

## Noir Sensibility and the Mystical East in Amir Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" of Amir Muhammad's *KL Noir: Red*

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines Amir Hafizi's "The Unbeliever", one noir story taken from Amir Muhammad's KL Noir: Red (2013), a noir anthology published in Malaysia. Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" is a self-claimed noir work contained by noir sensibility with portrayals of postcolonial experiences written from the perspective of contemporary-postcolonial Malaysian society. Both its noir sensibility and postcolonial experiences constitute the darkness and alienation which are commonly associated with noir fiction. Consequently, this paper looks into noir sensibility or noir parameters that construct Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" and, simultaneously, the inclusion of subversion of the West and East as a fragment of the postcolonial experiences that can also function as noir sensibility. The finding shows that the noir sensibility is manifested, firstly, by the noir theme comprising issues of mysticism and violence and, secondly, by the noir protagonist who is doomed and alienated. Additionally, the mystical East represented by the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul, the Queen of the Sea, has drowned the characters into darkness, chaos and, most importantly, subversion of the West and the East binary. Thus, they impressively shape this story to be a noir narrative with postcolonial issue.*

*Keywords: noir sensibility; mysticism; subversion; postcolonialism*

### INTRODUCTION

Known as a dark and bleak narrative that are actually much influenced by hard-boiled fiction and film noir, noir fiction has its own quality to portray dark sides of humanity. Humanity and its darkness are narrated, or even criticized, within noir fiction through its noir elements such as tone of pessimism and alienation, themes of criminality and violence, and unhappy endings. These noir elements are, in fact, inherited from the historical context of how noir fiction has been born under the realm of post-war situations. The emergence of noir fiction and its darkness is summarized by Catherine Jenkins in the following quotation:

"Many factors contributed to this dark mood that swept through the arts from the 1920s until the 1950s. Society was reeling from two world wars. A severe economic depression hit many countries in the 1930s. Belief in religion and God had been shaken by the onslaught of science and by a perceived breakdown of human morality. Belief in an intrinsic goodness in humanity seemed almost naive in light of the bleakness of war and poverty. In the United States, prohibition caused an increase in gang violence as well as rampant government and police corruption." (Jenkins 1996, p. 1)

Clearly, post-war effects have shadowed the mood of literary production where despair, depression, and bleakness are intensely captured, and noir fiction, which was known as hardboiled narrative at that time, is also influenced. The excessive exposure of criminality and violence found in most pioneering noir fiction can be understood as the ultimate response towards the sickening post-war atmosphere and its catastrophic aftermath. In line with this, Wheeler W. Dixon also mentions that historically noir served as the most authentic version of the inherent corruption and complacency of post-war life where noir was able to capture bleakness, dislocation, and other irritating consequences of war (Dixon 2009, p. 1). In short,

noir fiction and its narrative of pessimism, alienation, and darkness are initially written to continue the gloomy atmosphere brought by the wars.

Although noir fiction has been originally much influenced by the post-war effects, its darkness and bleakness remain to be variously manifested in the contemporary noir genre. According to Madison Davis, the fact that there are more noir works being produced and the availability can be found across the globe nowadays may suggest “another sign that we live in a “noir” age - sceptical, if not cynical, about heroism in particular and greatness in general” (Davis 2010, p. 10). Here, the nuance of noir has been considerably lingering to a broader meaning of darkness, which is not due to the post-wars any longer, instead the darkness that is caused by people’s being sceptical and cynical, for instance. To this extent, noir fiction become stories that reveal “the darker sides of mankind” (Breu 2005); consequently, this may result more emergences of noir works portraying various versions of dark narratives.

Furthermore, noir works are also available in the discourse of Malaysian literature written in English. The charming of noir genre and its noir sensibility have been utilized to narrate stories of bleakness and pessimism from Malaysian society. One noir work published in Malaysian literature in English is the *KL Noir* series. *KL Noir* series that are written in form of self-titled noir anthologies were published by Fixi Novo in 2013 and 2014. The series are tetralogy e.g. *KL Noir: Red* (2013), *KL Noir: White* (2013), *KL Noir: Blue* (2014), *KL Noir: Yellow* (2014) comprising various noir narratives from Malaysian society. The publication of *KL Noir* has introduced noir genre to the wider readership in Malaysia and also in the Southeast Asian region. Thus, this study attempts to examine one noir work in order to demonstrate what constructs the dark narratives from Malaysian noir anthology, and whether or not the noir narrative differently offers the meaning of darkness. Portraying a slightly different depiction of dark and bleak noir narrative, Amir Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” of Amir Muhammad’s *KL Noir: Red* is chosen to be analyzed.

