Demonic Possession: Narratives of Domestic Abuse and Trauma in Malaysia

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Abstract

Every society deploys narratives concerning the phenomenon of domestic abuse which serve to downplay and normalise it. Drawing on qualitative research with survivors in Malaysia, and working from a feminist postcolonial framework, this paper explores how the notion of demonic possession is used by survivors and perpetrators as a metaphor for domestic abuse, and a narrative to make sense of and excuse it. The idea of demonic possession has utility because of its close fit both with perpetrators' behaviour and the symptoms experienced by survivors with trauma. The research focuses on the intimate dynamics of abuse, including coercive control and intimate captivity, and the pivotal role of possession and trauma in the successful exertion of control and in extending the damaging effects of abuse. We argue that demonic possession reflects another way in which globally endemic practices of domestic abuse are justified and explained; it provides a means for perpetrators to evade responsibility for abuse, and a way in which the pernicious effects of both abuse and trauma on survivors, their families, and wider society are sometimes dismissed. The paper highlights the significance of culturally-sensitive approaches to domestic violence and trauma as a counterpoint to western-centric understandings. It also stresses the need for locally generated approaches to awareness raising and support services in Malaysia and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS

domestic abuse, trauma, demonic possession, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on research conducted with female survivors of domestic abuse in Malaysia. Every society deploys certain constructs and stories concerning domestic abuse that serve to continue its cultural and societal normalisation and the control of female survivors in particular. Here, we focus on the deployment of a particular set of narratives centring on demonic possession. Demonic possession, a widespread spiritual belief in Malaysia and elsewhere (e.g. Boddy, 1994; Bourguignon, 1978), is discussed by research participants both as an explanation for perpetrators' abusive behaviour and for their own symptoms of trauma during and after the relationship. Some perpetrators draw on this narrative to justify their behaviour, and the connection between demonic possession and domestic abuse is often reiterated by others. We argue that the idea of demonic possession is another way in which globally endemic practices of domestic abuse are justified and explained; it allows perpetrators to evade responsibility for abuse, and downplays the pernicious effects of abuse and trauma on survivors, their families and wider society. This and other narratives also exist in many other places.

While this journal has included several key papers on geographies of domestic abuse (Brickell, 2015; Bowstead, 2015; Pain, 1997; Warrington, 2001) and scholarship is expanding elsewhere (discussed below), there is relatively little analysis of particular cultural contexts or the connections between abuse, religiosity or spirituality. Moreover, trauma as a spatial and social phenomenon has not received adequate examination in discussions about domestic abuse, including in multicultural contexts such as Malaysia (Pain et al., 2020). Cultural explanations for trauma, such as demonic possession, are often viewed as 'anachronistic' and 'only used by unsophisticated people to make sense of their worlds' (Keller, 2002, p. 3), failing to recognise the diverse ways in which women in non-western contexts make sense of, resist and survive domestic abuse. Non-western frames of reference for understanding trauma and its relation with spirituality are under-explored in western literatures (Rothberg, 2008; Visser, 2015), which also downplay spirituality outside of formal religions, while the dominance of western secularism has led to loss of indigenous belief systems and practices. Drawing on the example of Māori culture, for example, Visser (2015) outlines how belief and rituals may reduce traumatic symptoms, and aid resilience and healing. Such traditions, often disrupted

by colonialism, globalisation and the export of western medical practices, now see movements to reconnect and establish them (Clark, 2016).

Our analysis recognises the nuanced nature of spiritual interpretations of trauma and abuse, and that these may be both empowering and disempowering to survivors. We focus on the narrativization of abuse and trauma by Malaysian survivors, and its effects on lived experiences and societal discourses of abuse. Focusing only on individual cultural contexts of domestic abuse carries the danger of 'culturalism' or explaining patriarchy through demonizing aspects of cultural tradition (Piedalue, 2017). Instead, our aim is to emphasise the common structural inequalities that underpin violence (Fluri and Piedalue, 2017). For this reason, we use the term 'possession' in two interconnected ways throughout the paper; first, in the sense of ownership and intimate captivity that characterise domestic abuse, and second, to describe the phenomenon of being taken over by evil spirits. Our perspective is informed by critical theories which have a specific concern with abuse and trauma as justice issues and engage critiques of white, western, ableist, heteromasculinist trauma theory (Carter, 2015; hooks, 2003; INSIGHT!, 2006; Jones, 2019; Pain, 2020). Our arguments thus align with and contribute to feminist postcolonial analyses of gender-based violence and trauma.

The paper starts by flagging the global persistence of domestic abuse and its embeddedness in patriarchal cultures, before introducing postcolonial perspectives on domestic abuse and trauma. After outlining the research methodology, the paper explores narratives concerning domestic abuse as demonic possession in Malaysia. We draw two key findings from the data; first, perpetrators are widely seen as being possessed by demons in the eyes of participants and those around them; and second, survivors' traumatic symptoms during and after abuse are also interpreted as demonic possession. In the conclusion, we reflect on the contribution this analysis makes to geographical understanding of abuse and trauma, and its implications for formal and informal responses.

2. POSTCOLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE AND TRAUMA

Domestic abuse is widespread in every society, nation, ethnic, cultural and religious group (Araji, 2000; McCue, 2008). Described as a global public health epidemic by the World Health Organisation, 30% of women globally have experienced violence from an intimate partner (WHO, 2013). More than half of the 87,000 women intentionally killed in 2017 were murdered by intimate partners or family members (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). Despite the recent growth of government and NGO responses, domestic abuse is not decreasing; instead new and renewed forms emerge as societies and economies change, enabled by new technologies and worsened by war and conflict (Brydolf-Horwitz, 2018; Giles and Hyndman, 2004). The consequences for health, social and economic wellbeing are colossal (WHO, 2013), not least for gender equality. While there is growing attention to male victims of abuse, male to female violence is more widespread and deadly (WHO, 2010).

While human geography has been curiously late to examine intimate violence, recent years have seen a growth in interest (e.g. Bowstead, 2015; Brickell and Maddrell, 2016; Cuomo, 2013; Datta, 2016; Fluri and Piedalue, 2017; Meth, 2003; Pain, 2014). While 'the underlying causes of gender-based violence rooted in patriarchal relations are ubiquitous across place', local environments, contexts and cultures influence its forms and impacts (McIlwaine, 2013, p. 65). Explicit situation of the dynamics of abuse, societal discourses and policy responses within both local patriarchal cultures and wider geopolitical relations should be a key contribution of geographical work (Brickell and Maddrell, 2016; Cribb, 1999; Datta, 2016; Fluri and Piedalue, 2017). We use the term domestic *abuse* to signal the importance of emotional and psychological abuse that often accompany physical violence, as domestic abuse is fundamentally about power and control (Stark, 2007).

Cultural narratives about domestic abuse share common threads in many societies, particularly matters of honour and shame for which survivors are deemed to hold some responsibility. Araji (2000) describes this an ideological 'honour system' crossing cultures. In neo-patriarchal societies, controlling women is everyone's business. Perceived contravention of gender norms threatens the family's social and political status, buttressed by social norms supporting violence against women. In capitalist societies, violence tends to be more private, but contravention of gender norms threatens the honour of male partners, and although social norms and laws may not support violence against women, rates of assault and murder

are still high. So domestic abuse was outlawed in many western countries by the mid-twentieth century, yet medical, psychiatric, social work and family therapy professions continued to reiterate women's responsibility for preventing it (Herman, 1997). Such gendered ideologies still influence professional responses and cultural explanations or stories about why domestic abuse occurs. These tend to individualize perpetrators' behaviour and survivors' experience, whereas feminist and postcolonial theories of violence centre on systemic inequalities and the sanctioning of abuse within wider sets of social and political relations (Fluri and Piedalue, 2017). Cultural narratives of abuse often have the effect of silencing survivor experience and protecting perpetrators, deterring others from escaping or tackling abuse. For Stark (2007), the domestic abuse 'revolution' has stalled *because* of persistent misrepresentations of domestic abuse.

While people of all genders, races, ethnicities, social classes, places, sexualities and citizenship status may experience domestic abuse, these differences mediate the severity of its impacts (hooks, 2000; INCITE!, 2006; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005). Racism, colonialism and globalisation further create uneven landscapes for survivors. Postcolonial, Black and indigenous scholars have critiqued mainstream western feminist perspectives on domestic abuse for universalising western perspectives as normative, essentialising women in the global South as tradition-bound victims of timeless, patriarchal cultures (Mohanty, 1988), and portraying violence against women elsewhere as more brutal than in the west (hooks, 2000). While a thread of work in human geography forefronts colonialism, racism and geopolitics in analysing gender-based violence (e.g. Cribb, 1999; De Leeuw, 2016; Fluri and Piedalue, 2017; Holmes et al., 2014), much scholarship has failed to account for race (Warwick, 2009). Elsewhere, indigenous theories and intersectional critiques of violence challenge universalising and western-centric accounts (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000; INCITE!, 2006). Western colonization deployed violence against women as a primary tool of conquest (Smith, 2005; see also Mama, 1997), leading to the devaluation of indigenous women being institutionalized in law and enshrined in popular culture, and promoting ongoing violence against women (Burrill *et al.,* 2010; De Leeuw, 2016; Dhillon, 2015; Weaver, 2009).

An enduring limitation of existing research is that 'almost all the feminist thought that circulates internationally… is based on concepts and methods developed in the global North'

(Connell, 2014, p. 520). A postcolonial approach that theorises from global South contexts is important in challenging feminist theory where it remains based on 'unexamined and unacknowledged assumptions that are profoundly insensitive to the meanings, values and practices of other cultures' (McEwan, 2009, p. 26). As Mohanty (1988, p. 339) argues, 'male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well as in order to effectively organize to change it'.

Similarly, postcolonial scholarship on trauma has profound implications for western framings of trauma. Western perspectives, largely developed based on the experiences of privileged white Europeans, often depoliticize and dehistoricize common experiences of trauma (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009; Visser, 2015). This includes collective trauma from historical violences of colonialism and capitalism and their contemporary traces (Brave Heart, 2000; Fanon, 1963), as well as (often overlapping) traumas from sexual and domestic abuse, racism, gender- and hetero-normativity (e.g. Brown, 1995; DeGruy, 2005; Root, 1996). These forms of chronic trauma differ from the single-event model that western trauma theories have favoured, requiring alternative epistemological and conceptual framings (hooks, 2003; Jones, 2019; Pain, 2020).

