

MAPPING HOME AND PLACE IDENTITY IN KEK LIAN WAH'S PROSE

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “home” has constituted a significant element and subject of contemplation in the prose of Malaysian Chinese writer, Kek Lian Wah. The author’s personal experiences, which were characterised by a series of tensions between “home” and “journey”, are reflected in the notable complexity and depth of expression within her prose. The multifaceted concept of home in her prose thus provides an excellent basis for discussion. This article draws on theories of home, place and identity in human geography and environmental psychology to examine the portrayal of “home” in Kek’s prose. It analyses Kek’s prose writings from the past twenty years, investigating her representations of home as both a point of departure and a constructed space. It explores the multi-scalar meanings associated with the concept of home and the significance of her ultimate return to it. It proposes that the evolving meaning of home presented in her essays is particularly pertinent to her relationship with her family, especially her parents, and the flux of her memories. This article concludes that Kek’s identity undergoes a significant transformation as the meaning of home in her essays evolves. Her “home-making” journey starts from the domestic environment of her home but gradually expands into a quest for the homeland that represents both a physical place that she identifies as home and an abstract concept.

Keywords: Kek Lian Wah; home; place; identity; Malaysian Chinese woman writer

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INTRODUCTION

Home is a common yet challenging concept to define straightforwardly and unambiguously. The term “home” is considered “an elusive and complex term” (McDowell & Sharp, 1999, p. 279), and is regarded as one of the most “loaded” words in many languages (McDowell, 1999, p. 71). It has been the subject of increasing attention in recent years in humanities and social science research, and as a spatial concept, it has also been the focus of considerable attention in geography (Gorman-Murray & Dowling, 2007; Ratnam, 2018). Tim Cresswell notes that the centrality of home in the studies of place in humanistic geography can be largely attributed to Martin Heidegger’s concept of dwelling as an authentic mode of existence and Gaston Bachelard’s notion of abode or home as a space imbued with human memories and dreams. In this context, the concept of home is regarded as “an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness”, and “more than anywhere else, is seen as a centre of meaning and a field of care” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 24). The concept of home has conventionally been linked to positive sentiments such as nurturing, resting, security, loving, caring, privacy and belonging (Tuan, 1971; Relph, 1976, Somerville, 2009).

The romanticisation of home, however, is criticised by feminist geographers, casting doubt on the idea that it serves as a refuge and a haven. They contend that humanistic geography implicitly accepts man as the norm (Rose, 1993; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999; Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Linda McDowell (1999) argues that the lyrical descriptions of the dwelling presented by male theorists fail to acknowledge the labour invested by both men and women in transforming a house into a home. She challenges the notion of the home as “an arena of security and of respite from the cruel world of work” (p.73), arguing that it can, serve to isolate women through a process of camouflage. For some women, the home can become “a site of fear and abuse” (p.88). Gillian Rose (1993), on the other hand, pointed out that socialist feminist writings in the West in the late 1970s had exposed the family as the central site of women’s oppression. She posits that the social structures and relationships that are intrinsic to capitalist patriarchy allow women to be exploited in the family and, by extension, in local communities. Therefore, developing a sense of belonging in the home is difficult for them. They do not feel “at home in place” even in their actual homes (p.56). Similarly, Blunt and Dowling (2006) state that the home is not a space in which women can claim privacy and autonomy, and this makes the concept of the home as a haven for women a highly contentious one. However, not all feminists endorse these perspectives. For some, the homeplace is a site of resistance. Black feminist bell hooks (1990) posits that historically, black women’s defence and construction of the home has been a resistance to white supremacist domination and oppression. Their acceptance and enactment of traditional gender roles within the home establish a space for black children, women, and men to return to, to renew themselves, to heal, and to ground their liberation struggles.

The preceding discussion reveals that home as a concept, metaphor and lived experience, exhibits a degree of fluidity contingent on one’s experiences and encounters. Homes, much like other places, are not fixed or static entities. Rather, they are social relations and memory constructs that evolve over time (Massey, 1994). Some scholars argue that the notion of home acts as a repository for personal memories (Bachelard, 2014; Ratnam, 2018), highlighting its role in shaping individuals’ emotional experiences. However, this concept is also subject to constant construction, shaped by the flux of personal memories. Throughout an individual’s lifetime, perceptions or memories of a home may change as a result of changes in personal tastes, circumstances or emotional state (Tucker, 1994).

