

Capitalist Patriarchy in Singaporean Women’s Work and Consumption: Towards a Radical Discourse in Kevin Kwan’s *Crazy Rich Asians*

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Abstract

In Singapore, state-endorsed patriarchal capitalism is at play in defining the economic processes of production and consumption for women. Amongst others, this scenario is increasingly reflected in emerging Singaporean literature today. While substantive studies have been done on middle class women in Singapore’s capitalist economy, a critical literary analysis of Singaporean women in the (corporate) elite demographic is lacking. Singaporean author Kevin Kwan problematizes the power play within capitalist processes by disturbing the established equilibrium of gender inequality in the city-state’s class economy. By analyzing productive labor and conspicuous consumption in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), I propose a radical reading of Kwan’s novel that places it in the vanguard to challenge prescriptive gender limits in capitalism. As rich Singaporean Chinese women are the focus, I draw on Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class and concept of conspicuous consumption to engage an evaluation of the gendering of capitalism that results in these women’s subjugated work for their fathers, husbands and the state. Even as the novel presents the uneven dynamics in modern-day “work” that privileges men, I argue that significant efforts of female characters at inflecting rigid gender boundaries effectively reclaim women’s position in high production and true consumption.

Introduction

Folbre (2009, p. 204) declares, “Current forms of gender inequality are not simply a byproduct of different class arrangements, but the outcome of more complex strategic interactions”. Folbre’s attempts to marry capitalism and patriarchy has been a long one that began in the Marxist-feminist era of the 1980s (Ferguson & Folbre, 1981). The concept of capitalist patriarchy, or otherwise termed patriarchal capitalism, was met with early resistance; yet, today it has gained much traction within the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) literature, notably Mandel and Shalev (2009) who address the complex intersections between capitalist class and gender, and Iverson and Rosenbluth (2006) who tease out patriarchy’s political economy in the gender gap. Yet, Folbre also rejects the conventional definition of “capitalism” in the way it excludes social reproduction (or household labour) from production (or profit-driven labour), by constricting itself to sole meanings of commodity production based on exchange and surplus values controlled and exercised by men, thus dismissing woman’s productive work in the home. In market economic (ME) terms, women’s socially reproductive tasks are thus not considered work, and women consequentially concede power over their ownership and self-serving choices to labour within and outside the home to men. In making this case, Folbre helpfully calls attention to patriarchy as a “family-based system of control over women and children rather than merely a form of gender inequality” (2009, p. 208), thereby underscoring the way male supremacy is further informed by cultural factors of race, ethnicity and citizenry that ultimately manifest itself in the head of the family who is dismissive of household and childcare labour as non-productive work. Such condescending view of, essentially,

women's non-work within the household is a way in which patriarchy constrains, reduces and controls the definitions of work for women, thus negating whilst also disrespecting their efforts at labour. In terms of capitalist patriarchy, work is only work if it serves men's comfort, needs and interests. If it serves women's interests, it can therefore no longer be work. In this regard, labour is thus configured by the male hegemonic supremacy in the capitalist system, and I take this point to be the initial premise of my paper.

Consequently, I engage a capitalist class analysis in which the labour of the leisure class housewife at "vicarious consumption", to use Veblen's term, of commodities and service display her implication within the patriarchal order. "Vicarious leisure" (Veblen) through hired domestic servants who free up the wife's time for the vicarious activities of conspicuous consumption also testifies to complicity with the master's control in her acquiescence to his pecuniary wealth. In this respect, women's consumption of commodities of dress and domestic service is thus considered labour because it is carried out in servitude to the husband's needs for the primary projection of his status. To refute this uneven alignment of attendant wives with their vicarious existence versus their superior husbands as high producers (who engage in "real" work and are also true consumers), I also turn to significant examples of inflections challenging these gender restrictions of work that set patriarchal limits on women's labour in and beyond the home. In so doing, I argue that wives' rejection of vicarious consumption becomes apparent through their dress selections and career choices that serve the individual needs of the mistress of the household, rather than as "social performance" (Trigg, 2001, p. 100) of her husband's capitalist power. Subsequently, I make the contention that women subvert male supremacy in the capitalist class structure by contributing to the workforce in high-profile, male-dominated occupations, and in their roles as primary, instead of vicarious, consumers who cater to their own needs rather than showing off their husbands' pecuniary status. In this way, they reclaim ownership of their work and can be regarded as contributing significantly, not tangentially, to the market economy as producers and consumers. Along these lines, the patriarchal integrals of capitalism are loosened as women's control over the economy through their primary contributions are embraced.

