicting misconducts of politicians, as will be discussed in the following section.

The Actor-Narrator and his Fragmented Tales

In this epic theatre serving a non-aristotelian type of drama the actor will at the same time do all he can to make himself observed standing between the spectator and the event (Brecht, 1978, p. 58).

The Big Purge opens with an actor coming out of behind a *wayang kulit* screen and states "above all, let me emphasize one very important point – this is only a story. Fiction." (Kee, 2004, p. 22). The breaking of the fourth wall decides the alienating tone of the play, as Amy Lai argued that the opening

speech “not only creates a metadrama to the ‘realistic’ drama in it, but also played on the ‘fictitiousness’ of this ‘realistic’ play” (2009, p. 44).

The prologue introduces the *wayang kulit* structure of the play, with the actor reiterating the sense of political manoeuvrings in *1984 Here and Now* by making fun of the *wayang kulit* adaptation: “Did I say ‘*Wayang Sulit*’? Sorry, I mean *Wayang Kulit*. *Wayang Sulit* means secret show; In Equaland, no secret, everything transparent” (Kee, 2004, p. 23). This heralded the following scenes that constantly went in and out of the world of *wayang kulit* and that of realism, in the tradition which Brecht termed “each scene for itself”, “montage” (1978, p. 37). As Shirley Lim opined, “Influenced chiefly by Brechtian strategies of Alienation, the play is deliberately structured to convey the awareness of being performance rather than realistic or naturalistic representation” (2004, p. 6). The six *wayang kulit* scenes in *The Big Purge* include scene one, four, ten, thirteen, eighteen and twenty-one, which form the frame structure of the play. The more realistic inner story between the five characters, Rong, Joan, Runid, Mawiza and Ravinen set in the fictitious Equaland is constantly segmented by the grafting of *wayang kulit* scenes, which takes place every two to five scenes. The progression of the naturalistic plot is hence interrupted every now and then by the disjunctive *wayang kulit* episode to retain the critical detachment of the audience.

Unlike *1984 Here and Now* which resorts to human actors mimicking puppets behind

the *wayang kulit* screen, the alienating effect in *Purge* is generated by the *dalang*, who is traditionally the *wayang kulit* narrator and puppeteer. As Tneh remarked, “...the thrust of the role of the *dalang* goes beyond the usual literal and metaphorical interpretation, to that of a storyteller and manipulator who has reclaimed his part in the national affairs of the state regardless of affiliation” (2017, pp. 127-128).

With the *wayang kulit* metadrama gradually revealed by the *dalang* via speeches and songs throughout the play, the *dalang* in *Purge* is comparable to the singer, Arkadi Tcheidse in Brecht’s renowned play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, who narrates the internal parable that intertwines with the frame story. The role of the *dalang* is multi-layered. He is all at once the storyteller that propels the story, the manipulator who controls the puppets/characters and the commentator who critiques the characters every now and then. Taking up the role of epic actor from the narrator in the Prologue, the *dalang* narrates with a blatantly sarcastic tone. Take the following examples:

The Chief Minister is a genius.

He has been Chief Ministers,

And head of the ruling Equaland Equa Party,

For donkey’s years (Kee, 2004, p. 24).

The most brilliant Minister that the CM hand-picked

Is a hard-sneezing man with a nose like a prick (Kee, 2004, p. 37).

Brecht argued regarding epic acting that an actor must “act in such a way that nearly every sentence could be followed by a verdict of the audience and practically every gesture is submitted for the public’s approval” (1978, p. 95). The *dalang*’s role is thus that of an epic actor who with every utterance, guides the audience towards a certain deduction or perception of events and characters, just as Susan Philip remarked “the *Dalang* is more than a mere storyteller. He is also a commentator” (2012, p. 367). In control of the puppets representing the Chief Minister, Minister Without Portfolio, Minister of Information, Minister of Education and the Minister of Home Affairs, the *dalang*’s juggling between his roles as all of the above guarantees a generalization of concept which Shirley Lim termed “multiply distanced, re-re-representation of Malaysian politics” (2004, p. 9).