Moreover, scholarly research has also contested the conventional notion of the home as a private dwelling. This indicates that the concept of home is not solely confined to the physical boundaries of the house; rather, it encompasses the tangible elements of our surrounding environment and the spiritual and psychological associations that individuals have with specific places. (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Gorman-Murray & Dowling, 2007; Tucker, 1994). Blunt and Dowling (2006) have proposed that the concept of home can be understood as “a site and a set of meanings/ emotions” (p. 59). They argue that it is not simply the physical dwelling or the emotional state, but rather the relation between the two that constitutes home. As a place and an imaginary, it influences how people perceive themselves and their identity (p. 62). The concept of “place identity” was initially proposed to describe the relationship between an individual's identity and the physical environment (Proshansky, 1978). Later discussions broadened the term to encompass the identity of a place and the identification of individuals with a particular place (Paasi, 2003; Rijnks and Strijker, 2013). Although the two concepts are not identical, they reflect “an individual's sense of self in relation to a place” (Erfani, 2022, p.461) and “a subjective or emotional bond between a person and the physical world” (Peng et al., 2020, p. 400). The sense of belonging to a place is considered fundamental to the formation of place identity and indeed constitutes the core of this psychological structure (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). A person's sense of belonging may also be constructed at different levels or scalars, ranging from the micro-level of the body and home to the macro level encompassing larger geographical units such as cities, nations, and even the globe (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Ratnam, 2018). This suggests that a person's place identity may also manifest at various scales and dimensions (Tucker, 1994; Lewicka 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The focus of this article is on the Malaysian Chinese woman writer Kek Lian Wah. Kek initiated her writing career during her university years and has since published three collections of essays: *Walking the Moonlight* (1999), *Planting a Tree in Spring* (2006), and *The Book of Water* (2020). However, her works have not yet received significant attention from the academic community. Among the very few available studies on her works, one compares her with other Malaysian Chinese women writers who have studied in mainland China, focusing on their sojourning experiences abroad (Yi, 2024); the other is a case study of her essays, exploring the characteristics of Malaysian Chinese Buddhist prose (Lim, 2010). Alongside the distinctive colours of Buddhist thought in her prose, this article proposes that the concept of home as a recurring motif consistently reflected in her early and later works merits discussion and analysis.

Kek's life experience has been marked by a series of departures from and returns to her place of origin. Having grown up in the Selangor estuary (Kuala Selangor), it was not until her sixth-form studies in Klang that she had her first opportunity to leave her poor and troubled home. Upon completion of her tertiary education, she commenced a teaching career and was subsequently assigned to her hometown for several years. She then assumed a teaching post at a public university following the completion of her Master's degree, situated on the outskirts of Serdang, approximately one hundred miles from her family home. Subsequently, she pursued her doctoral studies in Nanjing and returned to her post at the same university, continuing to live a considerable distance from home. A few years later, she resigned to enrol in a Waldorf education programme in Australia. However, she was compelled to return home after only a

brief period in Australia due to unforeseen critical health conditions. After an exhaustive search for medical treatment, she eventually returned to her original homeplace in Kuala Selangor, where she and her sister had invested significantly over the years.

As the human geographer Yi-fu Tuan (1971) has argued, the concept of home is meaningless in the absence of a journey that takes one outside of it. Kek's life trajectory exemplifies the cyclical relationship between "home" and "journey". Such personal experiences, in conjunction with the non-fictional nature of the essay as a literary genre, imbue her depiction of home with a sense of authenticity, intricacy and depth. This provides a solid foundation for the exploration of her perspective on home.

This paper employs a close reading approach to explore the portrayal of home in Kek's prose from the past two decades. Drawing on theories of home, place, and identity from human geography and environmental psychology, this paper first analyses her escape from and construction of home. The analysis then proceeds to examine the multi-scalar signification of the notion of home and the significance of her ultimate return to it.