As a noir work, Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” encompasses the tone of darkness and alienation that revolves around mysticism. Having noir story with mysticism is surprisingly unique. Noir with mysticism can be considered distinctive because it shifts away from the theme that is commonly linked to noir fiction. Several studies on noir fiction show that criminality and violence are two integral themes of noir genre. In fact, the close association of noir fiction and criminality is perceived as “crime is a way of being, not just a sensational act” (Andryeyev 2012, p. 11). This means criminality constructs noir texts, and a noir text itself can be solely associated with criminality. However, Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” offers a distinctive noir narrative from Malaysian society because it does not much expose criminality. Instead, it exposes mysticism and supernaturalism to reveal the dark sides, the *noir*, of the story, and violence only occurs after the mysticism is exposed. In addition, its noir protagonist, the unnamed narrator, who succumbs to the West values of life after he moves to the United States at the very early age of 19 years old does not only demonstrate the generic character of being a doomed noir protagonist but also vocalize postcolonial experiences. The relations of the noir protagonist and other characters denote issues of such postcolonial experiences. As such, this postcolonial experience exposed in “The Unbeliever” is argued as an added noir element that darkens the work.

In brief, Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” is about the quest of the unnamed narrator, a Malaysian-Malay, who is actually a descendant of Bugis tribe, and two American researchers, David and Elise, who travel to discover instances of idolatry and spirit worship in Southeast Asia. Their research embarks in the Straits of Melaka and explores Selangor to figure out what they have been investigating. This American couple is portrayed as the western people who are curious with the glory that their ancestors had done before by “[tracking] down several belief systems and religions as they spread from ancient Europe to the rest of the world”, and, thus, David and Elise want to prove that “it would be a big thing if

they could find evidence of similar rituals in Southeast Asia” (Hafizi 2013, p. 234). Unfortunately, these American researchers are not only fascinated by their enthusiasm to investigate rituals and belief systems but also absorbed to conduct mystical rituals that they are not allowed to do. They are impressed by the magical power of the mystical east: Nyai Roro Kidul. These instances are dragging them to their downfall and ruining everything they have, including their lives. Here is where the darkness of this story is presumably derived from. Their coming to Southeast Asia and their curiosity to do rituals of summoning Nyi Roro Kidul, the deity of the Sea, are going to be shown as depictions of West and the East binary. Meanwhile, the unnamed narrator who shows himself more as a half-westernized grownup and who disconnects himself from being Moslem Malay is going to be mostly seen as a representation of the East. Although he seems to be brainwashed, he eventually remains to be the East. His being westernized and brainwashed succumbs himself to be half-westernized inside; however, his surrounding does not easily accept him for being half-westernized, for being just like them, the West. Therefore, this study is going to show how this binary is actually subverted and contested, and, accordingly, the subverted and contested binary contributes to the emergence of darkness and alienation of this noir story.

There are two research objectives: first, looking into the noir parameters, and second, showing the postcolonial issue of the work i.e. subversion of the West and East binary. They are carried out to support the contention that the noir sensibility is also informed by the postcolonial dynamics. In other words, this study shows that Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” fits into the criteria of noir fiction as it is constituted by noir sensibility and postcolonial experience.

#### NOIR AND NOIR SENSIBILITY

Noir is constructed by some noir parameters that are also called as noir sensibility. Through these noir parameters the characteristics of being noir works are identified. Summarized from various previous-related studies, noir parameters known are mood of noir that will be associated with “cynically pessimistic mood”, “bleakly existential tone” (Holt 2006, p. 24) and also tone of “dark cynicism and alienation” (Conard 2006, p. 10); in fact, the narrative drive in noir comes from weakness and guilt (Fluck 2009, p. 300). In noir sensibility, mood and tone are the essential color signifying the meaning of *noir*: dark, bleak, pessimistic, and alienated. Next, highlighting on the ending of noir narratives, Penzler explains that the noir story with a happy ending has never been written, nor can it be because “the lost and corrupt souls who populate these tales were doomed before the readers met them because of their hollow hearts and depraved sensibilities” (Penzler 2011). This is also slightly related to how characters in noir fiction are mostly narrated. The occurrence of *femme fatale* and noir protagonist is regarded as the two essential parts in noir fiction albeit their involvement in the discourse of noir fiction. The former is defined as “deceitful women who like to use their sexual allure to mislead the detective” (McCan, p. 53), and also the woman figure “who lured the noir protagonist to his doom (or in some case, falling into the abyss with him)” (Zeltserman 2016). Meanwhile, the latter is always associated with “self-destructive individuals” (Guzman-Medrano 2013, p. 15) and “morally ambiguous and unquestionably evil [people]” (Holt 2006, p. 24). Noir protagonist also includes ‘the weak-minded, the losers, the bottom-feeders, the obsessives, the compulsives, and the psychopaths’ (Duncan 2000, p. 8). These definitions of noir protagonist illustrate how noir protagonist is doomed.

