

DEBUNKING THE MYTH OF SUBMISSIVE WOMEN IN ASIA: STRONG WOMEN IN POST-INDEPENDENCE MALAYSIAN LITERATURES

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Introduction

Any topic on women in literature is not a new topic, be it looking at images or analyzing stereotyped portrayals of women in literature. What is rare is a discourse on affirming the notion that Malaysian women have always been positive and strong especially in post-Independence Malaysian literatures.

This paper was written in resistance to unfair and unbalanced portrayals of women in literatures in Asia; it particularly aims to examine the image of Asian women as submissive, with a special focus on the representations of women in Malaysian literatures. Is it true that Asian women are culturally conditioned to be submissive? Were they born to be so? This paper aims to prove otherwise.

The study includes portrayals of strong women in Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English literatures in Malaysia. To date, any research done on images of women in literature is done separately or at most, done in a comparative manner with two literary groups: for example the image of women in Malay literature is compared to that in Chinese or Tamil literature. There is no study in which all four literatures are studied simultaneously and compared side by side. This paper is an attempt to document literary images of strong women which could well be representative of the real world.

Perceptions of Malaysian women in general

While it will be pretentious to project Malaysian women as a homogenous group, it is not wrong to highlight common perceptions of Malaysian women held by scholars, travelers, and observers of Malaysia. According to Ramusack,

Malaysian women are frequently depicted either as victims or saints by foreign travelers, which include Chinese Buddhist monks on their pilgrimage to India, Ibn Battuta, and European merchants, missionaries, and adventurers (83). Chin and Sangam recorded the impressions of Malay women given by Frank Swettenham. Swettenham was a British colonial official in British Malaya and was instrumental in shaping British policy and the structuring of British administration in the Malay Peninsula. He saw Malay women as not having the same fate of other indigenous women living in oppression under their colonial masters. Malay women, according to Swettenham, “enjoyed powers of intelligent conversation, quickness in repartee, a strong sense of humour and an instant appreciation of the real meaning of those hidden sayings which are hardly absent from their conversations” (12). Chin and Sangam asserted further how modern western scholars who came to Southeast Asia in the first half of the 20th century, like Margaret Mead in Bali, Rosemary Firth in Kelantan, and Judith Djamour in Singapore, were surprised to see the active participation of indigenous women in economic life and how this accorded them autonomy, power, and authority (ibid.).

The perception of post-Independence Malaysian women is very mixed. Many scholars agree that while the achievements of Malaysian women have evidently improved compared to previous generations, it is also obvious that women’s participation and presence at the decision-making level is still a major issue. In a 1996 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report, Malaysia ranked 53 where women’s participation in decision making is concerned (Corner).

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development has recently launched a project with UNDP to formulate and implement an Action Plan that would ensure at least 30 percent participation of women at decision making levels both in the public and private sectors in Malaysia in line with the 1995 United Nations Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), which urged governments to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in decision-making in government bodies as well as to increase women’s capacity to participate in both governmental and public bodies.

As far as women in literature are concerned, scholars also offer mixed reviews of representations of gender in their respective literary texts (often seen separately and not side by side as mentioned earlier). Christine Campbell in her book *Contrary Visions: Women and Work in Malay Novels Written by Women*

(2004) highlights how, despite the fact that women are often defined through their occupation, most male novelists are slow to recognize this (vii). As a result, one gets stereotyped representation of women characters, and this is highlighted much earlier by Rosnah Baharuddin in her thesis on women in A. Samad Said's novels (1995). According to Baharuddin, in much of A. Samad Said's works, the emphasis on physical beauty is evident. Said seems to project that without physical beauty, women would not be appreciated or given the opportunity to start a new life (426). Most of the women characters are young women whose career or personality would not guarantee them the strength to overcome difficulties in their lives (*ibid.*). A. Samad Said has been much criticized for bringing to the centre the life of a prostitute, the titular character, in *Salina* (1961). Although set in post-Second World War Singapore, *Salina* has always been acclaimed as one of the most excellent novels by Malaysian authors. It is the mind of this Malaysian author which this study is keen on scrutinizing since he is considered as one of the most celebrated modern authors in Malaysia and would have influenced later writers. *Salina* along with other novels by A. Samad Said are reflective of how women are perceived in post-Independence Malaysian literature.