The Epicentre of Turmoil: Home as a Site of Insecurity and Ignorance

Kek was raised in a fishing community, where her father and three elder brothers earned their livelihood through fishing. The stilted house by the river in which she lived until she commenced her pre-university studies was never the kind of home that has been idealised as "an arena of security and of respite from the cruel world of work" (McDowell, 1999, p. 73). The boundaries between the domestic sphere and the workplace were non-existent. Upon the return of her father and brother from trawling, she and other women of the family, including her mother and her sisters, were obliged to commence the arduous task of sorting and salting seafood. The nature of the work varied following market demand and the availability of seafood during different seasons. With the advent of lucrative clam farming in the village, her elder brother constructed cookers at home to produce dried clams. During weekends when they were not required to attend school, she and her sisters were obliged to forgo their leisure time and instead engage in the peeling of clams in the fishing huts in the early hours of the morning. She frequently sustained lacerations from the sharp shells, as she recounts: "The shells were sharp and hard, and when I peeled them with my fingers, blood oozed out, the colour of the clams' juices" (1999, p. 36). With the increasing prices for jellyfish, she was required to help handle them after school. The process was strenuous and repugnant, as evidenced by her own account: "Grabbing one slippery, milky-white jellyfish after another with my bare hands out of a barrel, pulling the many flaps of its eight claws off with a knife on the floor, and then removing the mucus build-up on its skin with a brush" (2020, p. 192). Despite her aversion to the slimy seafood and the itching sensation it left on her hands, she had to set aside her discomfort to keep her family business running.

The Marxist perspective conceives of the family as a site of social reproduction, a concept that distinguishes it from the workplace, primarily concerned with production. The former is associated with the realm of women, whereas the latter is considered the domain of men (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Its gendered approach to space has resulted in the segregation of home life from working life and a complete separation of domestic labour from commodity production, with women's domestic work being both unpaid and despised because it fails to generate income for the family (McDowell, 1999). However, as evidenced by Kek's essays, there is an inextricable link between domestic labour and commodity production.

Kek's essays illustrate that women's daily activities contribute to the family's income. However, the production of goods is often redefined as domestic responsibilities, framed as women's (including young girls') household duties. It is, moreover, unfortunate that rather than receiving monetary or other forms of reward for their labour, they are subjected to further constraints by patriarchal ideology in the distribution of the family's economic resources and even denied the fundamental right to education. This is reflected in the case of the author's sister, who expressed a desire to pursue further studies at the secondary school level following her graduation from primary school but encountered significant opposition from her family. The primary objection to this proposal came from the male adults in the family, who cited financial constraints as the reason for their opposition. This perspective is derived from patriarchal ideologies; as evidenced by the author's father stating that "daughters are not required to attend school" (2020, p. 139). Kek's narrative of this incident demonstrates a clear awareness of the detrimental impact of the home on women. She states her intention to leave her family home and pursue employment upon completion of secondary education, thereby indicating a determination to break free from the constraints imposed by the domestic environment.

One could develop a substantial argument based on socialist feminist theories to demonstrate that Kek's strong desire to leave her home is linked to her resistance to exploitation. However, this may be at odds with the author's perception. I would suggest that her thinking is shaped more by traditional Chinese thought – a blend of Confucianism and Buddhism – than by feminism. This traditional ethical framework prioritises classical virtues over personal gain. Her concern for the welfare of her family was persistent and pervasive, manifesting itself throughout her day and night in a manner akin to the ebb and flow of the tide, as evidenced in her essays, such as "Island and Harbour" (2020). She is aware that the yield of her father's and brother's catches will impact the family's livelihood, and subsequently their emotional well-being, and happiness. For her, the abundance of clam meat and juice in the jars signifies an increase in the family's income, likely leading to fewer domestic disputes arising from financial constraints. Therefore, she is willing to dedicate her time and effort to the hard work, even without tangible or emotional reward.

Despite her best efforts, the financial situation of the family remains precarious. The essays "Swinging Song," written in the 1990s, and "The Edge of the Horizon," penned more recently, provide detailed accounts of the unfortunate circumstances faced by the fisherman's family and the subsequent tragedy that befell them. The elder brother incurred debt and made a bid for the purchase of a boat to increase his income. However, he was ultimately confronted with persistent debt collection from the proprietor of the fishing company and was forced to sell his catch at a significantly reduced price, which was not a viable solution. As a result of the higher bid, some acquaintances subsequently became creditors and would visit the family home to collect the debt in an unfriendly and detached manner. This inevitably resulted in a state of unease and distress within the family. Furthermore, the father, lacking an income, often demanded money from his family to fund his addiction to opium. This led to frequent conflicts with his sons, which further exacerbated the existing resentment between them. Additionally, the three older brothers were engaged in ongoing conflict, further complicating the family's challenges.

