

“I am a Shape now Suddenly Long and Scaly”: Abject Physical Transformations and Dimensions of Monstrosity in Beth Yahp’s *The Crocodile Fury*

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Abstract

This article examines Beth Yahp’s novel *The Crocodile Fury* (1992) to explore how the novel’s fusion of conventions of the literary gothic and elements from indigenous folklore respond to the conditions of gendered and colonised oppression in the marginalised subject. By situating the many iterations of the titular “crocodile” as a quasi-mythic animal in Malay lore against the three major instances of physical transformations from the human to the grotesque non-human in the narrative, this article seeks to analyse how such transformations participate in a dialectic of oppression and liberation for such marginalised characters. At the same time, it explores how the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities in the novel open up the space for the subjugated female characters such as the lover and the young narrator to resist being appropriated within a critical framework that locates their agencies in the binaries of their victimhood and rebellion alone.

Keywords

gothic – folklore – postcolonial – monster – vampire – body

Beth Yahp’s *The Crocodile Fury* is essentially a novel about the writing of a book – a book that a grandmother wants her granddaughter to write so that the old

ways of life can be salvaged from permanently receding into oblivion. The grandmother realises that the book must be written in English, a language she does not understand, yet she believes the magical symbols of the white man alone can ensure that the book will endure. However, the book that ultimately comes about is perhaps not what she had in mind. Since the granddaughter – the young girl who is the primary narrator and the protagonist in Yahp's novel – is also the one who has to transcribe the book on her grandmother's behalf, the difference between the two books gets blurry and they eventually become one undifferentiated body of stories, snippets, and anecdotes inextricable from each other. While the stories told by the grandmother that are transcribed directly by the narrator are marked through italicisation, many stories, experiences, and anecdotes shared by her appear to be paraphrased in a non-italicised form. The narrator admits to sneaking in the perspectives of other characters as well as her own while she writes down or narrates her grandmother's stories, resulting in an overlapping of perspectives to the extent that they can no longer be separated (1992, 300). In the process, Yahp deliberately offers a deeply convoluted narrative comprising many fragmented stories, where a story is frequently and repeatedly abandoned abruptly and taken up again at a later stage. These fragments either keep returning to the same point repeatedly without apparent progression or they are told anew from a different perspective. At the same time, the narrative is interspersed with elements from indigenous folklore, pieces of oral history, and accounts of supernatural haunting, thereby creating an intricate mesh of overlapping stories. As Gina Wisker correctly points out, In *The Crocodile Fury* Yahp “provides a multi-layered Gothic text which enables alternatives and paradoxes to exist together, challenging single reductive versions of character and event” (2003, 75).

The novel focuses on the experiences of three generations of women from the same family whose lives revolve around the colonial convent on the hill – the grandmother, the mother, and the young narrator. Spanning decades, the events that transpire during the grandmother's tenure at the convent occur during the period of British colonisation in Malaya, whereas those during the mother and the young narrator's stay take place during the turbulent years of Malayan independence, the emergency years, and later. These political and historical events, however, remain at the backdrop and are only alluded to indirectly, while the narrative foregrounds the individual experiences of the three women as they encounter a range of mysterious and/or malevolent characters at the convent, such as the “rich man” who first came as a trader but became the de facto ruler of the jungle and the hill, the vampiric “lover” who haunts the convent, the “lizard boy” who is repeatedly brutalised for his physical and speech deformities, and the young girl only referred to as the

"bully". The "grandmother" was brought into the convent as a bondmaid when she was a young girl and when the convent was first established as the mansion for the colonising "rich man." The "mother" worked as a laundry maid after the mansion had been turned into a convent and she eventually developed an intimate and "illicit" relationship with the "lizard boy." The young girl, who serves as the primary narrator in the novel, comes to the convent as a student and encounters a range of conflicting emotions and experiences, such as adolescent sexual awakening through her exchanges with a fellow female student and, at the same time, the experiences of being haunted by the ghost of the "lover."