Through a literary analysis of Singaporean Chinese women in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*, my mission is to be sufficiently attentive to women's productions of meanings and shared experiences of the imposition of control and power by men in "an economic class system driven by the pursuit of profit" (Eisenstein, 1999, p. 208). Kwan's novel rejects the idea of women's reductive worth when her work is not exercised to pander to fathers, husbands or the state. In this way, his novel advocates for an initial radicalism by dismantling power / gender relations within the corporate elite class. I, thus, argue that *Crazy Rich Asians* puts forward challenging ideas about women's positions and roles in Singapore's richly affluent society, with a focus on its upper crust. First of all, the novel is germinal to a rendering of Singapore's capitalist class women belonging to the ethnic Chinese majority. Secondly, distinct from other Singaporean literature, it addresses gender stereotypes to debunk conventional representations of capitalist women's conspicuous subservience, which is read in terms of low production and vicarious consumption. To this end, I unmask capitalist patriarchy in the female characters' complicity with demarcated gender boundaries, while simultaneously analysing their forms of ambivalence as well as expressions of resistance. Given that "the family, at least historically, structured the division of labour in society" (Engels, cited in Eisenstein, 1999, p. 201), gendered

instantiations of capitalist power within hierarchical roles in the family have served as an increasingly germane site of scrutiny. My contribution, thus, lies in the subsequent analysis of the social expectation for women of Singapore's leisure class to serve (the head of) the household at the expense of their personal interests, needs and comfort. More importantly, I examine patriarchy's mechanism of "brutality towards women" (Benston, 1969) by attacking the propagation of "tighter control over the labour process" (Barker & Downing, 1980, p. 65) that results in women's transactional losses via "specific skills" (Folbre, 2009, p. 207), which demean and foreclose women's work within sex-stereotyped positions of inferiority.

Before launching into the discussion proper, it would be useful here to define my use of the term "capitalism" and provide some contextualisation within Singapore's national scene. Firstly, I maintain the term "capitalism," even amidst Folbre's call for a re-examination of its accuracy in reflecting today's social formation of work. Within the Singaporean context, the economic class system continues to be mutually dependent on a patriarchal construct that operates along gendered dimensions. In preserving the capitalist moniker, Singapore's advanced brand of "Asian capitalism", which has been identified as "open-led state capitalism" (Witt & Redding, 2013, cited in Andriessse, 2014, p. 8) promoting transnational and neoliberal globalisation (Naruse & Gui, 2016), is highlighted as a source and implication of the nation's conspicuous consumerism. Significantly, it alludes to Singapore's participation in a mode of capitalism that precludes, rather than assimilates, "Western" modernity. Secondly, Singapore's thoroughly capitalist system brings about and is brought on by a specific ideology of production and consumption encouraged by its ruling political party espousing anti-Westernism (Ang & Stratton, 1995, cited in Chua, 2003, p. 19). In fact, Singapore's Asian capitalism is responsible for patriarchal policies that have enabled the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to produce its ideological design of "Singaporean identity" to counter the "moral crisis [of] Westernisation" (Hill & Lian, 1995, pp. 195-6). With an emphasis on "Asian values" manifested in the national ideology of "Shared Values," its central aim to "anchor a Singaporean identity" has been shaped by formulating its brand of patriarchal state capitalism that guards Asian cultural precepts of familial and social duty (influenced by Confucian ethics) amidst its robust economic expansion (Tamney, 1996; Englehart, 2000; Tan, 2012). Therefore, consumption practices and the production of work geared at a thriving capitalist economy act as immediate sites of patriarchal order in this ethnic Chinese majority nation. My approach maintains a designation of capitalism to encapsulate modern Singapore's economic development along its state-declared shared values.

Notwithstanding Singapore's integration of Asian / shared values to bolster its patriarchal state capitalism, I also return to various leading Anglo-European and Anglo-American thinkers and critics of capitalism to understand the wide-ranging dynamics of gender inequality in production and consumption processes. To this end, my reading of Kwan's female characters further presupposes, in the wake of Eisenstein (1999, p. 211), that domestic labour of the housewife is readily subsumed within productive work. In this way, women's labour in the home can be rightfully acknowledged as production rather than dismissed as non-production. I assert this view by endorsing Margaret Benston's clarification of household and childcare labour as "socially necessary production", which challenges criticism of domestic (labelled "female") work as "[not] real work" because it lies "outside of the trade and market place" (Benston, 1969, cited in Eisenstein, 1999, p.

210 and Altbach, 2009, p. 84). Such a reminder of the need to recast women's reproductive work as social productive labour is important for asserting the housewife's position as the mistress, neither supplementary nor complementary to the master, but as authoritative in the household with her own command of "power" or "the capacity of individuals and organisations to realise class interests" (Wright, 1999, p. 4). It is, precisely, this empowerment that bears the hallmark of resistance against patriarchal capitalism. In addition to social production, empowered female subjectivities are further demonstrated in women's primary / true consumption. In other words, "real" consumption is evidenced when wives overturn the belief that "consumption [is] directed to the comfort of the consumer *himself*, and therefore, a mark of the master" (Veblen, 1994, p. 35, emphasis added). As demonstrated when spending their own money to achieve personal comfort, Kwan's female characters disprove expectations to exhibit the master's wealth. Here, the mistress' aims at personal enjoyment and own gains determine her appreciated value as a primary consumer who upends "conspicuous subservience" (Veblen, 1994, p. 29) to the master. Defying patriarchal subscriptions to Asian "cultural" identity, women pose a double challenge to the household master and "state father" (Heng & Devan, 1995, p. 195). In her consumption of global products readily associated with Western cultural import (Chua, 2003a, p. 6), female characters speak out to capitalist patriarchy that prioritises men's needs and agenda. In Singapore, it is thus the system of "state fatherhood" (Heng & Devan, 1995, p. 195) that promotes Asian cultural commodities that subliminally regulate women's entry into and exit from the capitalist workforce.