To escape the oppressive family environment, Kek felt compelled to stay at school after classes each day and visit the library on Saturdays and school holidays, uncertain about how to occupy herself on days when the library was closed. In instances when she was at home, she

describes her experience as “hearing the incessant lapping of the waves all day long and having to read aloud from textbooks to combat it” (2020, p. 141). The waves, from the metaphorical perspective, symbolise the unending domestic turbulence that afflicts her inner being. This imagery is in stark contrast to the male theorists’ use of the term “haven” as a metaphor for home. In Kek’s essays, the home is not a haven but rather the epicentre of the turmoil. Although the domestic turmoil did not result in physical injury, as is often the case with instances of domestic violence, it is evident that Kek was being exploited for the love and stability that she, as a minor at the time, required. Unfortunately, the adults in her family were preoccupied with meeting the basic needs of life to the extent that the provision of love and care appeared to be less of a priority.

In a study conducted by Tucker (1994), it was proposed that the term “runaways-from-home” is an inaccurate description of young people who leave their homes. He put forth the hypothesis that young people who flee their homes with the intention of evoking a specific response from their families are not, in fact, running away from their true homes, but rather from an environment they perceive as abusive (185). There are certain similarities between Kek’s situation and the case. In her essay, “The Mud Monkey,” the author suggests that the creature’s muddy habitat mirrors that of the fishermen. The creature, which rolls in the mud to survive, serves as a metaphor for individuals trapped in the confines of filth and ignorance. However, it is apparent that poverty is one of the primary factors contributing to the confined condition of her family. Consequently, Kek posits that a superior education can break the cycle of poverty, and she applied herself assiduously to her studies. It can thus be proposed that the situation she is so eager to escape is not an ethical concept of a home, but rather a locale characterised by ignorance and insecurity, and burdened by poverty. This is particularly evident in *Walking the Moonlight*, in which many essays were composed shortly after she left her familial residence.

Navigating The Journey: Home as a Place of Return and Reflection

The Book of Water, published over twenty years after the author’s *Walking the Moonlight*, presents the concept of home in a different and multifaceted manner. After years of living away from home and experiencing the ups and downs of her life, as previously outlined, Kek finally returns to the place she had previously sought to escape. In one of her essays, she states, “But now I have returned to my homeplace and settled on top of the waves” (2020, p. 194), where the image of “waves” reappears, but no longer as a metaphor for restlessness, as previously described. She employs a poetic rhetoric whereby she places the term “settle”, denoting stability and enduring consistency, on top of the “waves”, a metaphorical representation of the ebb and flow of life. This juxtaposition suggests that the author’s concerns, once characterized by anxiety and unease, now align with the natural rhythms of life, reflecting a state of inner calm and tranquillity.

The decision to return to her family home in middle age may have been influenced by the strong bond that she had with her mother since childhood. Kek, eager to escape the turmoil of her family situation, had previously left home in a determined manner, “pushing the pale daylight of the street back to her mother without looking back” (2020, pp. 108-109). However, her determination to leave the family home was, to a significant extent, influenced by her mother. As previously stated, Kek posits that a superior education could liberate an individual from the constraints of life, thereby facilitating a change to their fate. It seems reasonable to suggest that her mother played a significant role in fostering this awareness. In “Uncovering

the Rain Curtain,” Kek recounts a memory in which her mother searches the house for cash to purchase umbrellas for her sister and herself so that they can attend school. The motif of rain frequently appears in her prose, where she often intertwines the expression of sadness with the imagery of rain. In a symbolic sense, the author's mother was the first to “uncover the rain curtain” for her daughters, thereby creating an opportunity for them to escape from their unfortunate circumstances. It was her mother who provided the author's elder sister with the resources necessary for her to continue her studies, including the sourcing of her old textbooks and school uniforms. Her mother's efforts ultimately resolved the financial challenges that would have otherwise prevented her daughter from pursuing higher education. The author was herself a witness to her mother's struggles and unrelenting efforts to ensure her daughter's opportunity for higher education. This personal experience imbued her with the resolve to declare, “[I will] study for my mother, no matter what” (1999, pp. 37–38). Considering her mother's assertion that she was confined to the domestic sphere due to her children, the decision to “study for my mother” can be interpreted as a means of escaping the confines of life on behalf of her mother.