Noir protagonist is one noir parameter that undergoes extensive changes. As noir fiction is highly inspired by hardboiled detective story and crime fiction, its pioneering noir character is mostly (private) detective character. These protagonist detectives are

characterized as being hard-boiled and bestowed with “methods of detection [that] must as be of necessity brutal as well as quick-witted in order to survive the savage urban milieu in which these characters live”, and to achieve this goal, “[h]is modus operandi is often extra-legal or even illegal. He uses extortion, seduction, and torture as tools of his trade” (Simpson 2010, p. 191). Through these characteristics, Philip Simpson underlines that through the works of pioneering noir authors such as James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler the hard-boiled detectives run their harsh lives to solve their detection cases. This hard-boiled detective protagonist befitted a prominent formula for pioneering noir writing around 1920s. However, as noir genre has been interpreted differently by its authors, noir fiction in the contemporary era does not certainly conform to the occurrence of hard-boiled detective any longer. Interestingly, what they preserve is the attributes of being hard-boiled, harsh and violent to be accordingly associated as noir characters. A study reported by Bonnie Rhee Andryeyev confirms there is no detective figure in the current American noir texts (Andryeyev 2012, p. 11). In line with this development, Rune Christensen identifies that the noir characters are “monsters, criminals, or victims of illness; nothing excuses them, and they act as they do simply because of a fatal, inner evil”. (Christensen 2009, p. 17). This implies that the noir protagonists are not necessarily detective characters; they are beyond detective characters, yet they retain their characteristics of being hardboiled. To sum up, omission of detective characters and preservation of hardboiled characterization display the fluidity of noir sensibility, particularly the noir character.

Another fluid noir parameter is noir theme. Based on some studies on criminality in noir narratives, criminality demonstrates a notion of being fluid and shifting. What Foster Hirsch has found that noir deals with criminal activity from a variety of perspectives definitely attempts to emphasize that criminality is prevalently exposed in noir stories (Hirsch 1981, p. 72). Additionally, according to Simpson, scrutinizing some prototypical noir works, he further finds out that the emphasis of criminality is put on “the psyches of those who commit the crimes” (Simpson 2010, p. 191). This suggests that the criminals and their psyches are taken as the focus of what defines noir sensibility from the classical noir tradition. The tone and mood of bleakness from the earlier noir works are shaped by the criminals’ suffering from panic and fear as a consequence of being hunted by detective protagonists. The fluidity of noir fiction, in terms of its theme of criminality, is shown by what has been investigated in the contemporary American noir narrative. Here, criminality is “more concerned about the reason why a crime was committed” (Guzman-Medrano 2013, p. 19). It can be seen that criminality is narrated under different concern in which ‘why’ matters more than ‘who and how’ which expands from the earlier preoccupation depicted in the classical tradition i.e. ‘who’ committed the crime and their fear and psyches. To this extent, these studies indicate how the shifting mode of criminality happens and, gradually, it may change the concept of criminality exposed in noir fiction in the future. As a noir theme, criminality, thus far, consistently constitutes the noir sensibility, yet its fluidity is inevitably occurring expanding towards the reason of committing the crime rather than who the criminals are and how they commit the crime.

Thus far, noir sensibility e.g. tone and mood, noir characters, ending of noir fiction, and noir theme have been discussed, and some of them have shown their fluid mode. These noir parameters can be considered as a checklist to understand the construction of noir narratives and to justify whether particular works really fit into the noir category or not. What should be taken into account is that what Jenkins has emphasized that “not all of these elements are necessarily present in every novel” in order to call is a noir narrative (Jenkins 1996, p. 9). This functions as a significant perspective in order to scrutinize the noir parameters embodied in Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” that not all abovementioned noir parameters are necessarily prevalent to validate its generic characteristic as noir fiction.

Therefore, in this paper, noir theme and noir protagonist are going to be analyzed further to show the noir sensibility of Hafizi's "The Unbeliever".

Fluidity shown in noir theme is highly anticipated as a result of people's diverse interpretation of *noir*, or darkness, which is differently perceived from time to time. As mentioned earlier, in its early pioneering era of noir fiction, darkness and bleakness were informed by the post-war aftermath. As the time progresses, there is possibility that noir or darkness is informed by some other concerns. For instance, understanding the hallmark of noir proposed by Jenkins may add up broader meaning of *noir* and, thus, expand the noir sensibility in one noir narrative. The following quotation explains what Jenkins identifies as the hallmark of noir:

"[Noir is] fear, guilt, and loneliness, breakdown and despair, sexual obsession and social corruption, a sense that the world is controlled by malignant forces preying on us, a rejection of happy endings and a preference for resolution heavy with doom but always redeemed by a breathtakingly vivid poetry of word (if the work was a novel or story) or image (if the work was a movie)"  
(Jenkins 1996, p. 8).