Crazy Rich Asians

Kevin Kwan's Singaporean debut novel *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013) is a satirical diatribe on "gender-stereotyped assumptions about women, such as their suitability for housework and servanthood by virtue of being women" (Yeoh et al. 154). Through its representation of capitalist class families living in post affluent Singapore, the novel exposes the patriarchal capitalism that determine women's roles and identity in the family within the nation. Set from the 1980s onwards, the novel highlights Singaporean women's responses to capitalist patriarchy – their means of complicity, cognisance and subversion of subjective delimitations, and rejecting acquiescence to men's priorities, wealth and needs. Instead of dealing with "the majority of Singaporeans" in the "new middle class" demographic (Chua & Tan, 1999, p. 141), Kwan's novel focusses on Singapore's corporate elite / leisure class. Wealth possessed by this class category is on par, if not exceeds, rich doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs as well as wealthy expats. In their consumption habits, Singapore's rich locals may be further understood in terms of the spendthrift *nouveau rich* (new rich) and the thrifty old rich. Due to a theory of the vertical distribution of wealth across different ethnicities (Chua & Tan, 1999, pp. 138–140), the "Chineseness" (Young, 1999, p. 60) of crazy rich Singaporeans has been readily, even if speciously, disseminated. As a result, Kwan draws attention to ethnic Chinese characters at the top of the nation's economic standing. In his novel, female characters appear as corporate wives, aristocratic mothers and trust-fund daughters who have no need to engage in wage labour. Instead, they are expected to serve the enviable wealthy status of the household (master as husband or father). To this end, these women are subject to pressure to conform to prescribed roles as capitalist consumers and non-workers to enhance the venerable status of their family. In added

performance of “commodity fetishism” (Marx, cited in Page, 1992, p. 83) to signal the household’s “prestige value” (Marx, cited in Page, 1992, p. 83), these women are seen to exhibit their servitude to men’s reputation. Living with cultural patriarchy and state patriarchy that underscore “the patriarchal tradition that the woman is a chattel” (Veblen 34), women in Singapore deal with Chinese Confucian cultural values intertwined with the wider state ideology of shared values appropriated to retain women as subsidiary participants in the nation’s economic progress. In Singapore, women have also been directly referred to as “digits” or “hardware,” to borrow the words of ex-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Through this lens, they are subject to Singapore’s state father who serves as the programmer with the essential “software” (Heng & Devan, 1995, p. 210; Hudson, 2013, p. 24), thus exemplifying the established rhetoric adopted by the nation of women as pliable to the master’s power and fashioning. Kwan’s novel features the Singaporean Young family, descended from the imperial Shangs of China and married into the wealthy Straits Chinese Leongs. It presents Singapore’s millennial daughters Astrid Leong, Fiona Cheng, Cathleen Cheng and Sophie Khoo as women “between compliance and resistance” (PuruShotam, 2002, p. 127), whilst also foregrounding instances of women’s ready subscription to the master’s household. Astrid’s and Fiona’s primary consumption coupled with Cathleen’s and Sophie’s high-earning and skilled jobs blur gender boundaries of capitalism as these undo the deep-rooted notion of “female qualities and skills as defined in terms of a male ideological and consumer market” (PuruShotam, 2002, p. 155). Together, these women push back the limits of consumerism while challenging sex-stereotyped work in restrictive careers and low production.

Subsequently, whilst drawing on patriarchy’s positioning of women as secondary, inferior and incidental (Radcliffe, 1990; Tyner, 1994; Huang & Yeoh, 1996, 1998), Kwan’s invective against patriarchy is observed in the novel’s tracing of women’s “affect, subjectivity and experience” (Peletz, 2012, p. 87) of gender hierarchy perpetuated by Singapore’s capitalist system. His novel foregrounds intimate and personal responses to “work” that expose and challenge, at once compelling readers to rethink, the passive denotation of Singaporean Chinese women’s “use value” (Benston, 1969) compared to men’s productive “surplus value.” Such ready vocabulary propagates differences along gender lines to designate men as superior (producers and consumers) within Singapore’s capitalist state. It is this inequality that Kwan’s novel makes all too evident, whilst taking issue with the ideology of women’s specific skills that do not go unnoticed by empowered female characters refusing the limits of prescribed work.

Prior to moving into a detailed analysis of *Crazy Rich Asians*, it would be beneficial at this point to elaborate on Veblen’s terms of “vicarious consumption” and “vicarious leisure” that I employ in this paper. Such contextualisation will gravitate discussions of women’s complicity within capitalist patriarchy, and help to frame the kind of radicalism that I am proposing Kwan’s female characters may be seen to pursue in attempts to reject patriarchal capitalism in the family. With the capitalist class also known as the “corporate elite” (Burriss & Salt, 2014), defined as a small minority of people (mostly men) owning and controlling the means of wealth and production, their wives partake in the patriarchal structures of capitalism through their participation in vicarious consumption and leisure. Veblen explains that when housewives provide “painstaking attention to the service of the master’s needs” (Veblen, 1994, p. 28), it means that “the labour spent in these services is to be classed as leisure” (Veblen, 1994, p. 28). Since this labour is “performed by others [i.e.