Geographical research on trauma has burgeoned in the last few years, contributing to analyses in the social sciences and humanities that de-medicalize and position trauma as a social and spatial entity (Coddington and Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017). Nonetheless, little geographical work explicitly addresses postcolonial and Black critiques of trauma theory (Pain, 2020), and there is much scope to examine trauma in different contexts and engage these alternative epistemological approaches. Trauma is privately and publicly recognised, contested, treated and reinforced to varying degrees in different places, and its narrativization is crucial in offering and closing down possibilities for survivors' empowerment and rebuilding.

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on research conducted with female survivors of domestic abuse who sought refuge at a Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) shelter in a Malaysian city[1]. The research was oriented towards a decolonizing methodology (De Leeuw, 2016). Author 1 is a Malay-Muslim woman who conducted PhD research on secondment from her role as university lecturer. Authors 2 and 3 supervised the research, bringing expertise in domestic abuse and postcolonial analysis. The research aimed to theorise from the survivors' lived realities and understandings of domestic abuse, while not 'appropriating [them] nor enfolding [them] within pre-existing Western geographic ontologies' (Holmes et al., 2014, p. 565; see also Nagar, 2015). Author 1 carried out the research using qualitative and participatory methods. An internship with the WAO provided Author 1 with training, counselling and access to participants and their files. The ten voluntary participants were all married, aged between 21 and 41, and resident in the refuge. All were of Malaysian nationality and defined their ethnicity as Malay (four participants, all Muslim) or Indian (six participants, five Hindus and one Christian). They were from varied socio-economic backgrounds, generally well-educated and had held good jobs. All but two were mothers. Author 1 was both an insider and outsider in the research process, but her role as a volunteer at the WAO allowed her to form a bond of trust with the women (Sahdan, 2018). This was strengthened by everyday social contact, including participation in skills-building activities, child-care, cooking and sharing meals. This allowed the women to share accounts of demonic possession that were often kept hidden in counselling sessions with social workers, all of whom were trained in the western psychological tradition that shapes current psychotherapeutic practice in Malaysia (Sheng, 2007).

Participant observation was carried out over a three-month period to build relationships with participants and identify cultural contexts to their stories. In-depth interviews allowed the women to share their experiences and understandings of domestic abuse and trauma, to recount aspects of their relationship with perpetrators and to explain what brought them to the shelter. In addition, these interviews generated what we refer to as *fragmented storytelling*, which emerged spontaneously whenever the participants wished to share anything, either in private or in the presence of other women. These less formal interactions

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[1] Due to the sensitivity of the research, locations are not disclosed and pseudonyms are used at all times.

could last up to an hour and, as with the interviews, were recorded with consent. Fragmented storytelling captures something of the chaotic nature of trauma and its impacts through the non-linear narratives that emerged in participants' accounts. As Herman (1997, p. 181) argues, 'because the truth is so difficult to face, survivors often vacillate in reconstructing their stories', so traumatic memory can emerge as a series of snapshots. The action of telling a story builds confidence and, over time, participants were more able to talk in detail and in safety (see Bondi, 2013). Photovoice and crafting also proved to be effective methods of producing a 'culturally relevant lens' (McIntyre, 2003, p. 47) through which to understand the relationships between violence, place and culture. Participants took photographs to illustrate their experiences, producing written descriptions of each image. They crafted fabric roses with tags that explained their experiences of domestic abuse. Finally, documentary analysis of the women's record files, which contain information on interventions received prior being in the WAO shelter, the nature of abuse and details of children, was used to fill in any gaps in information.

4. DOMESTIC ABUSE AND TRAUMA AS DEMONIC POSSESSION

In this section, we present findings to demonstrate how domestic abuse and resulting trauma are understood as demonic possession, a widely held cultural belief among different ethnic groups in Malaysia and in the study sample. We consider how domestic abuse perpetrators use the narrative of demonic possession, and then the ways in which survivors may also seem to be possessed by spirits when they exhibit symptoms of trauma. First, we introduce the particular cultural beliefs about demonic possession that are used in these narratives.

4.1 Demonic possession in Malaysian culture

Belief in demonic possession is widespread in Malaysia, deriving from animist beliefs, some of which can be traced to the influences of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Malay Archipelago from the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Bellwood, 1997; Endicott, 1970) and have endured since the advent of Islam in the fourteenth century (Amin et al., 2017). *Hantu* – demons or spirits – are negative elements juxtaposed with the positive *Tuhan* (god) (Mohtar, 1977). *Hantu* are

greatly feared (Karim, et al., 1964) as having supernatural powers that enable them to possess human beings to bring harm, inflict diseases, and cause injury and death (Ishak, 2003). Belief in *hantu* has not been displaced by Islam, instead synchretising with similar ideas acknowledged in Islam about jinn (spirits or demons) and evil (Amin et al., 2017; Lim et al. 2015). Cultural hybridisation over hundreds of years has ensured that belief in spirits in Malaysia is common and shared across different ethnic groups (Nicholas et al., 2013; Nasri, 2015).