Here, works of art with noir style are employed to capture the world's fear and despair which are multi-interpreted and must have been affected by various anxieties. Fear and despair are manifested within the noir works to portray people's fear and despair because of morality, social problems, corruption, and any other concerns with a single purpose that these anxieties have burdened and worried them, and, eventually, they darken and make their lives bleak. Finally, the fact that fear and despair in noir can be initiated by various concerns and anxieties in this world becomes one reason to propose postcolonial experience as one possible source of fear and despair in this study. This concurs with what is mentioned earlier that Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" portrays a slightly different meaning of darkness and bleakness in the story. Occurrence of postcolonial experience within this noir work cannot be overlooked as a significant source of fear, despair and thus bleakness that can conclude the possibility of including postcolonial issues as one source of darkness in the noir narrative.

Studying noir narratives by employing postcolonial lens has not gained much attention, yet it does not mean that such study is never conducted. Analyzing Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon*, a novel of Caribbean literature, Irina Dzero tries to justify that Condé's *Heremakhonon* can be considered as noir because some "noir internal logic" is found within the work (Dzero 2015, p. 4). Her term noir internal logic consists of the depiction of the crime and the doomed noir protagonist who is a female investigator. The crime in the novel "exposes the corruption of the elite who, pretending to work in the people's interest, oppress their compatriots in order to gain greater power." (Dzero 2015, p. 4). These two noir parameters are identified to justify that Condé's *Heremakhonon* is possibly classified as noir work. To this extent, her study shows how the checklist method involving the noir parameters is applied. Simultaneously, looking into the depiction of the crime, Dzero recognizes depictions of postcolonial experiences as she argues that "the work reveals that the elite, who claim to be the mainstay of justice and order, abuse their power", and the elites "whitewashed the instruments and structures of domination, marginalization, exploitation and repression and continued the colonial-era repression" (Dzero 2015, p. 7). The comparable fear and despair imposed by the colonizers are reoccurring. The neo-colonialism is apparent in this noir novel as Dzero observes that the work exhibits "the local elites who replaced colonial powers control their subjects by means of supremacist, paternalistic, and racist discourse, just as white colonialists did before them." (Dzero 2015, p. 8). Here, the postcolonial experiences are argued to be influential to darken the story, to convince the novel is a noir narrative.

Postcolonial lens to scrutinize Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" is based on the postcolonial experiences depicted in its story. It centers on the binary of the West and East, particularly



about how the East is being imagined and represented by the West. As part of postcolonialism, Edward Said's concept of Orientalism is taken into account to be the underlying theory. Said's Orientalism shows how a massive and ancient discursive regime has taken these essentially mobile positions and fixed them in relation to an imaginary centre in Europe (Easthope 1998, p. 145). Consequently, the centre in Europe defines the non-centre using its own perspective where the position of Orient "becomes an object which could be known by a European subject as it could not know itself" (ibid). This is where the Orient is defined by what the (European) Occident perceives them, which is mostly inferior; the Orient is referred to define the East and its relation to the Occident/ the West.

The one-sided representation of the East by the West makes Said delineate Orientalism, briefly, "as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1979, p. 3). This 'East and West relation' is imposed triggering a particular relationship between Occident and Orient as "a relationship of power, of dominant, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 1979, p. 5). The complex hegemony creates binary opposition, Said explains, as "on the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things" (Said 1979, p. 49). The latter referring to the Eastern or the Orient is belittlingly defined after the Western defines itself with such "apogee confidence" (ibid). This binary opposition is imbalance and one-sided relationship of power that can be geographically, morally, and culturally projected and found in various 'texts', including noir works. The imbalance binary of the West and East is presented, yet its subversion is also identified. In fact, this subversion of representation of the West and the East informs and constructs the noir theme and, eventually, creates the darkness and bleakness of the noir story. Therefore, the subversion of the West and the East is proposed to be part of the noir sensibility in Hafizi's "The Unbeliever".

## METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted under the perspective of literary studies in which the data are taken from one noir story entitled "The Unbeliever" written by Amir Hafizi. A checklist of noir parameters and postcolonial theory, particularly Orientalism, are employed as the underlying theories in order to answer the research objectives. The first research objective is answered by the checklist of noir parameters to justify the noir sensibility of Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" while Orientalism is to meet the second research objective. The checklist of noir parameters is adopted from Dzero (2015) and Redhead (2016) where they propose that a checklist with noir parameters is considered helpful to study what noir parameters construct the noir works. Similarly, Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" is going to be analyzed by using the checklist in order to confirm the noir sensibility constructing the work of noir. Orientalism is to explain the depictions of the binary opposition and its subversion found in the noir work. Finally, employing qualitative-analytic method of analysis, this study employs the two theories to select, limit and analyze the data so that the research can result the expected finding of a literary analysis on Hafizi's "The Unbeliever".