In this paper, I intend to explore the specific aspect of grotesque physical transformations that permeate *The Crocodile Fury* and yet has remained relatively peripheral within the corpus of existing scholarship on the novel. To be more precise, this paper examines three interrelated instances of transformation from the (relatively) human to the non-human that plays a significant role in the text and its engagement with the gothic – the transformation of the young lady into the pontianak¹/crocodile, the transformation of the lizard boy into a crocodile, and the narrator's own eventual transformation in the end. I read the implications of monstrosity and, more specifically, those of the crocodile and the pontianak, in relation to the representations of the entities in Malay lore as well as the diverse incarnations they assume throughout the novel, to determine how these recurrent motifs of monstrosity participate in the processes of meaning-making in the novel and emerge as central to the expression of the characters' sense of oppression as well as the urge for escape. The contradictions inherent in the crocodile and the pontianak, as embodied by different characters at different points in the narrative, also allow the reader to unearth alternative interpretative possibilities beneath the more readily apparent sense of optimism and figurative liberation on the surface.

At the centre of the novel's spatial imagery, as well as its narrative action, lies the convent that facilitates the experiences and encounters of the three women and, at the same time, emerges as an unmistakably gothic space in the tradition of the castles and cathedrals of Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis, and Stoker. The structure of the convent mirrors the structure of the narrative and its labyrinth of stories, where the warren of hallways, arbitrarily constructed stairways and columns, and randomly placed windows and walls "like a child's dream house," in a typically gothic manner, evoke a feeling of claustrophobic confinement, making it difficult to perceive one's surroundings correctly and

1 A female vampire in Malay folklore.

giving one “the sense one was walking a maze” (Yahp 1992, 178). Prior to becoming a convent, it was the private mansion of an affluent European referred to only as “the rich man,” who is at once reminiscent of, firstly, colonists who became de-facto *tuans* or “lords” of the land they captured, built plantations upon, and exploited the labour of the native population, and secondly, of despotic gothic villains like Beckford’s Vathek with his depraved appetites and insatiable greed for power and wealth (Beckford 1786).

On the one hand, the mansion/convent embodies transgressions against the natural world as it disrupts the harmony that has existed between the natural and the human – the jungle and the people who live on the outskirts for centuries – before the rich man’s arrival: “Over the years the convent has eaten at the edges of the jungle, growing like an odd-shaped beast with mixed foundations and roof-shapes ... Sometimes the convent swallowed parts of the jungle whole” (Yahp 1992, 2). This invasive function of the convent is amplified further as its role of civilising native girls within its walls is also mirrored in its imposition of civilisation, order, and authority on the jungle and the hill. On the other hand, it testified to the rich man’s absolute authority over the land and the people like a “king” whose “word was law.” His conduct did not need “cause or explanation,” but only “needed to be humoured, worshipped and obeyed” (Yahp 1992, 221). It stood as a reminder of the abuse and oppression of the indigenous people whom the rich man labelled as “many lumps of brown and yellow, shiny with perspiration,” with “high pitched voices like jungle apes” (Yahp 1992, 69–70). For the three women in the novel as well as for other important characters like the young lady, the bully, and the lizard boy, the convent emerges as a profoundly oppressive space that contributes to the characters’ psychological torment and terror. They are both witnesses to, and victims of, unspeakable depravity and violence. The experiences of the characters within the space of the convent plays a significant role in their eventual transformation into “monstrous” entities at the meeting point of the metaphorical and the literal.

While the convent emerges as the “site” that facilitates the three instances of grotesque transformations that this chapter focuses on, it is worth noting that these instances are also connected by the coming together of two elements. Firstly, as I have indicated earlier, the novel borrows significantly from Malayan folklore, rich with stories of many ghosts, monsters, and other preternatural entities that continue to haunt literary and popular imagination. Folklore, as a cultural repository of stories transmitted horizontally and vertically, which is to say, shared among members belonging to a particular generation as well as transmitted from one generation to the next, appears as the crucial connecting tissue among the different iterations of monstrosity in the novel.

The monsters, after all, come into being through stories, and it is through stories that they attain legitimacy and derive their power. The stories ensure why they endure, if and when they are to be feared or, if possible, how to be appeased. Secondly, the gothic provides the thematic and affective framework within which these stories unfold in the novel and acquire their potential to evoke a sensation of palpable anxiety, fear, and abjection. Thus, the synthesis of elements from indigenous folklore and narrative conventions of the gothic offers an important point for approaching *The Crocodile Fury* and its treatment of monstrosity and the monstrous body.

