

# **Demonic Possession: Spatial and Cultural Accounts of Domestic Violence in Malaysia**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



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Despite the vast research globally on the domestic violence, there is a little understanding of the experiences of multiracial women survivors in non-western countries. The overall image of domestic violence that emerges from the literature tends to concentrate on a privileged epistemological standpoint in western theory. Domestic violence is thus only understood in culturally-specific terms, as initially posited by white western feminists. Adopting a qualitative and participatory approach drawing on postcolonial theories, this paper presents the spatial and cultural accounts of multiracial women survivors of abusive relationships in Malaysia. The findings reveal that abused women lived in a form of intimate captivity under the perpetrator's intimate control centred on women's psyche and body. As a form of entrapment, every action or sign of resistance from the women is countered with various tactics by the perpetrator. This prevents the abused women fleeing, leading to a coercive relationship and rendering them possessed. As a result, the notion of demonic possession is used by survivors, perpetrators and wider Malay society as a metaphor for domestic violence, and also as a narrative to both help make sense of or excuse it. This story of demonic possession works in this way because of its close fit with the social patterns and individual experiences of domestic violence. Both the behaviour of perpetrators, and the symptoms that women suffering from abuse commonly experience, resonate with societal beliefs about demonic possession. Indeed, what might otherwise be understood as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the cumulative effects on personality and identity of victims of long-term abuse, are identified as either causes or consequences of demonic possession by many of the survivors and perpetrators in this study. Through this focus on the nature and experience of domestic violence in Malaysia, the thesis thus highlights the significance of culturally-sensitive approaches to domestic violence as a counterpoint to western-centric understandings. It also stresses the need for culturally specific approaches to awareness raising and knowledge enhancement in Malaysia.





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## DECLARATION

This thesis is the result of my own work. Data from other authors contained herein are acknowledged at the appropriate point in the text.

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SIGNED: .....

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**DEDICATION**

*Special for my dear Pavithra (was 1-year-old girl), who always smiled and came sitting on my lap during the fieldwork. She lost her life because of being abused by her babysitter when her mum (a survivor) was in the process of rebuilding her life, that she had two jobs day and night to support the children.*

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*I hope you're in better place. Rest in peace.*



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## CHAPTER 1

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### INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is the most prevalent violence against women worldwide, which kills, tortures, and harms them psychologically, physically, sexually and economically. It is one of the most fundamental violations of human rights, denying women's equality, security, dignity, and their right to enjoy freedoms (Innocent Digest, 2000). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) reports that almost one third (30%) of all women worldwide who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner. Globally, as many as 38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners (WHO, 2013). Yet, domestic violence is "a concealed and ignored form of violence against women" (Innocenti Digest, 2000). As the real statistics are hard to obtain, not least because of underreporting, the term 'domestic violence' itself hides the reality of its cruelty and effect. Hammer (2002) rejects the term 'domestic violence' as it suggests the violence is something that is easy to overcome and subtle in nature; other terms used today to highlight this issue – 'conjugal violence', 'spouse abuse' and 'intimate partner violence' - all erase the reality of domestic violence as gender-based violence (Hammer, 2002).

In the social sciences, some scholars use other terms based on certain characteristics to describe domestic violence more precisely. hooks (2000) uses the term 'patriarchal violence' to highlight the causative factor. This term connects violence at home with sexism, sexist thinking, and male control (hooks, 2000). Patriarchal violence at home is based on the belief that male individuals are more powerful in controlling others via many forms of coercion. In Pain's (2014a) account, home is the main site of violence. She uses the term 'everyday terrorism' to represent the dynamics, severity and impacts of domestic violence. In a separate publication, Pain (2015) uses the term 'intimate war' to refer to perpetrators' tactics, patterns and its effects on women, which can be equated with war because in addition to violence it involves psychological occupation, subjugation, and entrapment. Explanations of domestic violence are often rooted in specific cultural contexts: different societies have popular explanations of domestic violence. For example, domestic abuse is often related to alcohol





and football in Scotland, to dowry and widow burning practices in India, and to foot binding and other patriarchal customs in China. This thesis explores the cultural framing of domestic violence in the Malaysian context.

In Malaysia, there is little known about domestic violence, particularly in terms of how it is experienced and understood by diverse women. The literatures on domestic violence in Malaysia are relatively limited (Mohd Hashim and Endut, 2009; Putit, 2008). Emerging scholarly works on domestic violence are still struggling with fundamental issues such as the prevalence, nature, patterns of the violence and issues of formal intervention from the government and NGOs. Therefore, the existing vocabularies in the domestic violence discourse in Malaysia are not sufficient to explain this issue comprehensively.