Demonic possession describes any situation where an agent is believed to have cast a spell or charm over a victim (Ward and Beaubrun, 1980). It may be used to explain any negative experience, the cause and origin of which are mysterious, supernatural or incomprehensible. Possession by demons is associated with malign intentions, such as deception, punishment or control. It usually involves at least three parties: a shaman (a spirit healer who summons the demon to act), a client who makes the request, and a demon (Suleiman, 2014). While research elsewhere suggests demonic possession may be invoked in response to domestic stress or sexual conflict (Ward and Beaubrun, 1980), most research on demonic possession in Malaysia focuses on mental illness (e.g. Haque, 2010; Chong et al., 2013) or mass hysteria in schools and workplaces (e.g. Ong, 1988, 2010). Demonic possession is often associated with the causes of mental illness by Malaysians, believed to be triggered by charms and evil deeds of jealous people, transgressions of religious-spiritual norms by the sufferer, or the person's weakness of spirit (Haque, 2005). Sufferers often seek guidance from traditional healers who are believed to possess knowledge and capabilities to cure the individual of possession and mental illness (Shaw, 1975). Most Malaysian psychologists are trained in western practice, but studies have shown that many also acknowledge the phenomenon of spirit possession in relation to mental health issues (Syarifah, 2019; Haque, 2010).

From the perspective of survivors in our research, demonic possession is a justification of violence as a strange 'illness' that is difficult to comprehend and has no reasonable explanation. It can also involve a spell that wives are put under by malevolent husbands. One example commonly mentioned is love *sihr*. Most of the Malaysian population, of different races and religions, accept that *sihr* exists and is practiced by people known to them (Nasri, 2015). Love *sihr* is a method used by a husband who aims to make his wife remain faithful.

This causes some communities to regard violence or coercion as an act of 'love', thus influencing their responses to domestic abuse. A wife is regarded as being possessed by a love *sihr* demon if she becomes low-spirited, tense and anxious (Hashim Awang, 1990; Baki, 1993). Its symptoms are determined by the party that inflicts the possession (the husband) as well as common symptoms associated with madness. The love *sihr*'s incantation includes a spell on anything that belongs to the survivor, including intimate materials such as those used to wash private parts, water that has been spat in or used to soak underwear, or a meal that is prepared to be served to the wife. Love *sihr* is believed to enable a husband to possess his wife by shackling her spirit, inhibiting her freedom to think so that she will not object to anything desired by her husband.

For those who believe they are sending a love *sihr* (for example, perpetrators or malicious family members who call on the services of a shaman), it is a form of violence that allows them to escape liability and punishment because there is often no proof that points to the crime of using a demon. The community's response is diverse; people are often confused about whether or not to believe this has happened. In general, some will sympathise with the survivor, but there are also those who deem her to be either fabricating or under the influence of corrupt shamans, a view relating to increasingly widespread fraud cases involving shamans in Malaysia (Nasri, 2015).

Despite these widely-held cultural beliefs, formal treatments of mental illness are often western-centric. This reflects the legacy of colonial attitudes towards Malay medicinal practices, which were dismissed as 'black arts', 'downright heathenism' (Maxwell, 1883), and 'superstitions found among the lower races' (Skeat, 1898). Colonial discourses represented shamanistic and other 'magical' practices, such as belief in *hantu*, as evidence of 'primitiveness' (Winstedt, 1925, in Laderman, 1991) and an inability to deal with abstract theories and systems. Embracing western psychology was thus seen as an essential element of becoming 'modern'. Consequently, patients are today evaluated for psychological disorders based on the criteria set by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), a classification system infused with western concepts of mental health and illness. However, the DSM, and especially its neglect of cultural factors, has recently become a focus for intense criticism. As Haque (2010) argues, while numerous studies have shown the impact of cultural

beliefs on mental illness, the DSM ignores cultural diversity and the impacts of factors such as acculturation adjustment, migration trauma and ethnic identity confusion. This neglect means that the DSM is prone to diagnostic errors, especially in the case of people from minority ethnic groups (*ibid,* 2010).

4.2 'He is possessed': Domestic abuse as demonic possession

The terms possession/possessive are salient in domestic abuse, aside from any implication of demonic intervention. The language of possession sits on the boundary between a conventionally-viewed loving relationship and an abusive one. The assumption that a husband possesses his wife is an established feature of patriarchal cultures in many parts of the world (Araji, 2000), legitimising perpetrators' belief that their abuse is permitted. Malaysian legislation enables women's self-determination and right to be free of violence in marriage, but this idea of wife as possession, while not universal, is still culturally entrenched. Moreover, possessiveness is a key characteristic of domestic abuse perpetrators across different cultures and communities, albeit interpreted in different ways. Possessiveness may be justified by perpetrators' moral contention that they know what is best for the victim and are acting for their benefit (Pain, 2014). What Herman (1997) has called the 'captivity' of abuse extends to the survivor's psyche and body, ensuring that she 'lives her life based on the perpetrators' pitch and plays by his rules' (Hennessy, 2012, p. 85). Her identity is distorted through abuse ranging from belittlement and isolation to rape and physical violence.

This setting is a powerful determinant of societal responses to domestic abuse. Entrapment is spatial and psychological, with every action or sign of resistance from the survivor being countered with further tactics by the perpetrator, leading to growing geographical and social isolation (Stark, 2007). Increasingly, psychological pressure and fear as well as practical and material constraints prevent the victim from fleeing, rendering them possessed (Williamson, 2010). Where survivors manage to escape, they often end up returning to perpetrators for a range of rational reasons, including a lack of support from family and community members, having inadequate means to survive, fear of losing children or more severe violence.