The terrifying entity that haunts the narrative and its young narrator throughout is the ghostly presence of the young lover, whose origin remains as mysterious as her fate by the end. There are strong suggestions in the narrative that she was a pontianak, captured and forcefully domesticated by the rich man (Yahp 1992, 135). However, Yahp also departs from the familiar lore by implying she was forcibly taken from the sea, associating her with wild mermaids or sirens who lure sailors to "the dance of a watery death" (Yahp 1992, 135). As the grandmother's stories about her are pieced together, it emerges that the young lover is a victim of the rich man's oppression and, at the same time, a menacing and macabre presence herself. As the rich man's mistress, she is repeatedly violated both in her body and mind during her confinement in the mansion. She is gradually stripped of her agency and turned into a lifeless possession in the rich man's collection of exotic curiosities. She is also reduced to a sexual object upon which the rich man's desires and fantasies are cast, evoking, in the process, the orientalist stereotype of the alluring but demure Asian woman whose presence and function are limited to satisfying the passions of the white master:

So the rich man took her to the deepest part of his mansion, to the basement room, the old punishment room ... He dressed her like a large shapely doll, draped colourful cloths and silks over her shimmering gown. He spun her in his arms in slow circles. In the rich man's arms the lover spun like stone. The lover lay beneath him as he stroked her, as he strained towards her, as he panted and wept and sighed.

1992, 252

At the same time, the novel underlines her frightening vampire-like qualities by frequently connoting her physical traits with the eerie and the uncanny. While "she looked like one already dead," she nonetheless possessed a preternatural charm to enthrall others with her eyes (Yahp 1992, 138). Descriptions of her appearance are characteristically vampiric, and the repeated references to her lips and eyes consciously evoke unsettling connections with blood:

When the lover emerged from the rich man's quarters, it seemed to everyone who saw her that her eyes were dark pools of red. The lover emerged wearing a gown which covered her from neck to ankles, even her head was covered, and part of her face. All people could see were her eyes. The lover's eyes swelled in their sockets, red-ringed and glinting, darting left and right as she walked. The lover's eyes were as red as bleeding ... her lips too red to be natural, her eyes fever bright. The lover's eyes swelled and dripped with a steady trickling.

YAHP 1992, 137–138

These seeming contradictions between her position of forced subjugation and her transgressive presence within the mansion parallel the contradiction embodied in the figure of the pontianak. While she is one of the most terrifying monsters emerging from Malay lore who prowls the night and kills unsuspecting men and children, she is also susceptible to patriarchal violence within the structures of domesticity once captured by a man. In Yahp's novel, not only the lover endures a similar tribulation, but, as critics such as Shirley Tucker (2000) and Gina Wisker (2003) have previously indicated, the conquest of her body by the rich man also allegorically mirrors the colonial conquest of the racialised and gendered agency of the native body. In this sense, the capturing of the lover by the rich man parallels the function that the convent/mansion plays through its imposition of authority and control over the land, the jungle, and the people.

In an act of fierce rebellion and vengeance, she sheds her human appearance and transforms into her grotesque, monstrous form of the pontianak and kills the rich man, symbolising her liberation from the state of servitude and confinement. Interestingly, her physical description at this point of transformation into the pontianak also evokes the image of an enraged crocodile:

In his arms she was a shape now long and scaly, now bloating, now ridged with spikes. Her face was terrible to look at, already crackling to black. Her flesh was blistered, her skin in shards like glass. The rich man could not hold her. The dragon-shape twisted to savage him, the reptile-shape slashed its tail, the fish-shape pressed serrated teeth to his flesh.²

YAHP 1992, 282

² Yahp appears to have borrowed this from Malay lore, where the crocodile is believed capable of transforming its shape into other marine animals. Takashi Tsuji pointed out in his discussion on the crocodile myths prevalent in the Indo-Pacific region, "If harmed, the crocodile is believed to seek revenge or the people's skin is believed to transform into that of a crocodile. Based on the environment, a crocodile may convert into a shark, fish, turtle, dolphin, or whale" (2021, 22).

The crocodile thus emerges as an almost mythical and sublime entity simultaneously evoking stupefying awe and terror. It also emerges as an embodiment of redemptive rage, enabling the lover to lash out violently against her male oppressor as well as her constant state of subjugation into docility, abuse, and exploitation. Similarly, since the oppression of the lover is implicated within the larger structure of colonial dominance over the colonised land, body, and agency, by association, the lover's grotesque and violent transformation also throws up a violent rupture within both the logic and the praxis of absolute dominance that colonialism sought to unleash. In its potency to disrupt the structures of dominance, as Grace Chin argues, "The 'crocodile fury' effectively voices the anger of the oppressed, of those who have endured 'discriminations accumulated over the years,' and worse, who have been owned 'body and soul' through the imperialistic politics of colonial powers" (1999, n.p.). Hence, the lover's transformation, even though born out of deep trauma, attains a transgressive and subversive potential, both individual and political, against the established hierarchies of power.