Women in post-Independence Malay literature: between ideal and reality

A. Samad Said has written over 65 books and much of his earlier writings portrayed and charted changes which took place in the Malay women's world. From the life of a prostitute in *Salina*, he went on to portray women in various roles, parallel to the changes that took place in the country. According to Rosnah Baharuddin, Said's post-Independence women were mostly career women and some were university graduates in local universities and abroad (239). Most of these women were young and unmarried and racially integrated. They were also very confident and independent, no longer living with their parents as was common in the old days when young women were expected to live with their parents till they were married. Despite these generous representations of women in his works, Said is often accused of objectifying urbane women as being prone to unhappiness because of their independence, lack of religious knowledge and internalization of religious values, as well as alienation from their family who would still live in the village (Rosnah 340). Christine Campbell points out that even after 50 years, the domestic role as wife and mother

remains irrefutably primary in Malay Literature, and that men in general still determine women's lives (206-7).

However, the situation may not be as grim as suggested above. There are female authors who have consistently portrayed strong women in Malay Literature. They include Khatijah Hashim, Zaharah Nawawi, Adibah Amin, Salmi Manja, and Fatimah Busu. Salmi Manja, for example, would feature feisty and strong women as leading characters in her novels. In *Hari Mana Bulan Mana* (1960), Sal is a gutsy female reporter. There is also Zamilah who fights for equal rights for women (Campbell 118).

Khadijah Hashim is also never short of strong Malay women. In a thesis on Khadijah Hashim, Chin Hye Ryon points out how Hashim dislikes women characters who have any or all of the following traits: lacking ambition, doubting themselves, and staying content in the shadow of men (150). Her stand is proven in her portrayals of strong women in novels like *Badai Semalam* (1968), *Dekat Disayang Jauh Dikenang* (1984), and *Senator Adila* (1992). She believes that women must first respect themselves in order to be successful in this world and the Hereafter (154-5).

Another prolific novelist is Fatimah Busu whose recent works became topics of heated discussion as she confrontationally raised issues relating to the marginalization of women in what seemed to be a progressive and independent state. Her novel *Salam Maria* (2004) is seen by Wong Soak Koon as "a radical novel as it provides a critique of the nation-state for turning its back on the less-privileged and marginalized communities, mainly women who are old, poor, single, disabled, victims of incest and rape" (qtd. in Manan). Busu reveals challenges encountered by her leading character, Maria Zaitun, in her attempt to be independent as well as her wish to assist other abused, oppressed women. In Busu's two-volume novel, *The Missing Piece* (2006), she charts the journey of a woman from childhood to old age, highlighting the strategies of a woman who tries to balance the demands of being a wife and mother and her career as an academic. In both novels, Busu places much emphasis on religious strength in her female characters and it is this religious energy that helps them pull through their hardships.

There are endless representations of strong, assertive Malay women in Malay literature especially from the 1990s onwards, and these are not restricted to portrayals by female authors mentioned above. Recent young writers like Nisah Haron, Faisal Tehrani, Mawar Shafie, and Siti Jasmina Ibrahim

persistently project a positive and assertive image of women in their writings. Faisal Tehrani in *Tunggu Teduh Dulu* (2004) portrays a tough woman named Salsabila Fahim who makes agro-industry her career (she has a papaya farm and it is the ups and downs of a woman trying to build her career as a producer of an agro product that makes this book different from other contemporary Malay novels). One would ask, why papaya? Why is biotechnology associated with a Malay woman? One would argue it is because Tehrani doesn't want to stereotype Malay women. In the past, they were often associated with paddy fields or rubber trees, playing secondary roles to their husbands or fathers. In *Tunggu Teduh Dulu*, Salsabila is not only portrayed as a knowledgeable worker of the field she is involved in, but by making her a prime player in an agro-industry which is the second largest in the world after Mexico (bringing in a market share of RM93 million in 2001), Tehrani positions the status of Malay women in a favourable light and confirms his own position as a gender-sensitive Malaysian male author. This comes from his religious understanding of the position of women in Islam. In an email interview, Tehrani highlighted the role played by Prophet Muhammad's wife, Siti Khatijah, who was a very successful entrepreneur before her marriage to the Prophet and continued to be so after the marriage.