In this study, the participants describe their husbands as someone who asserts themselves as 'God' or a 'pious husband' to reinforce their domination over their wife. Patriarchy and religious belief thus provide two justifications for abuse, based on the perpetrators' assumed position in traditional Malay culture, and (for those respondents from an Indian background) Indian culture in Malaysia. These are often used interchangeably: the 'pious husband' can become a 'God' and vice versa, or he may draw on other aspects of patriarchy that centralise women as male property. A case in point is Malay perpetrators using religion to control their wives, on the grounds of 'solidifying' their religion. She is pressured by the notion that it is her fault her husband becomes abusive. In Islam, wives should obey their husbands as long as he is still practising his religion. If the husband is violent, however, the wife does not have to comply with him (Zuhrah, 1950). The manipulation of religion is a compelling way in which perpetrators exert and retain control. This is related to the status of Malay women in Muslim culture and particularly the often misinterpreted notion of *nusyuz* (disobedience) under Sharia law. For example, Faizah is still conflicted by her decision to run away from home as she fears that she committed the offence of *nusyuz*:

> **Faizah**: Then I ran away many times.
>
> **Lieya**: To where?
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> **Faizah**: To somewhere, for a while. Like I ran away for a day, and the next day I returned home. It felt like I was committing nusyuz.
>
> **Lieya**: When you ran away, where did you stay?
>
> **Faizah**: At that time, the house that belongs to my family is near, so I just went there.
>
> **Lieya**: You went there with your kids?
>
> **Faizah**: No. It's only me, I didn't bring them along. I was afraid that my husband would accuse me of being nusyuz. He warned me and that's the reason I came home. Then, you had it again [physical abuse].

According to Islamic law, *nusyuz* means challenging or disobeying the husband without a valid reason (Mohd Yusoff, 2010). It is a sin and is liable to legal action, and often understood by the Malay community as a sin that only women can commit. However, in Sharia law, the law related to *nusyuz* allows disobedience if the husband is negligent in providing for his family, is harmful towards his wife or abandons her. But these acts are not automatically deemed as

nusyuz or wayward. The ambiguity of the use of this term can be very misleading and has specific social impacts, as highlighted by Othman et al. (2005, in Joseph, 2014), who argue that more patriarchal interpretations of woman's role in Islam tend to disregard fairness and justice for women. Hence, *nusyuz* requires a thorough explanation: in contrast to popular interpretations, its original meaning in Arabic can refer to both husband and wife.

For the Malay participants, the notion of an 'obedient' wife was consistently imposed from early in their marriages, and was used to justify their husband's violence and control. Their only escape was to seek refuge in the women's shelter. However, they describe being haunted by the notion that they have failed to be an obedient wife and that the violence was therefore their fault. This justification is reported by survivors in many other countries and described by Hennessy (2012) as a key part of the grooming process by which women are persuaded to obey the perpetrator's rules.

For the Indian survivors of domestic abuse in Malaysia, this imposition of the 'obedient wife' can become a form of slavery. Chumy recounted:

> *One day my husband told me, 'You're my slave. As long as I'm alive, you must stick with me. Even if I smack you, torture you, I can do what I want. Even if breaking your leg, I can do that. You have to accept that. Whether you like it or not, I don't care, because you're my wife. You belong to me. You're my slave, forever, until your death'.*

Studies of domestic abuse elsewhere also draw parallels between slavery and abuse, regardless of cultural background (Hennessy, 2012; Bancroft, 2002). Our Indian participants reported that their abusive husbands justified enslavement on the grounds that Hindu culture perceives Indian men as 'God' after marriage. Chumy also discussed the feeling of possession by her husband as a sense of life being granted by and entirely dependent upon her husband:

> *Ok, as a woman, her own life that she is leading now, belongs to her own husband. In fact, the husband makes the wife their property. Then the wife becomes the victim. She hands her own life to her husband. She is still alive, but her life is in the hands of her husband. So, even when she is crying, it's only she that experiences this, others*

will not know. Until she left the place... she realised... that in fact she is in control of her life, so she can continue her life (Chumy).

For both Indian and Malay women in Malaysia, cultural expectations concerning the relative status of husbands and wives and the misapprehension of Islamic concepts such as *nusyuz* makes disclosing violence difficult (Abdul Ghani, 2014). Chumy's account reflects a common tactic among perpetrators in this study, making their wives believe they should be servile and completely submissive. The situation is worsened where abuse is ignored or supported by family members or the wider community, whose complicity perpetuates the patriarchal notion of possession. Where the wife is seen as the absolute property of her husband, over time she may lose contact with her own family, coming under greater control of her husband's family. Chumy gave the example of her husband's family's role in her subordination:

He (the husband) always listened to his father and sister. Both of them dislike me. They liked to contact my husband. He (father-in-law) called him (the husband), asked my husband to go to his home. My husband went there, my father-in-law complained, 'You can't allow Chumy to dress up, she can't work, ask her to quit, forbid her from going out, ask her to take care of the kids'…Even if I'm dead, I will remain as his son's slave (Chumy).