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Noir sensibility is presented by the noir theme i.e. violence and mysticism and noir protagonist which is categorized by its generic elements of being doomed and alienated

characters. Another finding shows that subversion of West and East binary is challenged to be part the source of noir sensibility in Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" in which the figure of the mystical East, Nyai Roro Kidul, becomes the fatal and powerful entity that triggers and causes this subversion.

VIOLENCE, MYSTICISM, AND DOOMED AND ALIENATED NOIR PROTAGONIST: NOIR  
SENSIBILITY OF AMIR HAFIZI'S "THE UNBELIEVER"

Noir sensibility of Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" is firstly constituted by its noir theme. Its noir theme can be arguably distinctive due to two reasons: firstly, the absence of criminality and gangsters that are commonly apparent in noir texts and, secondly, the occurrence of mysticism that has not been much scholarly explored in the scholarship of noir genre. Consequently, the theme of mysticism locates "The Unbeliever" as one noir story with a slightly different noir theme from the noir tradition. Also, the theme offers a different meaning of darkness by exploring the dreadful and mysterious sides of mysticism and supernaturalism that are practiced in Southeast Asia. The notion of violence occurs only after the mysticism terrorizes the characters in the story. Violence cannot be said as the main noir theme because this story is evidently constituted by the madness and bleakness of mysticism that triggers violence to happen. The emergence of mysticism and its horrifying aftershock have been able to maintain the fatalistic mood and tone that must be preserved by a noir text. Instances of mysticism and violence are found when David is interested to investigate the practices of belief system, and he savagely acts as he succumbs to the ritual of summoning Nyi Roro Kidul. This summoning ritual turns into chaotic and violent because David is spiritually possessed, and he sacrifices his unborn child by cutting it out of a still alive Elise. The scene is brutally horrifying when it describes David as "a fair skinned man wearing a large wooden mask" who was "doing a weird dance" and "jumping about and holding a *keris*" (Hafizi 2013, p. 254). At this point, mysticism is shown more influential to suggest the noir theme whereas violence is considered as its severe aftereffect.

Portraying mysticism as its main noir theme that is shadowed by violence, "The Unbeliever" accordingly fits into the category of noir narrative. Mysticism uninterruptedly functions to maintain the fear, distress and chaos required within the construction of a noir narrative as suggested by the hallmark of noir. In the second part of this section, mysticism as the noir theme is discussed further to show how mysticism has contributed to the complexity of noir sensibility of Hafizi's "The Unbeliever".

Noir sensibility of "The Unbeliever" is also informed by the noir protagonist who is always associated with doomed and alienated characterization. To begin with, Hafizi's decision to create an unnamed noir protagonist-narrator shows how he has attempted to meet the requirement of being a noir protagonist. Oftentimes, a noir protagonist is born with no names to signify that noir protagonist and his being doomed and alienation can happen randomly to any people, any names, and, thus, names are not essential. What makes a noir protagonist essentially more important is what they have done to show that they are "self-destructive individuals" (Guzman-Medrano 2013, p. 15). The unnamed noir protagonist has fundamentally shown his being self-destructive and, consequently, he is doomed of his own making" (Zeltserman 2016). In "The Unbeliever", the unnamed noir protagonist who happens to be the narrator undergoes a significant journey in his life where he has spent his life in the United States studying, working and finally settling his life with jobs. His journey to the West is meaningfully read as a turning point where the nameless protagonist-narrator cannot resist himself to live the Western life. The journey to the West changes him to be half-westernized and, thus, his doom is anticipated.

Portrayals of the unnamed narrator being doomed and alienated are seen through his interaction with his western fellow-researchers and his fellow Malaysians. The unnamed narrator who returns to his origin is not able to completely bear his own identity as Bugis-Moslem Malaysian. First, his interaction with his fellow-researcher, Elise, shows how he tries to emulate the west life, thinks that he is equal with the western people around him, and, thus, he deserves to win Elise's heart. Growing his feeling to Elise, he is pining for Elise, someone representing the West whom he confidently imagines to conquer. The narrator grows his feeling yet ignores the fact that Elise is already married, and he innocently overlooks that she always views him as a friend. Based on one instance when Elise is having a moment with her husband, the narrator cannot help but notice her as the narrator mentions, "I tried not to glance in the mirror, tried to be somewhere else, but I couldn't help but catch the sweet trill of Elise's giggle" (Hafizi 2013, p. 232). He is dazzled by Elise's sweet laugh that he finds really charming. He is in love with her. This is the starting point of being doomed as the noir protagonist of this noir story when he cannot resist himself to act like the West and, later towards the end of the story, he is condemned and destructively ruins himself.