Strong women are also portrayed in another genre, the life narrative or memoir. In two memoirs by Khadijah Sidek and Shamsiah Fakeh who wrote *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesatria Bangsa* (2001) and *Memoir Shamsiah Fakeh: Dari Awas ke Rejimen ke-10* (2004) respectively, real women characters are put forth as the "unsung heroes" in the making of Malaysia. Both women were freedom fighters in pre-Independence Malaysia but their names and contributions to Malaysian history were not widely known until both wrote their memoirs later in their lives in a free and independent Malaysia.

Shamsiah Fakeh was a communist at a time when communism was not seen as a political or ideological threat to the ruling government (British in Malaya). For many Malayan nationalists, it was seen as the only movement which was able to free Malaya from the British and later, the Japanese. Shamsiah wrote the book to clear her name while she was a freedom fighter in the jungle as well as while living in exile in China after the war was over. She was accused of many things, including killing her own baby in the jungle to save her own life and avoid being found by British soldiers. She was accused of smashing her infant's head against a rock because the baby was crying too much. Shamsiah

who married five times was also accused of being a loose woman. In writing the book, she was able to present her life narrative. The book demonstrates not only her suffering over 46 years of fighting for the country's independence, but also her courage in overcoming all sorts of mishaps and life disappointments. Shamsiah Fakeh was allowed to return to Malaysia in 1994 after living many years in exile in China.

The other memoir, *Memoirs of Khadijah Sidek: Puteri Kesateria Bangsa* (2001), is by Khadijah Sidek, whose memoirs were translated into English. She died in poverty in 1982 despite her fierce and determined struggle against western colonisations in both Indonesia and Malaya. She came from Sumatra, Indonesia at the invitation of politicians and nationalists in Malaya who were impressed by Khadijah's reputation as a freedom fighter. She was already a well-known figure in Indonesia and was a wanted person by the Dutch authorities. When she moved to Malaya to continue her mission to free the region from colonial powers, she rose quickly in local politics in the women's wing. The memoir spoke of her many painful experiences as she gave her heart and soul to the freedom movement both in Indonesia and Malaya. She also spoke of her life as a second wife in a polygamous marriage. For someone who had done a lot to improve lives of the poor, especially women in rural settings, Khadijah Sidek died in poverty, unappreciated. This book will not only immortalise her and the contributions she made to the nation but is also a piece of evidence of how strong women continue to be marginalized in the literary history of Malaysia until they speak for themselves.

Malaysian literature in English: the post-Independence female space

In a book written by Quayum and I, *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women's Writing in English, 1940s-1990s* (2003), it is evident that the post-Independence period was a period which also liberated women writers especially those who wrote in English. The book charts the development of Anglophone Malaysian women's writing before Independence and after it, and it is found that the number of women writing in English grew and continues to grow today with much support from the government and the book industry in Malaysia. There seems to be ample space for women to write and publish, and many have gone into self-publishing as well. From novelists Chuah Guat Eng, Marie Gerrina Louis, Elina Majid, and Adibah Amin to Silverfishbooks or Rhino Press Series writers like Dina Zaman, Bernice Chauly, Mira Mustafa, Nora