The crocodile plays an analogous function, as a symbol of redemptive rage and rebellion against oppression, for the lizard boy as well. While the events surrounding the lover at the mansion are retrieved mostly through the accounts of the grandmother, the readers learn about the lizard boy through his encounters with the mother when she entered the convent as a lowly laundry maid. Being born with severe physical and speech deformities, the lizard boy's appearance and manners sharply contrast his mild and innocent temperament:

his skin was cracked and scaly, his body thin and sinewy, his stomach bulging whenever he ate. His eyes were round and lizard-like, hardly ever blinking. Everyone could tell wherever he'd been by the trail of silver skinflakes he left. They watched fascinated and repulsed by the flicking of his tongue.

1992, 83

Unsurprisingly, he is not only shunned by everyone at the convent and the society at large, but he is also severely bullied, mentally and physically, by the students. Just as the lover had violently revolted after prolonged captivity and exploitation at the mansion many years ago, the lizard boy too revolts after years of suffering through mental and physical torture at the convent. In a fit of frenzied rage, he violently attacks the students arbitrarily and possibly sets the library on fire (1992, 126). In this moment of violent revolt, the lizard boy is imagined to be discarding the docility of his lizard form and taking the form

of a crocodile: "The Lizard Boy's body glowed a fiery red. 'Lizard, hah? Look properly. Look at my teeth, glinting brightly! Look at my tail I can swish here and there like a whip! There's no lizard here, see – only – a – Crocodile!'" (1992, 126–127).

As a punishment for his "running amok," the lizard boy is chained to the laundry wall where the "convent girls would not see or hear him" (1992, 126–127). During this period of captivity and isolation, the only human interaction possible for the lizard boy is with the mother, who works at the laundry room. His metaphorical transition to crocodile begins to take a more literal form as he spends days on end crouched down and shackled to the wall: "Father, Uncle,' my mother blurted, 'please take away the chain, otherwise too late. Already he's turning!' ... 'He – he's turning into a – a crocodile!'" (1992, 248). That his transition to a crocodile is connected to his experiences of oppression within the space of the convent becomes all the more evident as he not only regains his human form once he's freed by the mother but also begins to shed his grotesque lizard/crocodile-like features (1992, 249). The freedom the jungle affords contrasts with the confines and oppression at the convent, and when he returns there many years later, he does so as a handsome young man. Hence, a closer analysis of the text suggests three distinct stages to the lizard boy's transformation, rendering it far more complex to comprehend the implications of his transformations than it initially appears. The first stage occurs through his enraged rebellion against years of bullying. The second, while the mother witnesses him turning due to his prolonged punishment and isolation at the convent's laundry room. The third, having finally escaped the convent, he regains his human form and turns into the "young man," but ironically, he also begins being referred to as the "king crocodile" at the same time as he becomes a fearsome guerilla revolutionary. Thus, for the lizard boy, the figure of the crocodile has a dual currency. If the crocodile symbolises the expression of his rage, it is also symbolic of a state of helplessness and despair in the state of his captivity at the laundry room. Therefore, the crocodile form also must be shed off, which the lizard boy manages only through his escape to the jungle with the mother's help and the subsequent attainment of a human form.

These nuances within the narrative resist the possibility of arriving at a singular understanding of the aspect of transformation in the novel. At the same time, the simultaneity of multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretative possibilities complicate deriving what the crocodile embodies in the narrative with any degree of certainty. It is possible to perceive the crocodile, following Chin's footsteps, as an entity championing a subaltern cause, and we might push further and try to locate particular events and anecdotes in the narrative within the larger mesh of stories they appear in. However, this brings into question the easily recognisable and relatively

straightforward approach to interpreting the crocodile in particular, and the instances of physical transformation in general, as a force of liberation alone.