Public discourse on domestic violence in Malaysia is made more difficult because it is associated with the fight by feminists against gender oppression and patriarchy and thus informed by and associated with western ideology. This renders the experience and understanding of domestic violence as western-centric and irrelevant in the context of Malaysia. Moreover, the voices of Malaysian survivors in the fight for women's justice are negated. Western feminist critiques of patriarchy meet resistance in Malaysia because they rest on the assumption that patriarchal practice in the Muslim community is rooted in the teachings of Islam. Hence, the fight against domestic violence is often reduced to a fight against patriarchy based on prejudice towards Islam. In response, this thesis argues that a postcolonial feminist lens is important in establishing a culturally-sensitive approach to understanding domestic violence in Malaysia and, in turn, to improve outcomes of attempts to recognise and tackle the problem so that abuse women attain justice.

Young (1990 in Blunt and Wills, 2000:168) emphasizes the need for a postcolonial approach to “challenge the production of knowledges that are exclusively western by not only focusing on the world beyond ‘the west’ but also by destabilising the dominant discourses by and taken for granted about the west”. Western ideology has its origin in the western context based on “white supremacist capitalist patriarchal western culture neo-colonial” (hooks, 2000) and secular thinking. As part of western thinking, western feminism has thus been accused of belittling non-western women as “unsophisticated” (Keller, 2002). “uncivilized”.





and “less fortunate” (hooks, 2000). From this, an unacknowledged assumption emerged that western feminists are responsible for teaching non-western women about the notions of gender oppression, patriarchy and the way to fight against violence. In recent decades, however, feminists from different cultural contexts have criticised western feminists for universalising their own particular perspectives as normative, and essentialising women in the south as tradition-bound victims of timeless, patriarchal cultures (Mohanty, 1991). The charge was that western feminists denied the voices and the authority of non-western women to represent themselves, were insensitive to non-western cultures, and disregarded cultural diversity in the western context itself. In recent years, western feminists such as Pain (1997, 1999, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, and 2015), Meth (2003), Hennessy (2012), and Herman (1997 and 1992) have responded to these criticisms and have argued for the importance of sensitivity to cultural difference in analyses of domestic violence. Consequently, domestic violence research has become increasingly sensitive to cultural differences in understanding experiences of and solutions to domestic violence.

This study draws on previous scholarly works (Stark, 2007; Root, 1996; Herman, 1997) to argue that the spatial experience of domestic violence can be understood as intimate captivity, which has common features among women from diverse cultural backgrounds across cultural diversity in Malaysia and women in western contexts. These features include entrapment, coercion, threats, and so forth. However, this study also argues that certain aspects and experiences of domestic violence are specific to the different cultures in Malaysia. It suggests, for example, that there is a need to understand different cultural codings of public and private space that may lead to very specific experiences of intimate captivity that may also contrast to those experienced by western women. The western notion of the private space of the home acquires a “material formality, private (exclusive and separate, sound and vision proof) and a space over which men and women express gendered attachments and aversions” (Meth, 2003: 320). This study explores how the public/private binary that creates the conditions of intimate captivity is determined by perpetrators’ culture and religion. It does so by also exploring the differences between Malay and Indian households, the ways in which Hindu traditions influence the ability of Indian husbands to control wives’ bodies as an extension of control of both private and public spaces, and the significance of Islamic traditions in extending the control of Malay husbands over wives’ bodies into private space.





The thesis explores the different dimensions of ‘private’ space and the significance of understanding this for Malaysian survivors, as well as how the notions of public and private space in intimate captivity are manifested in very specific ways in relation to culture, religion and societal norms in Malaysia.

The original contribution of the thesis is to explore how in the context of Malaysia domestic violence comes to be understood as demonic possession. The demonic possession described in this thesis goes beyond reductionist approaches that solely support the argument that demonic possession serves as a “hidden transcript” (Makris, 2000) or an idiom that articulates a range of experience (Crapanzano, 1977), which can easily be dismissed as rooted in belief in the existence of spirits among the abused women and their societies. Instead, demonic possession is dynamic, used by survivors as a metaphor for expressing the reality of domestic violence. Using this idea, the thesis makes three important interventions. First, it argues that western feminist conceptualisations of domestic violence are not always appropriate in understanding women’s experiences and survival tactics in different cultural contexts. Second, it contests problematic, western-centric depictions of demonic possession as evoking “images of strange and exotic rituals that are utilised by unsophisticated people to make sense of their world, a kind of primitive psychotherapy. That possession occurs predominantly among women is likely to fit comfortably with the image of a dark-skinned body, producing yet another fascinating image of the third world woman” (Keller, 2002: 3). Third, it argues that greater attention needs to be paid to cultural difference in order to have effective interventions aimed at preventing domestic violence, helping women escape from violent relationships and helping women with trauma relief. Through these interventions, this study reveals distinct ways of understanding, experiencing and resisting domestic violence in Malaysia that are quite different to western understandings.