women] than the economically free and self-directed head of the establishment [i.e. men],” this leisure is also “to be classed as vicarious leisure” (Veblen, 1994, p. 28). In other words, the mistress’ labour of consumption entails a “leisure [that] is not [her] own” (Veblen, 1994, p. 29). Therefore, vicarious leisure may be understood as a “performance of leisure” (Veblen, 1994, p. 28) that speaks of her consumption of “objects of status” (Marx, cited in Page, 1992, p. 83) as “investment[s] on [the master’s] part with a view to an increase of his good fame” (Veblen, 1994, p. 37). As Chua writes, Singapore’s “culture of consumerism” entails “consum[ing] leisure” (1998, p. 981). Thus, consumption is the mark of leisure. Yet, the master’s leisure provided by the mistress’ conspicuous consumption defines her “work”. For consumption performed for the master’s leisure is neither her own nor real, for it subsumes labouring to display the master’s wealth for his pleasure. As *Crazy Rich Asians* illustrate, resistance against women’s servility to “the master’s ful[l]ness of life” (Veblen, 1994, p. 29) ensues by overturning male-advocated standards of women’s “sole economic function” (Veblen, 1994, p. 83), that within conspicuous servitude. Moreover, Kwan’s novel deals with the mistress’ efforts to redress this power hierarchy by serving her own comfort, goals and needs. For a better understanding of the mistress’ and, by extension, the novel’s radicalism, I first turn to women’s reproduction of gender boundaries to expose the deeply intimate nexus between patriarchy and capitalism endorsed by women, before examining the extent of women’s forms of gendered resistance.

Reproducing gender boundaries: Women’s complicity in vicarious consumption and vicarious leisure facilitated by domestic servants

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, women’s subjection to the process of “graduated sovereignty” (Ong 217) exposes the lack of “biopolitical investments” (Ong, 1999, p. 217) in women that necessitates social expectations of conformity to an attendant subjectivity. Now married into the Youngs, Eleanor’s willingness to serve her husband’s interest as a good and subservient wife is evident when talking about her “sacrifice[s]” (Kwan, 2013, p. 438). Subsequent in-text citations from this novel will appear with page numbers in parentheses). Amongst others, efforts are made “to consume for [the husband] in conspicuous leisure” (Veblen, 1994, p. 30) at the cost of her own modest tendencies to “spen[d] far less money” (224) on clothes. When evoking her father’s name by exclaiming, “I am a Sung, [so am] never good enough” (436-7), she voices her resignation to a gendered non-sovereign role in the Young family, whilst articulating her awareness of being ostracised [“*still* considered an outsider” (436, original emphasis)] because of gendered and classed factors. As a result, not only are ambivalent feelings entrenched in, as she puts it, her having invested and “sacrificed [her] whole life” (428) for her family’s interests, but her sacrifices also signal her double labour to straddle “gendered ideals of good domestic and mothering practices” (Yeoh & Huang, cited in Yeoh et al., 2000, p. 154) and the social performance of conspicuous appearance. Simply, a culture of consumption and leisure is expected from Eleanor to boast the Youngs’ pecuniary wealth in keeping with national post-affluent trends in Singapore. Subsequently, the onus that inevitably falls upon her becomes overwhelming that it culminates in her willing complicity with a patriarchal ordering through capitalist expressions of conspicuous culture. Along this line, Eleanor exhibits her participation in the work of vicarious consumption. As a result, her dress style is “a

deliberate one," where she chooses exclusive "clothes from the boutiques of Hong Kong or Paris" (224) to set her household above others, in which wives resort to wearing designer fakes (225) to strive likewise for the conspicuous exhibition of their master's wealth. Subsequently, Eleanor's care to "always [wear] something distinctive that no one else in Singapore had" (224) achieves the "snob effect" (Mason, 1981, p. 128) that meets the patriarchal interest for promoting the master's pecuniary strength. When speaking of her personal sacrifices over her thirty-four years of marriage, Eleanor testifies to a "life spent in maintaining the honour of the gentleman of leisure" (Veblen, 1994, p. 30). This gentleman is no other than her husband Philip Young, who first appears leisurely fishing at his Sydney waterfront property as he anticipates the assistance of his personal chef. Hence, insofar as "conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure" (Veblen, 1994, p. 36), Eleanor's sacrificial work of consumption is a "mark of servitude" (Veblen, 1994, p. 37).