As I had indicated earlier, the grandmother suggests that the lover, even in her state of confinement at the mansion, is not merely a victim; rather she also has a macabre side hidden beneath her beautiful exterior: "Some say they see the saddest and most beautiful face, the face of the Virgin, the face of a queen. Others see a burned hag's face, fire-licked to leather, with its lips stretched wide as it leaps from the moonlight with a deafening howl" (1992, 48). Even though the grandmother's perspective here is possibly tinged with her own jealousies, this aspect of the lover can be read in connection with two other stories/anecdotes narrated at different points in the narrative.

Firstly, as the grandmother retells the myth of the pontianak in keeping with the Malay lore, it becomes evident that even though the pontianak can remain a "normal woman" and a "beautiful and loving wife" when she is captured by a man, she always embodies the possibility and potential to return to her original form (1992, 76). The pontianak, in folklore, is believed to be the vampiric ghost of a woman who dies in childbirth. However, in some versions of the lore, it is rather the stillborn baby that transforms into the pontianak (Skeat 1900, 327). More recently, borrowing from the ethnographic study conducted by Cheryl Nicholas on the popular perception of the pontianak lore in Malaysia, Nicholas and Cline show that in the "manifest narrative" of the pontianak, she is "usually garbed in white robes and has long flowing black hair;" she "either sucks human blood with her long fangs or tears out the stomach with her long fingernails to feed on the blood that streams out of the wound" (Nicholas 2010, 201). While she can be domesticated by putting a nail through her neck – an action analogous to the driving of the stake through the heart in its masculine/phallic implication – upon the dislodging of the nail she can regain her monstrous form and seek revenge. As the grandmother suggests, she is also capable of transforming her appearance into an abject and old hag-like figure (1992, 48) as she attacks and mutilates her victims to feast upon. Hence, in both her inception and existence, the pontianak does not only embody the potential for human life unrealised but also stands for the horrifying otherness or antithesis to the "human."

Secondly, while it is possible to read the lover's transformation into the crocodile/pontianak as an expression of feminine and feminist rage against patriarchal and colonial oppression as well as an attempt to reclaim her agency, the running association between the lover and the pontianak also hints at the presence of a past and an anterior agency in the lover, derived from the pontianak lore that the narrative purposefully touches upon, where the lover was in possession of her fierce, monstrous, and possibly evil potency long before she was subjected to the rhetoric of oppression/liberation in the narrative through

her presence in the rich man's mansion. The implied existence of an anterior and malevolent agency for the lover is supplemented by her reappearance as the pontianak haunting the convent as the "hanged woman" at night, long after she killed the rich man and escaped from the mansion:

The light slides over the folds of a grimy white gown, over rust-coloured patches, the matted ends of long black hair ... The hanged woman's eyes are wide open. She's wrapped in a sheet wafting around her like an untidy shroud. She swings creaking from side to side ... The hanged woman's head drops forwards. Her pale lips stretch to a smile that causes a frantic scuffle at the door. She unfolds a tongue that flicks at the bully, red and sticky, a lizard's tongue, three feet long. She suddenly drops from where she is hanging, her arms flapping like wings. She lets out a bloodcurdling cackle ...

YHP 1992, 74

This is followed by her terrifying incarnation at the hospital in the hag-like form pontianaks are believed to be capable of assuming:

Grandmother saw the woman had no feet. She saw her touching the heads of certain children, their heads and lips and hands ... The woman's hand was as cold as ice. Grandmother looked up, startled. The woman's face was suddenly shrivelled, the features of her face shifting subtly. Her face shrank to another face, gap-toothed and craggy, her eyes were washed the colour of crinkled leaves. Her face became an old man's face. The old man leaned forwards, his mouth split with laughing.

YHP 1992, 87

Perhaps even more interestingly, these instances of literal haunting are also accompanied by a more metaphorical haunting by the lover that the young narrator experiences, which I will focus on later in greater detail. The presence of the lover as the pontianak ghost, who is also the "hanged woman," brings into crisis the perceptible narrative of her revolt and freedom. Instead, it offers a much more chilling alternative to the relatively optimistic rebellion narrative, where it appears the lover might have never gotten away but perished in the mansion either by committing suicide or through murder by the rich man. In a similar vein, her hag-like appearance at the hospital and the killing of children associates an unpardonable malevolence to her character that goes beyond the narrative of her oppression/liberation at the mansion.