Subsequently, Kek was able to leave the family home and commence her studies at the university. Unfortunately, her mother passed away unexpectedly a few weeks after attending her university graduation ceremony. The trauma of her mother's sudden death left her feeling isolated and helpless, akin to an island adrift in a tempestuous sea (Kek, 2020, p. 193). Over a decade later, the experience of attending her mother's funeral continues to have a profound and distant impact on her. The profound attachment to her mother has imbued her former residence with a plethora of memories, particularly reflected in the essays compiled in the first section of *The Book of Water*. The essays provide a retrospective account of the author's upbringing, with frequent references to her mother's presence, both in tangible and intangible forms. The author's recollections of her mother extend beyond the boundaries of her home. It encompasses a variety of locations within the author's hometown, including the mangrove forest, the swamps, the coconut plantation, and other local areas. An illustrative example can be found in the essay entitled “Street,” in which the author's mother plays a significant role in linking together the various scenes situated in the neighbourhood, thereby signifying her consistent presence in the author's younger days. In reflecting on the past, she recollects memories of her mother and revisits her hometown in gradual steps. This can be considered an expansion of the meaning of home, which will be discussed in the next section.

The re-examination of the past, moreover, led to the unexpected “rediscovery” of her father. This appears to be a crucial element that contributed to her settling down in her homeplace. In her early prose, the image of her father was only somewhat worthy of reverence when he returned from a successful fishing trip, which demonstrated his contribution to the family's financial improvement. However, such recollections are rare. In many instances, her father made no significant contributions to the family; rather, he placed upon them additional burdens. Her father, who is depicted as an opium addict, is frequently depicted walking in a state of panting. During the late 1970s, when the government intensified its efforts to eradicate drugs and outlaw opium squatters, her father's drug addiction caused significant distress and concern for her family. In “The Mud Monkey,” the author offers a critique of adults who “repeatedly commit the same mistakes, neglect the education of the next generation, are addicted to drugs, gambling, superstition, cause trouble, and bring shame and disappointment to themselves and their families” (1999, p. 23). It can be argued that these characteristics are applicable to her father. Her father, who died before she left home for university, appears to

have left behind no meaningful legacy. The opium-smoking instruments that were found after his death were a source of shame. As Kek herself notes, her mother did not even glance at them, shouting, “Throw them away! What’s the point of keeping that stuff?” (2020, p.143).

The “rediscovery” of her father is primarily documented in *The Book of Water*. Considering the numerous similarities and continuities in the content present in this later publication, it can be proposed that this book signifies a rewriting and revision of the narrative elements initially presented in *Walking the Moonlight*. Revision can be defined as the act of looking back in fresh eyes which may result in the re-visioning of the stories (Rich, 1972). While the factual particulars of past events remain unalterable in any subsequent rewriting, the act of re-visioning enables the author to recuperate a degree of understanding and emotional response to the past, thereby facilitating a greater sense of emotional resolution. To illustrate, in “Island and Harbour”, Kek once again recalls the experience of shelling clams during her childhood. Although the distressing memories cannot be erased, rewriting the past offers her, who has already experienced the vicissitudes of life, a chance to reframe her memories and, in turn, to revise her perception of her father:

That morning, when I thought in my heart that the family would add some money, the days would be better, so I quickly and swiftly stood up from the small stool to stretch my waist, turned my head back, and froze. Abba was squatting at the five-foot way! He is watching my brothers and I work! At once I felt a warm fire shimmering in my heart. It was the first time that Abba was with us. When did Abba come out of the room? How long had he been crouching there? What was he thinking about? Everyone around us was busy. Abba’s face still had deep features, but he was crouching as a stone statue that had been eroded by the wind and rain, and he was so indifferent and lonely that he looked like a homeless man watching people come and go by the side of the road. I suddenly realised that even if Abba stayed home, he would not be able to integrate into the family! I had experienced that moment countless times, and once again looked at my father from afar, and softly called out “Abba!” in my heart. (2020, p.191)

The realisation that “Abba is with us” serves to compensate for her feelings of lack of love. At the same time, her memory is triggered by the sadness and loneliness her father experienced because of his inability to integrate into the family. This makes her feel a deep sympathy for him. This is, of course, the belated understanding and empathy of an adult daughter for her father after the passage of time. Adulthood has afforded her a different perspective on her father. In her childhood, she had perceived her father to be lacking in emotional expressiveness, which she attributed to a lack of affectionate parenting. On reflection, however, she recalls a scene in which her father shed tears at the funeral of his employer. This leads her to conclude that her initial assumption was wrong and that her father was not a stoic, emotionless figure. The belated compassion and warmth towards her father may have reawakened her dormant memories. As a result, Kek’s later prose portrays her father as a figure beyond the mere image of an unstable, wheezing opium addict. In one of her essays, she states that her father rises from his “squatting and smoking” position, holding a candle in his hand, lovingly escorting her to and from the riverbank in the darkness of the night “like a light boat” (2020, p.100). This revises the negative comments she had previously made about him in her earlier writings, such as characterising him as a drug addict who was a disgrace and disappointment to his family.