The fact that the narrator grows his feeling to Elise at least serves two important notions from the perspective of how the West and the East commonly represent each other. First, his feeling serves an indication that the narrator perpetuates the colonial discourse of finding women of the Occident desirable and superior than those of the Orient. Second, it highlights the fact that in comparison to an Occidental man, represented by Elise's husband, the narrator who is an Oriental man will never become the Occidental woman's first choice. The narrator will always be secondly ranked to the Occidental man. At this point, the feeling the narrator has for Elise evidently represents the binary of the West and the East. This is made apparent as David is aware of the narrator's feeling towards his wife that is shown when Elise and the narrator have a discussion on how he should find closure with the family that has disowned him. The scene illustrates David who "burst into the house, clad only in a sarong" questions the other two about what they are doing behind his back (Hafizi 2013, p. 247). The narrator does think that David only jokes around as he proceeds to be playful and laugh with his wife, but the narrator sees that "for a brief moment, I could see an almost deranged glint on his face" implying that David is really disturbed by what seems to be odd between his wife and the narrator (ibid). Consequently, although David is aware of the narrator's feelings, he is also aware about the narrator's status of being an Oriental man, which is why he does not feel threatened and still allows the narrator to interact with his wife. David's superiority as a white man wins the hierarchy between his standing as a white man and the narrator's as the non-white one.

Another consequence of being doomed and undervalued is apparent by looking into the narrator's position between his two American colleagues. He is consistently stratified under their whiteness, including both under white man and white woman. This suggests that the narrator inhabits his actual space despite his adoption of West values. He will not once equally stand with them because in reality he is a man of the Orient, and he is never taken seriously, accordingly. The idea that the narrator, as the Oriental man, will never be considered as the first choice of an Occidental woman is also illustrated by the relationship that the narrator builds with Elise. The narrator's emulation the West harms him as he is consistently ranked lower than the White men and White women, including in his love relationship.

Not only has David underestimated the narrator, the hierarchy placing the narrator as the Orient and Elise as the Occidental woman is also prevalent. Elise makes it obvious for him when the narrator praises her for wearing beautiful "baju kurung and a sarong" (Hafizi 2013, p. 245), Elise responds it by laughing, and she says to him, "I had hoped David would notice" (Hafizi 2013, p. 246). It is only David that Elise expects to see her beauty; Elise



prefers her husband rather than the narrator. This response is a clear indication to the narrator's actual position that is lower than them. As an Occidental woman, she is ranked higher than the narrator, the East man, which is why she is comfortable enough to tell the narrator that his affection towards her is appreciated, however, it is unwarranted. This is seen in the following dialogue they have together where she tells the narrator, "We can't keep doing this", followed by, "I'm a woman. I know. You've been such a dear friend and I have used you so. Abused you, as a friend" (Hafizi 2013, p. 246). This lets the narrator go down gently, yet it effectively puts him in his rightful place, the secondary man, someone who is always the friend to be used and abused, but he never becomes her equal partner to be loved. To this extent, the narrator's irresistible submission to the West and his confidence of acting equally like the West accordingly has punished and doomed him as he remains to be treated as what his origin suggests, the East man.

This noir story also emphasizes how the hierarchy is irreplaceable. The narrator will never substitute David despite the narrator's devotion to Elise. Although the portrayal of the Oriental man's victory over the Occidental woman is temporarily shown; in fact, this shows how rigid the hierarchy is. The fact that the narrator saves Elise after the ordeal of summoning Nyi Roro Kidul and causing David's death cannot change how Elise perceives the narrator in her life. Elise and the narrator manage to return alive to the United States, yet Elise remains living insecure and feeling scared by that particular ordeal. The narrator can be around Elise for some times as the narrator states that they are able to "make love" a year after the ordeal, yet the fact that Elise "ended up crying" suggests that she is not really stable (Hafizi 2013, p. 258). This suggests how Elise cannot easily replace David's position as her savior, not even by the narrator who has saved her life for real. Elise's final decision to commit suicide justifies her stance that she is not easily tamed by the East man. Thus far, the unnamed protagonist-narrator demonstrates his destined characterization of being noir protagonist. He starts his destiny by being emulated and irresistibly succumbed to the West, and then this makes him doomed and punished as he is being unequally treated by the West. The narrator also shows what Redhead suggests that "the protagonist was guilty of something, and complicit in their own downfall. They had to know what they were doing was wrong, but be unable to resist their desire. There had to be some examination of class, economics and gender relations (all thematic noir staples)" (Redhead 2016, p. 4). As explained earlier, the narrator's class and genre as an East man are being examined by the hierarchy that the West and the East prolong.