These different iterations of monstrosity associated with the lover and the instances of her malevolent expressions beyond that of the rebellious crocodile

severely problematises the reading of her physical transformations in the novel simply through the framework of redemption through rebellion. It opens up fissures and alternate possibilities that allow the lover/pontianak and her monstrous iterations to be discerned as a figure who, on the one hand, resists the totality of patriarchal-colonial dominance through her transgressive presence, but on the other hand, in an acutely self-aware manner, resists being subsumed within scholarship that might reduce her to another Bertha Mason and locate her agency only at the moments of her victimhood and subsequent rebellion.

Considering these complexities, ambiguities, and multiple interpretative possibilities in the novel, how do we situate the narrator's transformation into the crocodile at the end? The problem lies partly in the instabilities within the figure of the crocodile as it appears in the novel and assumes a central position in the network of events, stories, and anecdotes within the textual space. Hence, to answer this question, one must examine two interrelated problems – the different possible implications of the crocodile in the narrative and what factors contribute to or trigger the narrator's transformation.

The crocodile has always been common in Malaysia's rivers and marshy wetlands. Unsurprisingly, it has attained a special place of reverence in the popular imagination, especially among people whose lives and livelihoods have been dependent on farming, fishing, and foraging, for whom encounters with the animal have naturally been far more frequent. The crocodile appears in numerous popular folktales, such as the hikayat of Sang Kancil, the hikayat of Hang Tuah, and the story of the Seri Pahang and Seri Kemboja. H. E. Maxwell, in his seminal cultural ethnographic work in British Malaya in 1881, noted how the crocodile not only features in a range of superstitions and ritual practices, but also is often considered *kramat* or "sacred" (1881, 24). Maxwell also pointed out how many of these superstitions, beliefs, and stories gradually became Islamised after the introduction of the religion in the region:

For a long time it was a plaything of the prophet's daughter, Siti Fatima, but it at length became treacherous and faithless to Tuan Putri Padang Gerinsing, who had grown old and feeble. Then Fatima cursed it saying: 'Thou shalt be the crocodile of the sea, no enjoyment shall be thine, and thou shalt not know lust or desire.

1881, 25

Hence, the crocodile emerged as an entity that is simultaneously sacred and cursed, fearsome and revered, appeased and worshipped. It also acquired a cautionary function in Malay folklore; Takashi Tsuji observes that "in Malay

cosmology, crocodiles never arbitrarily attacked people; rather, crocodile attacks were considered a result of the victims' mistakes" (2021, 28).

In Yahp's novel, the characters interpret the crocodile differently at different points in the narrative and, in the process, evoke these diverse iterations of the crocodile in Malay lore in the various anecdotes that appear in the text. For the grandmother as well as the nuns at the convent, the crocodile, to borrow from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "polices the borders" (1996, 12), which is to say, it serves as an agent of prohibition. The crocodile is a warning against girls and young women who do not "behave" or control their adolescent urges and punishes those who venture too far beyond their permissible limits (Yahp 1992, 186). A similar association that the novel offers is that of the *buaya darat* or the land crocodile, who is a predator that sexually "corrupts" young virgins (1992, 18). This perception held by the grandmother and the nuns is contradicted by the mother, who posits that the crocodile carries the burden of a curse. For the mother, the crocodile is a sublime and dreadful "fantasy" (1992, 125), it is born out of unrelenting "fury" accumulating and tormenting over time (1992, 125), but it must also bear the mark of the violence unleashed by that fury in its body. Thus, the abject appearance of the monstrous crocodile is not only terrifying for others but, somewhat paradoxically, it also embodies the violent and inescapable trauma that led to its birth in the first place.

While the novel is quite forthcoming in narrating the conditions that lead to the violent transformations for the lover and the lizard boy, it is far more ambivalent when it comes to the narrator. To determine the factors that ultimately contribute to her transformation, the reader not only has to delve deep into the mesh of fragmented stories but also focus on the silences, erasures, and absences. The narrator barely talks about herself directly; instead, her subjective position in the narrative only becomes accessible through her experiences with the other characters or the stories she listens to from others. Drawing upon Stephen Slemon's notion of the postcolonial allegory, Grace Chin argues that the narrator embodies a "censored subject":

The term "censored subject" signifies the conditions of powerlessness and exclusion experienced by the gendered subject – the nameless and featureless protagonist, whom the readers only know as "I" in CF – as she inhabits the periphery of her world order. Although we hear her voice, we have no definitive picture of her. The protagonist's featurelessness acts as a metaphorical blank page that is inscribed with the stories told by her grandmother, mother, the bully, and other characters ... while her own story goes unspeakable.