The evocation of warm memories prompted the emergence of sadness associated with her father's death, which had not been experienced for over three decades. The temporal distance and the author's life experience of more than thirty years have contributed to a widening of the gap between her present self and the once-heavy reality. This has resulted in a change of perspective regarding her family and home. The essay, "Living in a Bungalow House," provides a useful point of reference in this context. The essay depicts the author's experience of residing in her aunt's bungalow while preparing for the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) examination. The experience of staying in such a luxurious mansion undoubtedly fulfilled her long-held aspiration. However, as time passed, the initial excitement was replaced by feelings of solitude and inadequacy. From her position across the river, she observes the modest stilt house, constructed on a foundation of mud, which her family inhabits. The view from her distance provides a contrasting perspective on her hometown. Consequently, she came to understand that the fishing village, which initially appeared to lack vitality and to be underdeveloped, was, in fact, representative of a state of tranquillity and stability in life. It is a place to which she is inclined to return, reflective of her attachment to it as a place of belonging, a sense of home. The changes in her perceptions illustrate the fluidity of memory and home, which are complex in their relationship and vary across life stages (Massey, 1994; Tucker, 1994).

The profound affectional bond with her mother, as well as her subsequent reconciliation with her late father, which was achieved through the cathartic processes of writing and re-telling the past, eventually enabled Kek to move on from the distressful experiences of her past (Lim, 2020). This is effectively demonstrated in the essay entitled "A Strength-Exerting Afternoon". In this essay, the author recounts a childhood anecdote in which she describes her experience of peddling dumplings in the local area. In this narrative, the subject assumes the role of a passive observer, watching others engage in strenuous labour. By displacing her physical hardships – suffered in her efforts to support her family – onto the blacksmiths she observes, she effectively distances herself from the reality of her own toil. The recollection of her childhood, which was characterised by poverty and hardship, can thus be made to appear less onerous when she recalls it. Similarly, the bitterness associated with the hometown she had sought to leave behind, had also diminished under the same circumstances. Instead, the emotions experienced during these recollections appear to be characterised by tranquillity and serenity.

Defending Memory: Home As the Stronghold of Identity

As previously stated, home is complex and can be observed at multiple scalars and levels. In Kek's earlier essays, it is presented as a microscopic entity. However, following the experience of the fluctuations inherent to the journey of life and the subsequent return to the family home, the concept of home underwent a process of expansion. It is no longer constrained by the boundaries of the homeplace or the familial context. Instead, it has been expanded to encompass a specific place, her hometown, Pasir Penampang. This is demonstrated by her conscious depiction of her hometown landscape and her lyrical recollection of the place's historical past, which illustrates her attachment to it (Lewicka, 2008).

The concept of place attachment, situated within the realm of environmental meaning and association (Shamsudin & Ujang, 2008, p. 400), can be defined as an emotional bond between a person and the setting (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). Given the emotional bond she had formed with her mother, Kek repeatedly evoked her in her literary works. Similarly, her gradual attachment to her hometown prompted her to re-sketch the landscapes in which she had