Another generic element is the protagonist's alienation. The alienation is his manifestation of his being westernized, and it is reflected when he departs himself from the shared culture of being Malaysian. An instance can be seen when the narrator meets up an old friend of his, Rob, an American living in Malaysia and gets introduced to Rob's wife, Linda. Linda is "a pretty little Malay girl", yet the narrator inferiorly deems her due to what he believes to be Linda's failed imitation of looking like a Western woman as he describes her having "dyed her hair brown and wore bluish contacts" (Hafizi 2013, p. 243). This shows her efforts as the wife of a White person that Linda tries so hard to look like them by having fake brown hair and blue eyes. The narrator proceeds to share his thoughts suggesting how he views Linda as someone inferior to him as he points out her "passable English" and "she had no idea how stupid she looked" (ibid). His being heavily westernized informs his perception about Linda who is trying to look like a western woman. His thoughts suggest how he has alienated Linda as 'the Other', a Malaysian woman, and the narrator as the half-westernized person is the superior Self. In addition, the narrator's negative reaction shows that he has lost all affinity toward his origin, and he objects the non-white people attempt to be a white person. This could happen because the narrator has disconnected all ties to his status as a

Malaysian including leaving behind his tolerance among Malaysian fellows and abandoning his religion of Islam and his parents as well.

#### MYSTICAL EAST AND SUBVERSION OF WEST AND EAST BINARY

The first point discussed above concludes that the work embraces two noir parameters showcasing its noir sensibility. The noir sensibility is arguably much informed by the results of the unnamed narrator's submission to the west concept. The second part of the analysis is relevantly intertwined with the issue of the representation of West and East; however, using a slightly different angle, this part also highlights the subversion of this particular binary. Therefore, the contention is the prevailing portrayals of subverted binary profoundly construct the noir sensibility of "The Unbeliever".

Subversion of West and East proposed as part of noir sensibility in Hafizi's "The Unbeliever" has powerfully connected with mysticism, the aforementioned noir theme. Raising mysticism as its noir theme, Hafizi intensively showcases that mysticism is able to dismantle the settled binary opposition subscribed thus far; consequently, it leads to the occurrence of darkness and bleakness in the story as an addition to the noir sensibility. This section discusses, firstly, how mysticism represents the West and East representation and what representation is being shown within the work, and, secondly, how mysticism simultaneously causes subversion of the West and East representation through the figure of the mystical East, Nyi Roro Kidul.

Mysticism is firstly apparent to portray the prevailing representation of the West and the East. Mysticism is conveyed in the story as an underlying reason why these researchers need to conduct research in Malaysia. Taken as the main reason of embarking the research, mysticism symbolizes how the West and the East are represented. These research and western researchers meaningfully represent the reinforcement of the status of the West indoctrination through colonial discourse whereby they are seen as superior because they are associated with "being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, virtuous, normal and masculine" as they are compared to the East (Macfie 2002, p. 8). Research on mysticism is conducted by these American researchers who see themselves as rational, critical, and virtuous. The fact that David is the initiator of this journey indicates that he is the rational American man whereas the narrator is merely accepting David's request to join him and Elise.

At the same time, their decision to come to Malaysia, representing as the East, to investigate issues of mysticism and belief ritual also signifies how the East is represented by the West. This echoes the discourse that "the Orient (the East, the 'other') is seen as being irrational, backward, despotic, inferior, depraved, aberrant and feminine sexually" (Macfie 2002, p. 8). Also, this affirms the binary concept of "racialised and gendered understandings of identity" where the Occident or the West is able to portray "non-Whites" as the Other "who needed taming and from whom things could be taken" (Lugones 2007). Thus, their coming to embark the research is much contained with some representations of the West's superiority. Finally, the research and their expedition to Southeast Asia mirror their colonial ancestors in which conquest of a particular land is preceded with the false intention of knowledge and innovation. David and Elise glorify their ancestors' success to come to Malaysia. Their journey confirms with "the core of white privilege [that] is the ability to consume anything, anyone, anywhere (Alcoff 1998, p. 19). Consequently, in this noir story, Malaysia, as the Orient, is proven to be a place where the West can take and consume anything they want, including justifying what they call of 'scientific evidence' of mystical practices. David and Elise's research tries to benefit from the village's culture of mysticism by turning it into a research paper that further promotes their own (the West's) superiority.

Above all, there is no doubt that the portrayal of the East here is only an agenda to pave the way for “depicting The East as soft, feminine, and irrational, in need of the saving grace of rational Western masculinity” (Said 1978). This is obviously seen when they try to look into the belief systems and religions of Southeast Asia, their hypothesis is to prove that actually the mysticism of Southeast Asia is derived from the West, and, thus, they want to argue that the idolatry worship in Southeast Asia can be traced back to “ancient Europe” (Hafizi 2013, p. 234). These American researchers only refer to the West definition to justify what they are looking for in Malaysia. Reading the notes from the former American researcher describing Nyi Roro Kidul, the narrator finds out that “[...] similarities between the patterns of the idol designs. The rather bulbous head and scales on the lower half of the body are reminiscent of either the mermaid, or the Irish kelpie” (ibid). Nyi Roro Kidul, which is the figure of the mystical East, is explained by comparing to the western definition referring to the mermaid or Irish kelpie. These researchers show off their ignorance towards the culture and beliefs of people of the East that the Eastern people may have their own patterns of idolatry. In short, consistent references to the West may have been done to show every subjects are originated from the West, including the issues of mysticism.