2009, 94

In Chin's estimation, "the protagonist is not yet endowed with the conscious will of an individual self" and she "does not yet possess a personality, opinion or a voice of her own" (2009, 104–105). Consequently, Chin perceives the narrator's transformation as the culmination of her journey from a position of lack to the moment when she attains an individual agency, voice, and freedom. This argument is largely consistent with her earlier observation that "*The Crocodile Fury* heralds an utopian [*sic*] and feminist vision of a future that is freed from the shackling restrictions of both patriarchal and colonial imperialism" (1999, n.p.).

Yet, it also needs to be remembered that this absence of self-utterance on the part of the narrator is not the product of her inability to voice her perspective or her lack of agency since she *can* and *does* manipulate the stories when she wants. Therefore, alternate interpretative possibilities to the one proposed by Chin open up as we turn the critical attention to other contributing factors, such as the generational trauma of the young narrator as well as her relationship with the character only referred to as the bully.

The convent has been an overwhelming presence in the young narrator's life just as it has been for her mother and grandmother. She inherits the legacy of oppression and violence that the mansion/convent has inflicted over the years. As the narrator reminds us, the grandmother, when she was a bondmaid at the mansion, was repeatedly subjected to harsh punishments for her mistakes and transgressions. Located in a remote corner of the mansion, the punishment room is reminiscent of the "red room" in *Jane Eyre* (1847), where young girl servants such as the grandmother were locked up to be disciplined:

When they found her work unsatisfactory, they dragged her there, and when she was naughty, or a precious lamp was broken, and no one owned up, or when Grandmother was deliberately stubborn, when she flew into a temper, and refused the work they set her, and answered back ... the other servants cried, slamming the door behind her with the slam of a door not soon to be opened ... My grandmother hated this room, the punishment room ... In the mornings when she woke to the dark walls around her and her limbs stiff from lying twisted and the door latched from outside, Grandmother shouted and beat her fists. The floor was bare and dusty ... the dry earthy air rattled in her throat. Grandmother crouched with her cheek to the door, rocking, slapping her palms against the wood. Some days she beat and shouted for hours before anyone remembered.

YHP 1992, 10–11

Besides being locked up at the punishment room in the basement, like the lover, the grandmother too is possibly violated by the rich man as a way of disciplining her (1992, 210). Similarly, for the mother, the convent was a place of trauma as well as abandonment. Like the grandmother before her, it is the site where she experiences sexual violence, possibly rape, by the lizard boy (Yahp 1992, 212). Yet, she must inhabit the site of trauma as she is deemed as corrupted and unfit for society at large. The narrator herself, the first one among the three generations to be a student at the convent, suffers a sensation of claustrophobic confinement that is physical as well as psychological. This is to say, while the young girl undergoes a sense of entrapment within the walls of the convent as it is a space defined in terms of its separation and isolation both from the jungle and the city, she also feels trapped within the world of strict rules, surveillance, and moral policing at the institution. In the process, she must bear the accumulated burden emerging from “The effects of power that have ‘travel[led] an indirect route’ through three generations of memories and narratives” (Chin 2009, 112).

The narrator and the bully retreat to the “dark room,” which used to be the erstwhile punishment room at the mansion, to escape constant surveillance and policing. Ironically, the space that she expects to be a space of respite, thrusts upon her another layer of unease and the uncanny. The dark room allows the narrator and the bully to share moments of intimacy and freedom that are not possible elsewhere in the convent, but this relationship is revealed to be an inherently unequal one. Like the lover, the narrator does what she is told for the bully to probe her body and gain pleasure and satisfaction: “Lie down,’ the bully says. ‘Lie down and pull your skirt up. Like that. Higher” (1992, 66). This is very strongly evocative of the way the rich man used to treat the lover in the very same room many years ago: “‘Sit,’ the rich man said, and the lover sat. ‘Stand,’ he said harshly, and she stood. ‘Turn,’ the rich man hissed. ‘Turn over!’ And the lover turned” (1992, 252). The bully uses the exact phrase to affirm her control over the narrator as the rich man did for the lover: “so you’ll never leave me” (1992, 114, 253). These uncanny similarities are not limited to verbal language alone, as the bully and the rich man use the same physical actions to pronounce their control over the body of the narrator and lover, such as drawing patterns on the thigh with the finger. These similarities consciously establish a parallel between the situation of the narrator in her adolescent erotic relationship with the bully and the exploitative relationship between the rich man and the lover. Unsurprisingly, in her moments of togetherness and intimacy with the bully that, for the narrator, are also the moments of her exploitation or subjugation, her feelings of being haunted by the lover take their most prominent form. Thus, she not only carries the

weight of generational trauma from her mother and grandmother, through her relationship with the bully, but also carries the legacy of the lover's oppression.