## Research Aims

This research aims to explore the spatially and culturally specific experience of domestic violence by focusing on women survivors from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in Malaysia. It seeks to capture the ways in which domestic violence discourse and experience are contested in everyday life for Malaysian women. It also aims to contribute towards a better understanding of the nature and experience of domestic violence, as well as contribute





to awareness raising and knowledge enhancement in Malaysia. Thus, the research will seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What bearing does trauma have on abusive relationships, as defined by women survivors in Malaysia?
2. How far do these meanings, and associated experiences of domestic violence, differ for women from different ethnic groups and across rural and urban settings?
3. What are the related experiences and differences in help-seeking behaviour and expectations of informal and formal intervention in domestic violence?

### Definition and Terminology

In western contexts, domestic violence is generally understood as shorthand for male violence against women in the home (Hague and Malos, 2005). Domestic violence is usually regarded as violence between adults who are or have been in an intimate or family relationship with each other most often a sexual relationship between a woman and a man, although other family members may sometimes be involved.



In Malaysia, domestic violence is understood as the physical abuse by a husband of his wife. In contrast, the legal definition of domestic violence in Malaysia includes violence against other family members such as ex-wives, ex-husbands, children, mothers, fathers, or relatives who live together. This type of violence is not gender based and the form of abuse also varies, including psychological, social, financial and sexual violence (Tumin, 2006). However, the relationship between perpetrators and victims and their religion determines which laws play a role in the Malaysian legal system. A case in point is spousal relationships that are governed by Shariah laws for Muslims and family laws for non-Muslims. By taking into account this matter, the working definition of the term ‘domestic violence’ in this thesis is any type of abuse by a husband against his wife. Domestic violence is understood to involve control executed through physical, psychological and/or emotional abuse, rather than one-off incidents of physical violence which may be more widely understood as ‘fights’ (Stark, 2007).





## Thesis Organisation

This thesis consists of nine chapters. Having outlined the main arguments of the thesis in the Introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework for the thesis and argues that a postcolonial perspective is important to challenge western-centric notions of domestic violence and its relationship with ethnicity and culture. It also explores the concept of trauma as a framework through which to address the main issues of domestic violence from a postcolonial point of view. Chapter 3 places the research in context by explaining Malaysian demographic structures and cultural diversity, tracing the histories of these differences and some of the cross-cultural frictions (for example, between Hinduism and Islam) that partially affect cultural pluralism in Malaysia. This chapter further elaborates on the patriarchal cultures associated with the Malay and Indian communities, which are the two main ethnic groups involved in this study. Finally, this chapter explains the legal and cultural marital procedures for Muslim and non-Muslim couples, as well as the consequences if the procedures are not adhered to, which have particular consequences for women affected by domestic violence.



Chapter 4 sets out the participatory research methodology and explains how the qualitative data was collected. It also explains the attempts of disseminating the findings through mural art, which takes into account the traumatic events experienced by the Malay and Indian women in this study. In this chapter, I reflect on my own positionality and reflect on my experience in dealing with trauma during data collection and analysis. The ethical issues, limitations and other challenges that emerged during the study are also highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter 5 is the first of four chapters that analyse and discuss the findings. The chapter first discusses why the women married their partners. Second, it explores the different social and spatial processes that influence their decisions to marry and how these position them as vulnerable when the relationship becomes abusive. Chapter 6 explores in more detail the spatiality of domestic violence through the notion of intimate captivity. The Chapter explores aspects of 'home incarceration', and the significance of private cultural settings, social isolation, geographical isolation, and psychological force. The chapter argues that these settings are under the perpetrator's intimate control and center violence on the woman's







psyche and body. This ensures that abused women become entrapped as prisoners. Together, these two chapters suggest that despite socio-cultural differences in shaping the meanings of public-private and how these influence the cultural coding of domestic space, there are many common features of domestic violence that cut across cultural diversity, be that within Malaysia or between Malaysia and western contexts. However, the next two chapters demonstrate that cultural specificity creates important differences in the ways in which domestic violence is experienced, understood and resisted among diverse women in Malaysia.

Chapter 7 examines demonic possession as a metaphor for domestic violence which, in comparison to the term domestic violence, is well understood and common among the Malaysian community, including across diverse ethnic groups. In this study, demonic possession is used by survivors, perpetrators and other family members to make sense of perpetrators' cruelty, the wider patterns of abuse, and the effects of this abuse as chronic traumatic symptoms. This cultural framing is used to explain both the social patterns and individual experiences of domestic violence. Chapter 8 focuses on survivors' resistance, escape strategies and 'recovery' processes. It stresses the weakness of formal interventions in Malaysia, such that most women are not well equipped to free themselves from violence. Finally, the conclusion (Chapter 9) summarises the research findings, reiterates the importance of context-specific understandings of domestic violence to draw out the nuances in how it is understood and experienced, and makes recommendations for improving domestic violence interventions in Malaysia.