However, as the West shows off its superior representation compared to the East, the mystical East, Nyi Roro Kidul has been portrayed as a magically more superior figure in this noir story. American researchers who conducted this research in this site must have been drown by her magical power making them desire to summon Nyi Roro Kidul. Therefore, it leads to another argument that the figure of Nyi Roro Kidul can dismantle the representation of the West and the East and, eventually, subvert the binary of the West and the East, turning them upside down.

To begin with, the fact that the West is rational and the East is savage is completely subverted in this noir. What Nyi Roro Kidul with her magical exoticism has dismantled is the West representation when these American characters act barbaric losing their sanity and identity. The instance is clearly shown when Whitney, the former American researcher, and David are magically drown, and they get excited to conduct the summoning ritual themselves. Both of them are losing their rationality insisting to conduct the ritual. Here, these Western characters succumb to the mystical power of the Nyi Roro Kidul. Consequently, the summoning ritual fatally ruins themselves causing death for both Whitney and David and endangering Elise’s life. This also includes the narrator’s life. His life is somehow fatally affected by this dreadful incident. Subversion is prevailing when David, representing the West, is no longer like he is associated with. Acting out of David’s mind, the narrator barely recognizes him saying that “but I knew it wasn’t him” (Hafizi 2013, p. 255). This implies that David is not only turning fierce but also unrecognizable. His identity is severely changed. Meanwhile, losing his grip is shown when David performs the ritual. The scene portraying the true savagery of the East, the ritual, is described by the narrator as not having a “shred of intelligence in their eyes or on their faces” (Hafizi 2013, p. 254). In fact, David is among them; he is the one who insists to conduct it to prove how powerful Nyi Roro Kidul is. The binary is flipped when David performs the ritual transforming him into an absurd and barbaric person.

Another subversion is shown through the power possessed by the East, the magical East that is always depicted as submissive and powerless. Nyi Roro Kidul, representing the East, is proven as the stronger East. Her magical power that drowns David’s insanity away and succumbs to his curiosity over Nyi Roro Kidul’s power is strong enough to overwhelm all these Western characters. She is not just powerless feminine figure; in fact, she is portrayed as “impossibly huge, slightly humanoid but of its form were all wrong”; the deity is described as “distinctively feminine” and “towered over everything, and wore the clouds as it would a sarong” (Hafizi 2013, p. 256). Thus, this description has reversed the association of

the East with the femininity; she is feminine, yet she is also dominant. Nyi Roro Kidul is a personification of the East according to colonial discourse, borne out of mysticism, having such a savage visage that is evidently female and feminine, yet, at one time, she has dismantled the basis of the hierarchy perpetuated by the discourse and just like her legend entails: “All enemies would die before her waves and currents” (Hafizi 2013, p. 250). Thus, she is able to extend her power even to make these Western people surrender over her power.

This paper, thus far, has exemplified the representation of the West and East and its subversion. Mysticism as the noir theme and the figure of Nyi Roro Kidul are argued as the essential source of this subversion. The mystical East figure is proven to flip representations of the West and East, and it horribly contributes to create darkness, bleakness and, most importantly, fatalism within this noir work. At this point, these instances lead to construct noir sensibility of Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” and evidently support the contention that the subversion and its cause, the mystical East, are proposed to be the part of the noir sensibility. How the mystical East shows her power making the binary of West and East being turned upside down and the fatal consequences may have miserably brought fatalism and doom for not only the noir protagonist but also the other characters. In fact, these subversions add the noir mood and tone and create more fear, despair and shock. Subversion of identity and representation may have conveyed distress and driven someone to be out of his or her ordinary life. Finally, this paper has addressed its objective that noir sensibility can also be derived from the mystical figure, like Nyi Roro Kidul, whose magical power is so impactful that it can thoroughly alter, ruin and, cause fatalism. The occurrence of the binary subversion as a result of her power is inevitably prevalent and frightening as this noir story has shown its fatal consequences.

## CONCLUSION

Noir sensibility of Amir Hafizi’s “The Unbeliever” is found to be constructed by noir theme and noir protagonist; thus, they consistently preserve the generic technicalities of noir fiction, including noir stories from Malaysian noir. Surprisingly, this study offers an added noir sensibility which is constituted by subversions of West and East representation as a result of the mystical East’s magical power. This fact may expand the source of darkness and bleakness showcased by one Malaysian noir story that mysticism and its mystical East figure coexist to constitute the noir element of this story. What is found in this study may open further research in the noir scholarship, particularly in the specific context of Malaysian noir which is still considered as an under-researched field.

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