In her moment of transformation into the crocodile, the narrator is turned into a quasi-demonic presence: "my hair lifting on the sudden wind. My hair uncoils from Grandmother's braid, it slithers untangled and free ... I am a shape turning, I am a shape now suddenly long and scaly, now bloating, now ridged with spikes" (1992, 328–329). However, the appearance of freedom in the narrator's transformation that Gina Wisker (2003) and Grace Chin (1999; 2009) emphasise is inextricable from the lover's haunting. As the narrator states unequivocally, she follows the direction pointed by the lover's footprints (1992, 329). She wears the lover's gown and carries the knife that the rich man had originally used to capture the lover – symbolising her inheritance of the lover's fate. Rosaly Puthuchearry argues that the repetition of specific phrases such as "body and soul," "shimmering gown," and "footprints" at the novel's conclusion reinforces the sense of oppression that persists (2009, 155–156). The description of her transformation uses the same language as it was used earlier to describe the lover's transformation as the two women mirror each other in terms of their grotesque physicality/monstrosity – "long," "scaly," "bloated," and "ridged with spikes" (1992, 282, 328–329). This mirroring appears to strongly imply that the narrator is no longer merely haunted but fully possessed by her: "When I turn to face her my teeth are long and pointed. I show her the hole in my neck where the rich man woke me" (1992, 329). This association with the lover undercuts the possibility of her rebellion and freedom, for if she is indeed transformed into an approximation of the lover then, like her, she too is trapped within the indelible legacy of her trauma and oppression and fated to keep haunting the convent in perpetuity. The young narrator's repeated reminders to the reader regarding the cyclical nature of things gain a particularly significant implication when she suggests that her transformation is not the breaking of the cycle, but a shift from one cycle to another (1992, 328). Moreover, the circularity of the stories that comprise the narrative, where they return to the same point repeatedly and their finality or completion remains perpetually deferred, is also reflected in the narrator's confinement in the cyclicity of the histories or legacies of oppression.

The many contradictory meanings invoked by the crocodile throughout the narrative reach culmination in the narrator's transformation but without any apparent synthesis. Like the body of the crocodile, she embodies the potential for breaking away as well as the grim possibility of further confinement beneath the surface, just as she is at once the "most beautiful woman" and one who is cursed with abject monstrosity. These contradictions problematise the possibility of reading the narrator's transformation into the crocodile purely

as a liberatory event. It offers the reader a sombre reminder that the crocodile manifests an entrapment of its own and despite its furious birth, escaping the trauma accumulated over years might be impossible. It is undoubtedly a moment of recognition of her lived reality, a moment of her maturity from girlhood to womanhood, but, as the lover's possession of her body and soul implies, it is also a moment where she enters the realm of patriarchal oppression that womanhood entails. Just as the very apparent rebellious potential in the lover's transformation is problematised by her subsequent entrapment in the convent – the site of her oppression and trauma – as a ghostly haunting presence, the emancipatory potential of the narrator's transformation is undermined as she, too, becomes the lover.

Beth Yahp's novel thus serves as a powerful reminder of how the structures of dominance – colonial, patriarchal, racial – leave a lasting legacy that is notoriously difficult to eliminate. At the same time, there's a poignant observation that the marginalised subject, at the bottom of the concentric layers of subjugation, undergoes simultaneous processes of oppression under the burden of these structures. The narrator's recognition of her condition of entrapment and repression as well as her longing for escape is captured by Yahp in the final line: "East, towards the sea" (1992, 329). However, given the narrative's resistance to closure, the reader can neither determine nor cease suspecting if, like the cyclical stories in the novel that are never finished, the possibility of escape too is a perpetually receding horizon. Nonetheless, irrespective of the plausibility or futility of this longing for escape, the "monstrosity" embodied by the narrator and the lover, in their moment of transformation, renders visible the condition of pervasive oppression that the gendered, colonised, and the marginalised subject endures.

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