The first use of the narrative of demonic possession that we explore here focuses on the justification of abusive behaviour by the participants' husbands. Perpetrators are commonly described by survivors as demonic, or possessed by demons that lead them to abuse their wives: this is how most of the women in this study understood and experienced domestic abuse. Perpetrators also claimed that they became demons, in the form of dead human spirits, as an excuse for their abuse. According to Chumy, her husband said:

'Once I've died, my spirit will come after you, so you're gonna die too. I'm dead, then I'll drag (kill) you as well.' He said, 'whatever happens, I can fight any hurdles, even the shamans, I'll finish you off so that we're both dead' (Chumy).

Demon is a grandiose term (Baumeister, 1999), but for the female participants it captures their experience of the terror of domestic abuse. It is a metaphor for the ways their abusers manipulate them, and a means of making sense of it. The abusers physically exist as the women's husbands, but operate like demons. We should remember here that this group of women have certain similarities: they have usually sought the protection of the women's shelter voluntarily, and have taken part in counselling during their three month stay. This is very likely to have increased their awareness of their husband's responsibility for violence and abuse. The counselling on offer does not engage with beliefs about demons, but survivors incorporate cultural beliefs alongside a new understanding gained through counselling, which enables them to identify patterns of domestic abuse, manipulation and deceit. Most are sure their decision to leave the abusive relationship was the right one, because they have come to understand that the behaviour of perpetrators is unlikely to change.

Nevertheless, some of the women see their husband himself as a victim of *sihr* that has turned him into a demon. In these cases, the women think this because their husband seems not to realise his behaviour is abusive. A *sihr* could be sent by family members, the husband's friends or an ex-wife and is then used to blame others. This helps survivors make sense of otherwise unfathomable abuse by a husband who appears 'normal' (Herman, 1992; Pain, 2014):

> *Lieya: If he brought you to hospital, did he mind if you told the doctor about the abuse?*
> *Rekha: I said nothing about the abuse. I just said that I had fallen down.*
> *Lieya: Why?*
> *Rekha: Because I know that he's not guilty. He didn't even realise what he had done. He was wrong but he didn't know why he did that.*
> *Lieya: He was unconscious?*
> *Rekha: Yes. I think his friends put something (sihr) in his food…I thought maybe it's because his mum, siblings, I have no idea.*
> *Lieya: So when he's not affected by sihr, he is ok?*
> *Rekha: Yes. He is nice. He went out to work, gave me money and asked me to eat.*
> *Lieya: Did he realise that he has a problem?*
> *Rekha: Yes, he knows that. But he couldn't control it.*

Women's economic dependency on their husbands also influences their interpretation of their husband's abusive behaviour: they were more inclined to attribute it to *sihr* if they did not have independent financial means.

4.3 'She is possessed': Trauma as demonic possession

The second key way in which demonic possession is used as a narrative by participants is in explaining the traumatic symptoms commonly experienced by women suffering domestic abuse. The manifestation of trauma resonates with societal beliefs about demonic possession (see Haque, 2010). International studies have found strong relationships between trauma exposure and spirit possession; for example Hecker et al. (2015) identify especially high correlations in post-conflict African countries. The diagnosis and treatment of PTSD is often a poor fit for lived experiences of trauma (Pain et al., 2020), and is sometimes viewed as an unwelcome western intervention which individualises suffering and erases political violence (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009; Marshall, 2014). Indeed, for Clark (2016) trauma may operate as a colonial technology in postcolonial contexts. However, the narrative of demonic possession can also lead to individual and societal denial of traumatic experiences of abuse, to the detriment of women, gender and sexual minorities (Gringrich 2006).

Over time, the culture of possession in domestic abuse leads to some survivors feeling they too have been possessed by spirits. The 'possessed body' in this study is therefore a culturally specific local term describing women subjected to domestic abuse who develop chronic trauma (Herman, 1997). Chronic trauma is characterised by mental health symptoms and behaviours that may appear to be evidence of demonic possession. In this section we highlight the complementarity and crossover of these framings (Syarifah, 2019), while demonstrating the inadequacy of the symptomological model alone. The participants in this study discussed four traumatic symptoms in particular: adjustments to their sense of identity, 'love' *sihr* possession, hyperalertness, and flashbacks/reenactment.

First, a common feature of possessed bodies is that the victim feels and acts like her identity and body are closely controlled or replaced by other spirits (Boddy, 1994). Similarly, violence leads to significant changes to an individual's sense of identity, especially in prolonged captivity (Herman, 1997). The values and ideals that give a person their sense of purpose and coherence are broken down methodically by perpetrators (Hennessy, 2012; Williamson, 2010):

> **Shalini**: *The first time he hit me, I was lost. Then when he kept beating me, I got used to it, then I felt numb, I'd met a dead end. Then I was wondering, is this who I am?*
> **Lieya**: *Psychologically?*
> **Shalini**: *Yeah, it's a mental torture. I thought to myself, am I really like this?*
> **Lieya**: *What do you mean? What did he say?*
> **Shalini**: *'You're useless, you not reliable, you only bring me bad luck, all sorts of things'.*

Even after separation from their husbands, participants struggled to assume their former identities. The effects range from feeling like they are a different person, to feeling they are no longer a person where abuse has been particularly dehumanising (Van der Kolk, 2014). Many are still dealing with the consequences of psychological abuse while in the shelter:

> **Ashna**: *When I lived with my husband…he likes to make me feel stupid. He said that anything I say isn't right. It's only him who is always right. My decisions are all wrong, I'm a fool. So, I thought, maybe I am good-for-nothing.*
> **Lieya**: *Do you have those feelings anymore?*
> **Ashna**: *It really affects me. When I came here (the shelter), I spoke with a social worker, 'I'm in kind of a blur, confused, err, now I can't even make a decision, I feel that I am indeed useless'. I had to face that every day.*

Secondly, some women explain the effect of domestic abuse as akin to becoming the victim of love *sihr* (discussed above) making them unable to leave. Rekha, for example, suspected her husband of giving her water enchanted with a spell:

> *Rekha*: They (her own family) asked me to run (away from her husband)...but I wouldn't budge.
>
> *Lieya*: Why?
>
> *Rekha*: (Sighing) it's seems that I was under his (husband) influence, from the drink that he gave me (sihr).
>
> *Lieya*: You were unconscious?
>
> *Rekha*: Yes. It seems that I'm charmed to stay with him... Before he got me, he gave the shaman something...If he called me, I just followed him.
>
> *Lieya*: You just went back voluntarily?
>
> *Rekha*: Yes, I went back on my own... I couldn't control myself. I knew he hit me, I knew what he is, sometimes taking a knife, but I couldn't control myself.

Rekha internalises her experience of being possessed in two ways, through contradictory thinking and through bonding. Contradictory thinking is knowing that abuse is wrong, but ignoring her family's advice and her own wish to leave the abuser. Other survivors also associated contradictory thinking and 'love' bonding with the mental health impacts of abuse such as losing consciousness, confusion, blurring events, and losing control (see McCue, 2008). This psychological state can be a survival strategy to cope with chronic fear (Pain, 2014). Herman (1997, p. 92) describes this apparent attachment to abusive husbands as 'like a basic unit of survival that forms in hostages, who come to view their captors as their saviour'. The cultural specificity of Malaysia helps to explain how strong the 'love' *sihr* (or traumatic bonding) can be:

> *Even though when I was alone here (in the shelter), sometimes I shed my tears because I longed for him (husband). Sometimes I called the police station where he was remanded, asking whether he had his meal or not (Faizah).*

Ashna talks of other survivors at the shelter who experienced similar traumatic bonding. While she herself is 'recovering' over time, she was aware that some survivors return to their abusive husbands, as trauma increases the risk of repossession (Matsakis, 1996):

> *Ashna: I used to encounter many women here (in the shelter), for instance Mona, she coaxed me to make amends with my husband, to give him a chance…I always see she's crying, thinking of her husband when she's here… But I don't love my husband anymore because when he hurt me, he was ruthless.*
>
> *Lieya: How about when you had just come here?*
>
> *Ashna: At first when I was here, I did pity him…I was thinking of his future, what would happen to him. Eventually I realised, I'm not going to care for him any longer.*

Belief in love *sihr* therefore allows the abuse to continue. The experience of demonic possession is one way in which survivors explain to themselves and others why it was so difficult to leave (see also Gringrich, 2006).

Thirdly, possessed bodies that experience chronic fear often find that this persists after leaving, a state known as hyperarousal or hyperalertness (Van der Kolk, 2014). All the participants had experienced depression and anxiety at the time of the abuse, and all experienced symptoms of hyperarousal such as startling easily, being snappy in their reactions and sleep-deprived (Herman, 1997). This can anger perpetrators, leading to further abuse:

> *I was stunned when he called me out or held me - 'Can you stop being so stuck-up? Why do you flinch when I touch you?' He was so shocked at my response that he became more enraged, so I got abused that night…He kept beating me, that was why I got startled when he touched me (Ashna).*

After leaving the abuser, hyperalertness may be aggravated by any reminders of perpetrators, for example, the phone ringing, a vehicle starting, or being in places known by perpetrators:

> *When Usha opened the shelter's gate, all of a sudden there's a red car passing. Usha abruptly ran for her life. I asked her why she acted like that. She responded, my husband drives a red car (Research diary, Lieya).*

When Usha called me to her room, Shalini and Chumy rushed in. They said, 'both marketing managers who came just now are Indians, I'm worried that they know my husband.' So they locked themselves up until the marketing managers left (Research diary, Lieya).

Survivors often avoid people, places, events or things associated with past traumatic events. This behaviour looks odd to others, and is often assumed to be a feature of mental illness and demonic possession. In Malaysia and other contexts, such as Tamilnadu (Clark-Deces, 2008), it is common for multicultural women who exhibit this behaviour to feel they are still possessed by their husbands, and they are often judged by society as being possessed by spirits or demons.

Fourthly, flashbacks are sudden, vivid memories of a traumatic event, accompanied by a feeling of terror (Van der Kolk, 2014). In this way, trauma intrudes into survivors' everyday lives (Matsakis, 1996). Usha says that her sense of terror is heightened by flashbacks of being stalked and incarceration, with her perpetrator seeming to appear in doors or windows, so that she feels constantly watched or haunted (see Figure 1):

I feel my husband's shadow in places… It seems like he is standing there, whispering my name… Usha… Usha… Usha… My husband kept intimidating me like that, in the house that I lived in before. This [photograph] shows the nature of a man who does not trust his own wife and keeps eyeing her from windows and doors. How frightening to live with a husband like him (Usha).

FIGURE 1 'I Feel My Husband's Shadow Here' taken by Usha.