previously lived. By employing detailed and evocative descriptions, she re-envisioned the vanished topography of the townships that once occupied the northern banks of the Selangor River. A personal and lyrical narrative imbues the human landscape with a sense of place. This demonstrates the crucial function of memory in her re-creation of the geographical environment and lived experience of this small fishing village. She recalls the scenes of electric boats operating between the two riverbanks, facilitating transportation for villagers. Subsequently, the Kuala Selangor Bridge was constructed during her secondary school years. The author notes that the inauguration of the bridge was met with enthusiasm by her fellow villagers, who found crossing it an intriguing experience. Additionally, she notes the impact of the construction of the bridge on the town's ecological landscape. In the early 1970s, the advent of the cinema in the town prompted a collective response from the local population, including herself, who would gather to watch the films, which were broadcast in a variety of languages. Furthermore, she documents the significant transformation of the landscape that occurred during the late 20th century. In the 1980s, the riverfront was lined with coconut fields, with a concentration of coconut oil factories, coconut sheds, and coconut roasters situated close to one another on the ferry to the north. However, the expansion of the oil palm industry ultimately resulted in the decline of the coconut grove landscape, which led to the extinction of several aspects of daily life. These include the coconut husk, which was previously used as fuel, the sound of the oil refinery's *gong* that marked the passage of time, the paths that villagers used to walk on, the ditches and channels that surrounded the coconut grove, and the sluice gates that were dismantled in the 1990s.

It is worthy of note that Kek's recent writings about her hometown have been formed in response to the considerable changes that have taken place in the region. The growth of the tourism industry has resulted in significant changes in the regional economy, with the emergence of numerous new commercial enterprises. These include fishing companies, restaurants specialising in seafood, homestays, and speedboat companies. Such developments have had a considerable impact on the natural landscape and the pace of life in the area. In one of her essays, she reveals that a representative of a land developer visited her and informed her that the developer intended to demolish approximately a dozen houses in the neighbourhood for tourism development. She was astonished and disheartened to discover that the embankment in front of her house, the setting of a memorable journey with her father on a dark night, was at risk of becoming a road that would never be revisited. This consequently prompted her to embark on the writing of her essays (2020, p. 102). In this sense, the reconstruction of the landscape through writing is not only a nostalgic review; it is also a means of preserving the imprints of the past and the history of the home. In this way, home can be seen as a construct that serves to resist the erasure of the past by consumerism and capitalism. This is analogous to bell hook's assertion that home is "a site of resistance" (1990, p. 45), albeit with a different connotation.

The positioning of an individual within a specific setting or context, along with the emotional and perceptual associations that emerge from this, contribute to the formation of their identity. It can be argued that Kek's writing on Pasir Penampang demonstrates the contemplation of her origins and relation with the place. This aligns with the assertion that "questions of 'who we are' are often intimately related to questions of 'where we are'" (Dixon & Durrheim, 2007, p. 27). In *The Book of Water*, the author initiated a deliberate practice of referring to the river that flows alongside her house, the Selangor River, as the object of her observation. Moreover, the river is affectionately compared to a teacher, sibling, and mother

(Kek, 2020, p. 131). In essence, her writing on the river represents an act of contemplating her origins. This is evident in her essay, "Water Pen," in which she draws on the metaphor of the "water pen" (the Chinese common name for *Kandelia obovate*) from her memories of travelling with her mother to the swamps to cut down mangroves for firewood. In an unfavourable environment, the characteristics of this mangrove viviparous seedling are described as follows: "It falls to the ground and plunges into the soft mud, taking root and thriving as soon as it has secured its place, or else it goes with the flow" (2020, p. 49). In this metaphor, the "water pen" embodies the struggles and perseverance of her forefathers, who similarly "came from a difficult background" (p. 52) before finally settling at the Selangor estuary after a period of extensive wandering. The symbolic meaning of the place in relation to the family's history of striving and rootedness provides an explanation for its significance to the author. This is consistent with the argument put forth by scholars that place attachment is based on the symbolic meanings attributed to specific locations. As we ascribe importance to landscapes, we, in turn, become attached to those meanings (Stedman, 2002).

Kek's forefathers originally hailed from Hui'an, a county within the province of Fujian in China. In her earlier essay, "A Dream Made of Granite," the author depicts her visit to her long-abandoned ancestral home in Hui'an, which she refers to as "home", and describes the experience as a sort of "pilgrimage" (1999, p.55). However, a substantial shift in her notion of home and sense of identification can be observed in her recent essays compiled in *The Book of Water*. "The Edge of the Horizon," for instance, presents the historical trajectory of the family within the broader context of local history. The historical events preceding her birth, or too early for her to recall, are narrated through her mother's account. The text is inscribed in Chinese characters, yet it is expressed in a fusion of dialect and local language (Hokkien and Malay in this case), thereby exemplifying the linguistic characteristics of a "mother tongue" in the context of Chinese Malaysian identity. Moreover, the narrative portrays the intertwined relationship between individual experiences and local politics, including the Japanese occupation and the May 13 Incident. Notably, narratives play a crucial role in the formation of individual and collective identities. Stories that are passed down through generations and recounted in the home serve to affirm family memory and identity over time (Ratnam, 2018). In this context, the narrative of her mother marks a change in their identity.