While the use of human actors in scene fourteen in *1984 Here and Now* compels the acting to be done in a “puppet-like” manner to resolve dramatic illusion, there is no such need in *The Big Purge* where puppets are used. Taking Artaud’s impressionistic concept, Shirley Lim contended that the characters played by puppets underwent a ‘systematic depersonalization’ whose “dialogue cannot be taken as imitating or representing real persons but as evoking the ‘power of a system’” (2004, p. 10). The lack of sentimentality and personal will of the political figures is thus emphasised, as can be seen in the *dalang*’s nonchalant handling of the puppets:

DALANG brings on the relevant puppet (Kee, 1987, p. 25).

DALANG takes off MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO puppet and brings on MINISTER OF INFORMATION (Kee, 1987, p. 27).

It should be noted that all puppet characters in both *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* represent authority figures whereas ordinary folks are played by humans. This naturally gravitates the spectators’ attention to the *wayang kulit* scenes that tell the inner workings of corrupt politicians; more so than the overall plots revolving the relationships between characters. In a way, hence, prominence is given to the *wayang kulit* metadrama which bring the audience beyond the dramatic façade of the play into Kee’s intended discourse. As echoed by Amy Lai, the puppetry scenes in *The Big Purge* differ from *1984 Here and Now* because they involve a *dalang*, whose roles further blurred the boundary between the playwright and the actor (2009, p. 41). Reverberating Kee’s ultimate calls for political awareness, the *wayang kulit* adaptation provides a perspective that puts the power back into the hands of the people. As Susan Philip proposed:

Kee presents them, through the framework of the shadow puppetry, as being manipulated by an outside force, which is able to critique their actions. This points, perhaps, to the fact that the power should be in the hands of the people, and that

they can, if they choose to exercise that power, become the *dalangs* themselves (2012, p. 367).

In short, the play-within-a-play structure of *The Big Purge* answer to the Brechtian fragmentation needed to dissolve dramatic illusion while resorting to the audience's reasons. The narrative nature of epic acting and Kee's political commentaries are embodied by the *dalang* who is, at the same time, the actor, puppeteer, narrator and commentator. Making strange the backstories of political maneuverings, the *wayang kulit* episodes highlights the need to critically review existing political traditions, suggesting that the possibility of reform lies in the power of the audience

CONCLUSION

All in all, the adaptations of *wayang kulit* in Kee Thuan Chye's published plays, *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* answer to the Brechtian alienation effect by retaining the critical detachment needed by the audience to perceive the significance of power play depicted in Kee's *wayang* scenes. The faceless, corrupt politicians hiding behind the screen of the *wayang* blurred the individual recognizability of each actor, dissolving their pejorative characters into a general representation of public figures whose integrity demands questionings. The presentation of political manoeuvrings in the form of *wayang kulit* alienates Kee's audience from the everyday perception of politics and from its customary and systematic vices that they have long taken for granted. The god-like presence of the

dalang whose role includes that of an actor, a narrator, a puppeteer and a commentator embodies Brecht's recommendation for epic actors, bringing the audience in and out of the dramatic world of the play to that of their realities, nudging them to critically judge similar issues happening in the actual world. The play-within-a-play structure of the *wayang* segments the plays into independent parts that demand specific attention, echoing Brecht's subversion of traditional naturalist plot structure.

Kee's attempt to be more eclectic in his political representation in *Purge* is a response to the critiques of *1984 Here and Now*. Kee's persistent search for dramatic material from the Malay culture may stem from a need to establish his cultural identity as a Malaysian writer of Chinese origin who writes in English; and perhaps also a wish to reach out to his Malay audience. Nevertheless, the drastic increase in the scale of adaptation of *wayang kulit* in *Purge* signifies a more matured employment of Brecht's strategies to enhance subtlety while retaining the audience's critical perception of the playwright's commentaries. Consequentially, the metaphorical displacement of real-life politics through the *wayang kulit* universe helped Kee to relay his hope for reform, or awareness in the least, in a less didactic, more entertaining tone to his audience.

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