In contrast, Harini's trauma is invoked by being in a confined space (see Figure 2):

My husband locked me in the house. When I see window frills, I'll think of past violent incidents (Harini).

FIGURE 2 'A Restricted Life, Locked Inside the Doors of Violence' taken by Harini

Trauma is also relived through behaviour known as reenactment (Berman, n.d.), interpreted as an act of self-harm by Calof (1995), a way to 'tell without saying a word' the story of abuse while offering a feeling of control that was not present during abuse. It may cause survivors to exhibit 'crazy' behaviour or have sudden outbursts, which again is interpreted by others as demonic possession:

> *Rekha: When the clock hit 12, I was petrified. I went to my room, and kept quiet.*
> *Lieya: You mean every day?*
> *Rekha: Yes... I'm scared out of my wits.*
> *Lieya: Did he drink every day at 12?*
> *Rekha: Yes, at night. At 12... Or one in the morning…Then, he would break into the room. Smashing it. When I see the clock reached 12…there was a sound, "ting, ting, ting, ting", I quickly ran into the house, went into the next room, locked myself up and 20 minutes later, he would show up.*
> *Lieya: So he'd break into the room?*
> *Rekha: Yes.*
> *Lieya: Are you still living in fear?*
> *Rekha: Yes, I can still sense it (shaking in fear). I can't let it go, I won't forget it till my death (sighing).*

These four symptoms of trauma result in feelings and behaviours that are frightening to the survivor and those around her. Where they are explained by demonic possession, this has the effect of further controlling the survivor as she tries to move forward with her life.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this study of survivors in Malaysia, women of different ethnic backgrounds report that domestic abuse is often explained as demonic possession by perpetrators, survivors and other

people around them. The effects of intimate captivity, the dynamics of abuse and symptoms of trauma resemble demonic possession, which is narrativised to explain what is happening. This narrative becomes pivotal in the successful exertion of control by the perpetrator, extending the damage that abuse causes. Rather than offering a value judgment about the validity of demonic possession or its use in explaining violence, we suggest that it provides a means for these survivors to make sense of abuse, and for perpetrators to justify and evade responsibility for it.

The paper contributes to the expanding field of scholarship in human geography on domestic abuse and trauma through exploring further the intimate dynamics of violence in particular contexts, answering calls to understand the location of violence in patriarchal cultures in ways that critique structural inequality rather than cultural variation (Holmes et al., 2014; Piedalue, 2017). While systems of domestic possession and abuse are globally continuous, they work hand-in-hand with beliefs such as demonic possession to sustain violence against women. Employing a postcolonial feminist framework, our study extends awareness of non-western frames of reference for trauma; analysing trauma solely through symptomology can not capture its lived experience or the social relations that compound it.

Spiritual beliefs are not always helpful for women where they are imbued with power relations including patriarchal control. Using demonic possession to explain violence can lead to denial, which harms women, gender and sexual minorities (Gringrich, 2006). And yet the situation is complex, because for some survivors these beliefs provide a means of coping, reconciling impossible situations, and gaining recognition of their experiences. In Rothenberg's (2001) examination of stories of possession as an intimate dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she describes politics as mirrored in the body. And as Bartolini et al. (2018, p. 2) observe, 'religion, and by extension spirituality, do not stand outside of modernity…but are fundamental in how it is constructed.'

Greater understanding of the relation between demonic possession and domestic abuse might lead to more effective recognition and interventions. Firstly, bringing the operation of these narratives into public discourse may lead to better public understanding of violence against women, which itself can be protective. Secondly, current models of domestic abuse

services and trauma treatment in Malaysia (as elsewhere) are often based on western psychological approaches that are not wholly appropriate. There is a need for more culturally sensitive approaches informed by survivor experiences and perspectives (Gilfus, 1999; hooks, 2003; INSIGHT!, 2006), and interventions built on critical trauma theories that question western models of trauma (Clark, 2016; Marshall, 2014). Equally, understanding domestic abuse means listening to the voices of diverse survivors on salient issues within their communities (Bubar and Thurman, 2004). The survivors in this study suggest a need for both research methods and mental health treatments to take cultural and religious aspects into account, acknowledging and working with beliefs such as possession.

This paper has demonstrated the value of postcolonial feminist perspectives to understanding the cultural specificities of domestic abuse in different places, problematising the western-centrism of some feminist debates. In non-western societies, the fight against western cultural imperialism is as important as the fight against patriarchy for women's justice (Sewpaul, 2016; Amos and Parmar, 1984). A postcolonial feminist lens can address the limitations of those feminist critiques of domestic abuse in 'other' cultures which overemphasise 'cultural' practices synonymized with ethnicity and religion, or that collapse diverse ethnic groups into a single category. This study provides further support for decolonized trauma theories (Andermahr, 2015; Clark, 2016), as well as decolonization of space and culture in domestic abuse research. While there are global consistencies and common dynamics in the experience of domestic abuse, there are also cultural specificities in western as well as non-western settings. The narrativisation of domestic abuse may take different forms: for example, in western contexts, alternative cultural beliefs about women's culpability for gendered violence are mobilised by perpetrators and wider society (Stark, 2007; Williamson, 2010). What all such narratives have in common is the minimization of violence, deflection of perpetrators' responsibility, and buttressing of collective failures to challenge violence locally and globally (INSIGHT!, 2006; Stark, 2007; WHO, 2010).

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