Additionally, in the aforementioned essay, Kek recollects her experiences after entering school in the 1970s. She depicts the penetration of the National Language Act and the National Culture Policy, which exclusively honoured the Malay language and culture, into the hearts and minds of the local people through the media of education and broadcasting. The impact of the New Economic Policy on people's livelihoods was similarly profound. However, as she claims, the policy "forgot about us fishermen," resulting in "my family's rice storage bin often being empty. When I scraped the wall of the bin with an empty condensed milk can, all that came out was the sound of shrill protests and grunts" (2020, p.139). It is worthy of note that the economic situation of the fisherman's family, which was portrayed in a realistic light, was only perceived within the context of family disputes in her earlier essays. The revision of her upbringing and the family's poverty in the light of national policies, thus, suggests a realisation of her place identity.

The notion of identity is brought into sharper focus when the author reflects on the final resting place of her grandparents in "The Rocks on a Hill". The remains of her grandparents are buried on the hill, which is locally known as Bukit or, on occasion, Royal Hill, due to its status as the royal burial place for the first three Sultans of Selangor. Notwithstanding the lack of

certainty regarding the precise location of her grandparents' graves, which has been caused by the superstitious actions of their descendants who neglected them for an extended period, the author provides a concise biographical account of them in the essay. Furthermore, she postulates how their coffins were transported across the harbour during the Japanese occupation period when they were laid to rest in this locale with the assistance of their relatives and fellow villagers. The sketch serves to provide a brief history for her forefathers and to signal the end of their diaspora.

The burial of Kek's ancestors at Bukit symbolises the rootedness of their clan in this land, establishing the basis for her identity and transforming it into a place that can be called a homeland. She contrasts the graves of her forefathers in the south of the hill with the tombs of the first three Sultans of Selangor in the north, indicating that the Bugis forefathers of the Selangor royal family and the immigrants from Tongsan had long since become "one family" on this Bukit. The phrase "we are all one family", coined by the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim during the late 1990s, has been widely embraced by the Chinese community. However, despite this apparent consensus, the distinction between ethnic positions remains evident. Indeed, the long-standing ethnic politics has served to further entrench ethnic relations (see Muslim et al., 2022; and Chin, 2022, for a further discussion of ethnic relations in Malaysia). The author employs metaphorical rhetoric to convey the impression that, despite the propagation of the notion of a unified "family", the various ethnic groups remain separated by metaphorical "columns" (2020, p. 47). Nevertheless, the poem "The Faith of Little Flower" by Gu Cheng, cited at the end of the essay, offers insight into Kek's perspective. This poem portrays the hope that the stones on the hill will eventually be touched and will respond with kindness to the little flower (pp. 47-48). This suggests the strong faith that Kek has in her identity.

CONCLUSION

The evolving meaning of home as presented in Kek's essays is illustrative of the concept's inherent fluidity. Initially, it represents the centre of the storm from which the author flees. It then becomes the resting place to which she returns after navigating the ups and downs of her life. Subsequently, it becomes the site where she battles against the erasure of her past, ultimately becoming the stronghold where her identity is rooted. The evolution of the concept of home is posited to be pertinent to an individual's social relations and the flux of personal memories. In Kek's case, her profound emotional attachment to her mother initially prompted her to flee the family home in search of a more promising life. However, this bond later played a pivotal role in her decision to return. The reconciliation with her late father, caused by the renewal of her memories, further contributed to her deep identification with home after her return. Furthermore, her experiences with illness, frustration, and other challenges in life, along with her devout religious beliefs, are also factors that cannot be disregarded.

Given geography's theory that neither home nor identity are fixed but are mutually and continuously co-constituted (Gorman-Murray & Dowling, 2007), it can be argued that the changing connotations of home in Kek's literary work have an impact on the changes in her identity, particularly evident in her later essays. The emotional attachment to her parents expands into an identification with place. The muddy place in which her parents and ancestors took root thus transformed from a reference to poverty to a symbol of her family's and her own "roots". We can therefore conclude that her "home-making" journey starts from the domestic

environment of her home but then expands into a quest for the homeland, which serves both as a physical place that she identifies as home, and as an abstract concept.

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