Moreover, wives' work of vicarious leisure in perspicuous servitude to their husband and his pecuniary status is greatly facilitated by the work of domestic servants. As "chief ornaments of the well-bred housewife" (Veblen, 1994, p. 29), hired workers serving in a household where "a male head remains in force" ultimately function to show off their "trained conformity to the cannons of effectual and conspicuous subservience" (Veblen, 1994, p. 29). This is to say that servants' "acquired facility in the tactics of subservience" (Veblen, 1994, p. 29) becomes a measure of the head of the household's "superior opulence" (Veblen, 1994, p. 30) and his financial standing to hire them. In attendance with Harry Leong and his wife at their residence at 11 Nassim Road are "a whole row of Malay servants flanking the entrance hall in crisp white blazers" (341) to greet their party guests. Here, the service provided by these migrant workers "under the exacting code of forms" that coheres to an "attitude, special training and practice in subservience" (Veblen, 1994, p. 29) displays the reinforcement of labour provided to the housewife to enable her own work to perform leisure for her master. In other words, the master's reputability as one of "primary or legitimate leisure class" (Veblen, 1994, p. 29) rests on his procurement of specialised servants trained in the art of good carriage. Similarly, other crazy rich Singaporean households in Kwan's novel enlist the laboured service of both trained and untrained domestic workers, who are turned into capitalist commodities exploited and consumed for wage labour. From the Cheng's Mainland Chinese maid and their Filipino nannies (257) to Astrid Leong's French au pair (70), domestic workers are acquired by Singaporean households via the "transnational flow" (Yeoh et al., 2000, p. 147) of low-skilled female migrants into capitalist Singapore to serve state's and family's patriarchal ordering along gendered boundaries, where women are responsible for what patriarchy views as non-productive labour. Cecelia Cheng, wife to Australian commodities trader Tony and the daughter of renowned heart surgeon Malcolm Cheng and Alexandra Young of Singapore, epitomises the capitalist class "full-time mother" (50) who spends more time keeping up with the social performance of leisure than on household and childcare delegated to her domestic servants. That Cecelia, "the horsey one", works "on the international equestrian circuit" (50) exhibits her vicarious leisure as the wife of an entrepreneur and an old-moneyed daughter. As her little boy Jake is charged to Filipino nannies, the transferal to these workers of what is in fact socially necessary production (Benston, 1969) enables the mistress' performance of vicarious leisure. Thus, in handing over significant duties of social (re)production to domestic helpers, the mistress frees up

her time for her vicarious leisure to enhance her husband's reputation. In this way, the mistress bolsters the "real" leisure of the capitalist master. Hence, domestic servants facilitate the transferral of obligations of housework and childcare, readily dismissed as non-productive, to replicate the patriarchal structure that supports the mistress' work of vicarious leisure.

Kwan's housewives who are married to capitalist class men are further implicated within the patriarchal structures of work due to their psychic internalisation of the belief of women's lacking production. In Kwan's novel, *Ipoh-an Daisy*, "married to the [Singaporean] rubber magnate Q.T. Foo" (24), poses a "loaded question" (324) to Rachel Chu during their visit to Eleanor Young's residence. She asks American Chinese Rachel "Would you ever consider working in Asia?" (324). Even while attempting to establish Rachel's intentions of marrying her Singaporean boyfriend Nick, Daisy's question illuminates her own personal circumstances. Here, Daisy's subscription to the patriarchal status quo is demonstrated in her frame of words. The choice of the modifier "ever" carries the presupposition of her non-participation in the workforce, most likely attributed to an internalised view of waged labour, even for the briefest of moments, is a disservice to her rich husband. Consequently, Daisy shows herself to be "governed by the [cultural] mechanisms of the family and the [state] patriarchal ideology of women as wives and mothers" (Barker & Downing, 1980, p. 65). She thus disavows women's work of production by reinforcing the master's capital (wealth) production. Arguably, the hallmark of this housewife's vicarious leisure lies in her "abstention of labor" (Veblen, 1994, p. 21). Hence, Daisy typifies the mistress who partakes in capitalism's gender status quo by forsaking productive work to signal her vicarious leisure in the hands of her Singaporean Chinese master.

Inflecting boundaries: Towards gendered resistance expressed in women's ownership of consumption and production

Conversely, Kwan's representation of empowered mistresses of Singaporean capitalist class households in active pursuit of their own comfort and personal goals disturbs the patriarchal paradigm structuring the work equilibrium in capitalist society. By exhibiting that the aims of their consumption of commodities are for their own purposes, comfort and sole pleasure, wives take hold of the prerogative to consume directly for their personal gains rather than to elevate the husband's status. In so doing, they dismantle the patriarchal structure of vicarious consumption. Instead of letting the "ministry of moral panic" – controlled by the state father and attendant male leaders – ascribe them their status, women in Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* loosen patriarchy's grip over them by catering to their own fullness of life, rather than the master's. Some may argue that despite resisting their husband's economic power at the micro level, at the macro, wives' consumerist acts may still be read as enriching the patriarchal nation and perpetuating its capitalist discourse. However, it must be stressed that their self-gratifying acts of consumption, from the outset, carry little intention to enhance the patriarchal capitalist system nor to benefit the national economy chiefly. While the capitalist system is fed by women's consumption (notwithstanding whose money is spent and needs are served), their choice to consume capitalist products exposes their willed power and exercise of personal say on whether to continue or not with these consumption practices. This kind of primary consumerism lends a way to forging a female subjectivity away from a patriarchal reach of power. Because

women's consumption as well as work are still regarded as adhering to state patriarchal orders of national capitalist expansion, one could argue that unless these are practised outside the nation's borders (in the case of Astrid), women's challenge to patriarchy is thus deemed as ineffective and limited. Along this line, women's bodies are constituted in the space "between compliance and resistance" (PuruShotam, 2002, p. 127), neither totally amenable nor resistive against Singapore's patriarchal capitalism. In this section, I argue that Astrid's and Fiona's primary consumption, coupled with Cathleen's and Sophie's highly skilled and well-paid jobs, undo the ideology of "female qualities and skills as defined in terms of a male ideological and consumer market" (PuruShotam, 2002, p. 155). Collectively, they push back the limits of capitalist consumerism to challenge sex-stereotyped work in restrictive careers and small capital gains.

Women's primary consumption problematises the normalcy of patriarchal control. To this end, Kwan's novel illustrates women's continuous and assiduous efforts to counteract male dictates by reclaiming power through "real" consumption. In other words, advocating primary exercise over their spending and work to satisfy their own needs in high production, women gain their self-reputation rather than focussed (consciously or otherwise) on outcomes for the master. Even with their limitations, women reassume their self-charge by reclaiming self-rewards denied to them by the master, who may benefit directly or indirectly (in the public eye, women's consumption and productive work may still be identified as reflecting the household's wealth). In Kwan's novel, attempts by women at primary consumption and high production to undermine the normalisation of power / gender inequities in state capitalism are fraught with the issue of their dominant socio-economic position, entailing a ready (even if unsolicited) social identification as the daughter or wife of their rich family. In other words, not only does cultural patriarchy influenced by Chinese Confucian teachings as dictated by Singapore's state-sponsored ideology of shared values impact patriarchal capitalism, but socially ingrained norms expressed in the patriarchal nation also determine the roles assigned and identity accorded to these rich women. Hereon, I discuss Kwan's portrayal of Singaporean Chinese female characters' efforts at reconfiguring their roles in their family and, through their personal determination to carve out a legitimate space in the workings of the larger nation, they strengthen and empower their statuses as self-made and self-oriented rather than family-derived and master-oriented. Responding to the emphasis Singapore's state father has placed on the family as the "basic building block of society" (AWARE, 1996, p. 11), no less "deployed in multiple strategic moves as an instrument of the national agenda" (Hudson 44), Kwan's empowered female characters are symptomatic of the struggle of gendered resistance in the family within the nation state. Despite visible limits, these women's efforts to re-define their bodies and self-identities by reclaiming primacy of their consumption and high work practices re-inscribe authority to assert an enhanced subjectivity.

Firstly, Astrid Leong is one such instantiation of the leisure class woman who defiantly seeks to contest the patriarchal measures of her practice of capitalist consumption. As the daughter of a formidable chief executive officer with his recent acquisition of Calthorpe Hotels, Astrid recognises that her prominent identity and attendant role in Harry Leong's family remains after marriage. Associated inextricably with the Leongs, her wifely and motherly statuses are prevented from encroaching into her enduring reputation as a mighty rich Leong. With a penchant for conspicuous consumption, Astrid's shopping passion for

luxury fashion wear is ultimately defined as vicarious leisure; it is inevitably interpreted as being of service to the master's reputation. Therefore, identified as a Leong daughter, her indulgent purchase of Western capitalist products is a visible indicator (even without intention) of efforts to reinforce her assumed Leong status. In fact, her real intention in consuming capitalist commodities is to serve her personal fulfilment, and not to reflect her family's wealth. Personal pleasure attained from retail therapy, here, marks the "comfort of the consumer [herself, rather than] himself" (Veblen, 1994, p. 35). She goes so far as to describe shopping as begetting enormous self-satisfaction beyond that offered by sex: "honestly, it was better than sex" (426). Moreover, her proclivity for *haute couture* and fine in-dining preferences hinge on vehement disobedience against, not vicarious service to, her family's reputation as the Leongs are "people who didn't know how to enjoy their good fortune" (426)] from the old rich lineage with frugal ways. By "simply ma[king] her own rules" (72), Astrid exemplifies an autonomous self who refuses a subjugated designation. Yet, attempts at self-empowered subjectivity do not constitute rebellion as she does not "break the rules" (72), but she surely shakes the foundation of base assumptions of dominated women endorsed by patriarchal capitalism. A further authoritative epithet granted by leisure class women within her social circle sees her elevation to a reverent status; Astrid is legendarily called "The Goddess" (236, original emphasis) for her unparalleled conspicuous taste. Such approbation defies the state's condemnation of women as a source of "moral panic" (Stivens, 2007, p. 29) or "moral crisis" (Kuah, 1997, p. 36), as it otherwise promotes this Singaporean Chinese woman as a towering example of eminent femininity. Contrary to capitalism's "family-based system of control over women" (Folbre, 2009, p. 208), Astrid hence embodies women's control of their choices for personal gratification in their conspicuous aims for a self-made status.

Crucially, Astrid fails to patronise locally situated fashion and jewellery outlets that mark Singapore's status as a "shopping haven." Rather than serving the state father and enriching the patriarchal nation, she facilitates economic riches out of the nation. But for the sporadic trip to Singapore's very own luxury mall "ION on Orchard," Astrid's consumption habits mainly do not feed back into Singapore's capitalist economy as her predilection is for private shopping in Europe. Such defiance of cultural patriarchy in rebuke to the Leongs' Chinese thrift, coupled with insubordination to capitalist patriarchy in subverting calls by the state father for women's active economic role within the nation (during early anti-natalist policies, e.g. "Stop at Two" campaign), show her forsaking vicarious leisure whilst ignoring prescriptions by Chinese authoritarian fathers. By discarding expectations of vicarious performance of consumption, she simultaneously abandons Asian cultural consumption for European cultural consumption as a testament of her reluctance against serving her Chinese biological and state fathers in Singapore. So, it becomes especially surprising that she opts to appear in a cheongsam in the highly anticipated public event of the year, featuring the marriage between two tycoon Singaporean Chinese families. The cheongsam as a Chinese cultural attire, as Chua (2003a, p. 79) explains, "emerged under [Singapore's] Asiani[s]ation process". Yet, Astrid has chosen this pick of dress not so much for its cultural signification but for its representation as "a power clothing for women with power" (Chua, 2003a, p. 79). As a means to assert her dominant class, she wears the cheongsam to affirm her power of female subjectivity (unbeknownst to other women in attendance with their vicarious consumption of expensive *haute couture* apparel). In further defiance to her father when choosing to marry Michael

Teo, a “complete unknown, son of schoolteachers from the then middle-class neighbourhood of Toa Payoh” (Chua, 2003a, p. 75), she exemplifies her complete disregard for the aims and purposes of the master-father. By marrying middle-class Michael and having one child together, Astrid displays personal choices that are her own making for her immediate needs. In direct disobedience to her father when marrying below her station and refusal to heed subsequent pro-natalist calls by the Singapore state, she exercises her strong and wilful decision-making ways to reveal self-serving acts of consumption as well as marital and maternal choices that solely please her. Hence, Astrid serves as a corrective figure who addresses the gendered imbalance of power in the leisure class through her exercise of self-prerogative to affirm reinstated subjectivity, previously dictated by the master and state father.

Secondly, in the same way Astrid rejects the work of vicarious leisure, Fiona – known primarily through her marriage to the eldest son of Malcolm Cheng and Alexandra Young of Singapore – snubs her husband for framing her consumption as a symbol of his pecuniary status. Amidst patriarchal demands for her decorative capacity to wear expensive dresses, Fiona calls out the fact that Eddie “never pay[s] for [her] clothes” (257) by disclosing that she “spends her own money” (257), rather than uses her husband’s wealth to acquire her conspicuous wear. Eddie’s domineering control over his wife Fiona – predominantly treated as his addendum with few friends to call her own but those in his social circle – is demonstrated through his violent actions and abusive words. As recognised by Fiona, Eddie’s power in the household is intimately tied to obsessive dictates for a sartorial style defined by Veblen’s traits of conspicuous dress: “conspicuously expensive,” “inconvenient” and “up to date” (79) for displaying “the good repute of the master” (Veblen, 1994, p. 35). Demonstrating his adherence to conspicuous consumerism, Eddie excessively scolds Fiona in front of their children for “wearing something that looks cheap” (258). He calls her “a disgrace” (258) whilst simultaneously insisting that their children suit up in “Balmoral” (258) attire even though inappropriate for Singapore’s heat and humidity. Eddie’s selfish goals in his violent outbursts, here, exhibit his “brutality” (Benston, 1969) toward his wife and children. In fact, Eddie’s willingness to hit his son Augustine for spilling Orange Fanta on his newly imported suit (390) and openly cursing him afterwards as the “little bastard” (390) reveal an unchecked violence in his authoritarian assumption of power as the household head. Yet, amidst her husband’s constant coercions to “impress” (392) photographers, Fiona challenges expectations of “conspicuous subservience” (Veblen, 1994, p. 29) to her master. Audaciously and in full view of others, she accuses him of being a “tyrant” (392). Additionally, Fiona’s resistance against Eddie’s oppressive demands for subservient compliance with his aims of conspicuous consumption [she declares, “I’m so sick of this!” (392) and “I’m not going to be wearing a single piece of jewelry tonight” (392)] demonstrate vocal counteractions against the master’s ownership of conspicuous reputation in the family. Hence, Fiona’s verbal assertion of subjectivity is a reminder to herself that “I have *nothing* to prove to anyone” (392, original emphasis), thus speaking out against Eddie and his prescriptive standards for her as his wife.

Furthermore, the housewife’s clear disinterest in utilising the service of leisure in foreign domestic workers hired by the master is another way of refuting her auxiliary role. Failing to call upon the help of maids, Astrid jettisons the work of vicarious leisure expected of her from the regimented patriarchal structures in the Leong family. Instead of

instructing the Leongs' head housekeeper to mobilise the domestic helpers in her home, she "talks to cooks" and "unpacks luggage by herself" (71). Friends and family thus opine that "Astrid's current domestic situation was a perplexing one" (71), a direct result of her relinquishing the use of household services available through laboured servants hired by the master. Furthermore, the housewife's vocal defence of hired domestic servants exposes her identification with the servant class, who becomes reprimanded by the master when his aims are not fully met. For instance, when chiding the Malay female servant Nasi for her alleged inefficiency to remove a soda stain on his expensive imported suit, Eddie asserts his entitlement over raced, classed and gendered servants. In reproach, Fiona tells her husband off for shouting at the head laundry maid in her grandfather-in-law's house by exclaiming, "Eddie, there is no need to raise your voice. She understands [English]" (390). Here, Fiona calls out Eddie's claim over the domestic servant by outwardly rebuking his demeaning treatment of this hired labourer. Thus, Fiona's vocal reprisal on behalf of the servants represents not a desire to join their low-productive (meagre-paying) ranks, but that she identifies with their assigned subjection to patriarchal power in the capitalist process, as she relates to their use as the master's instruments for his primary leisure and his singular aims.

Thirdly, highly skilled Singaporean Chinese women who break with "specific skills" (Benston, 1969) inflect gender boundaries by dispelling the myth of women's always meagre pay in sex-stereotyped work as well as their isolated existence in the domestic home. Contrary to Kwan's stereotypes of women "working" for familial ends, educated elite women pursue their personal ambition in engagements of professional work beyond the home. Self-determined jobs directed for self-gains satisfy their personal desires by catering to their self-reputation rather than the master's reputation. Sophie Khoo – Astrid's cousin – for instance, works as a surgeon because of self-rewards reaped in compassionate care for patients rather than as an outward symbol of her family's wealthy status. She explains, "I work twelve-hour shifts and don't have the time to go to benefit parties in hotels. I have to benefit my patients first" (269). Her entry into, and dedicated commitment to, a taxing profession in medicine are motivated by the outcomes of self-fulfilment, self-contentment and self-satisfaction. Even as incidentally boosting the repute of the family as well as nation by choosing one of two "*only* acceptable majors" (72) for the "Singaporean elite" (71) (law and medicine are the two top reputable professions accepted by the dominant socio-economic class), Sophie's vocation is plainly undertaken to please herself rather than as a means for identification as a daughter of the Khoo-Leong family. Shunning herself from "glamorous" charity galas, she stands out as the "no-nonsense," "dressed plainly," and "no make up or jewelry" (73) type. In addition to Sophie, Cathleen is another subversive figure who avoids vicarious consumption whilst also assuming high production to transcend state-advocated subjection to the master. Even with external expectations of vicarious consumption, Cathleen similarly eschews conspicuous consumption and rejects its attendant work of vicarious leisure. Just like Sophie, she ensures she remains "always so plain, with not a drop of jewelry in sight" (392). In this way, both women serve as a visible contrast to subordinated women fulfilling men's aims in sex-stereotyped work, evident in female executive secretaries hired by men who "need a girl to massage his shoulders and to help him choose jewelry for all his mistresses" (8). Both Sophie and Cathleen unmistakably "massage" or bolster their self-egos by serving their self-image when choosing waged work over ostentatious ornaments of wealth attributed to the master.

Even as she remains identified as Mrs Henry Jr. Leong, Cathleen seeks to make a name for herself as a constitutional law expert (342) who does not “give up a career” (72). Evident, here, is her refusal to allow marriage into Singapore's Leong family deter goals of accomplishing her fullness of life via professional success. As a mother, she also straddles a profession with maternal duty, thus forging high production in both the workplace and home. Here, Cathleen serves as the epitome of the successful working mother who refuses patriarchy's “prescribed order” (72). By refuting gender boundaries, she asserts herself as a man's peer who commands both the private and public spheres. In *Sophie and Cathleen*, Kwan thus offers alternative female models whose choices act against patriarchy capitalism's gender delimitations to reclaim their elevated subjectivity in the family and nation.

Conclusion

To summarise, I started off by unmasking the gendering of capitalism in terms of the restricted definitions of “work” and consumption that unfairly arrest women's subjectivity, and assign them a subordinate and incidental position in capitalism. Seeing as “economic systems allow considerable room for the perpetuation of discrimination” (Rubery, 2009, p. 200), Kwan's portrayal of crazy rich Singaporean Chinese women exposes the disequilibrium along vertiginous planes of power inequality that genders consumption as vicarious (female) and primary (male), and concomitantly grades work on a spectrum of no-to-little (female) production to high (male) production. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, Kwan draws on gender stereotypes to question the underlying and pervasive premise of patriarchal capitalism denying women their subjectivity. Consequently, women's inflections of patriarchal hierarchy agitate set configurations of gendered workings in production and consumption. In readily established ways that “capitalism uses patriarchy” (Eisenstein, 1999, p. 208) and, in turn, “patriarchy is defined by capitalism” (Eisenstein, 1999, p. 208), Kwan's novel – by foregrounding women's entry into class economics – seeks not the impossible task of completely de-coupling these two inextricably intertwined components of social formation. Rather, it lays the groundwork for claiming an enhanced position for women in capitalist processes that remain inevitably powered by patriarchy. Furthermore, the novel advances the radical idea of women's empowered place in capitalist society, not least by interrupting and complicating Veblen's conceptualisation of capitalist class as distinctly male-centred. In its satirical diatribe against ethnic Chinese women's reduction to an incidental position, it makes in-roads into patriarchal structures governing the leisure class Singaporean family within the nation. By portraying female characters as true consumers and high producers, it rebukes other female characters who fall prey to an internalised (and persistent) patriarchal standard. While the latter's complicity with patriarchal capitalism strengthens the determinants of a male ruling hegemony, the former's transgressive actions invite a gradual subversion of the prescribed order that has denied women of their legitimate space in the private and public domains. In this way, Kwan's novel dismantles gender stereotypes in women's (true) consumption and (high) productive work to reinforce feminist undercurrents in the gendered economy. Finally, in the context of capital class / gender relations, it lies in the critical vanguard as it emphasises and works against an elitist class settings' propagation of gender stereotypes. Power imbalances, hence, are subsequently addressed in order to redress them in efforts to disturb capitalism's gendering of the leisure class Singaporean Chinese family.

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