Adam, and Melissa Maureen Rizal, to self-published poets like Zariani Abdul Rahman, Farida Jamal, Maznah Puteh, Sharanya Manivannan, Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, and Jasmine Low, to a memoirist like Bernie Tan, to playwrights like Sabeera Shaik and those from the Kualiworqs team, Ann Lee and Karen Quah, Malaysian literature in English has come a long way. These women not only respond to modern lives and the challenges of living in a globalised era, but short story writers like Che Husna Azhari and Zawiyah Yahya are also concerned with eroding Malaysian, especially Malay, culture in a world so bent on being swallowed by modernity and post-modernity. Their voices are not one, which show how diverse the women writers are. What is evident is these women write back, each asserting her own identity and reflecting on lives of women living in a fast-changing nation, not necessarily conforming to the roles given to or expectations made of them. In my article entitled “Sexuality in Post-Independence Anglophone Writing by Three Malaysian Muslim Women Writers,” I point out that Dina Zaman is probably one of the few Malaysian writers who write boldly about prostitutes, transvestites, and illegal abortions in Malaysia. In a story about a fat prostitute, “The Fat Woman,” she reveals the victimization encountered by this woman who was driven to prostitution because she was fat and ugly. In the end, she leads a very lonely, directionless existence and has given up hope on life. In an interview done with Dina some time ago, she was asked why her stories seemed to be anti-feminist and very often pessimistic especially of the lead character in “The Fat Woman.” Dina answered, “So, she’s given up on life. How many people are like us, going through life, hoping? Maybe she’s smart, why bother” (qtd. in Quayum and Wicks 147). Such confidence expressed by Zaman shows a glimpse of a Malaysian woman who rejects any norm or expectation of her by her society because she knows that society does not owe her anything and vice versa. If such a sentiment signals a woman’s resignation of life, or that she has given up hope, the question which should be posed to society is, what has brought the woman to this level? Is it too much space or the lack of it that shapes a woman into who she is in modern Malaysia?

Women in Malaysian Chinese literature: between foreign and local influences

In an article by Satoshi Masutani, “From Immigrant Literature to National Literature: Invention of Malayan Chinese (Mahua) Literary History,” it is

highlighted that more than 80% of world Chinese overseas are concentrated in Southeast Asia, and that where the Malayan Chinese literature (Mahua) is concerned, it began since the early 20th century (Masutani). In an article by Wang Gungwu, "A short introduction to Chinese writing in Malaya," he points out that there were more anti-fascist and anti-colonial writings published five years after the war and that Malayan Chinese stopped looking up to the writing style and themes of mainland Chinese writers and experimented with their own after restrictions were placed on Chinese publications in Malaya and Singapore in 1949 onwards (qtd. in Wignesan 251-2). As a result, many new writings emerged; several scholars have documented the development of Mahua Literature, among who are Yulduz Emiloglu and Chong Fah Hing.

Emiloglu's comparative study on Malay women writers and Mahua women writers, published in 1995, highlights the various struggles faced by women; no matter what race or creed they have, women go through similar phases of hardship and difficulties. They also persevere and survive their ordeals. In many of the works studied by Emiloglu, Chinese women in Malaysia are portrayed as tough, determined, and independent. Issues addressed by Malaysian Chinese women writers include their struggles against forced marriage, the dilemma of choosing between career and love life, and overcoming poverty. Mixed marriages, an interesting and rare topic, is also addressed in stories like Shibao's "Net" and "The Story of Youngest Uncle and a Malay Woman" by Shan Wanyun (57). The endings of both stories are not similar. In "Net," the relationship between Yunni, a Chinese woman, and her second husband, an Englishman, works better than her earlier marriage to a Chinese man. Shibao's message is that marriage will only work if both spouses are willing to accept their spouses as they are; it has nothing to do with having common values or being in the same race. If this analogy could be applied to race relations in Malaysia, Shibao would make her point pretty clear. The second story, on the other hand, is less optimistic because the relationship between the narrator's youngest uncle and his Malay girlfriend ends with resistance from their families. Shan Wanyu highlights the existing prejudices and distrust of one race for the other and appears to be less hopeful than Shibao.

Chong Fah Hing has also documented some short stories written by local writers in his book *Cerpen Mahua Dan Cerpen Melayu: Suatu Perbandingan* [Malaysian Chinese Short Story and Malay Short Story: A Comparative Study]. In his study, he finds that Malaysian Chinese women are

portrayed in various roles, which are not that far removed from those portrayed by Malay short story writers. For example between 1955 and the 1960s, their favourite themes circled around love and prostitution; it was only after the 1960s that writers began to move on to other themes like death, dignity, and sexuality (65). In these stories, women still struggle for their identity. Much of the challenge come not only from patriarchal society but also from bureaucracy in the system. For example in “Fensho Yi Kache De Fen Nu” [“To Burn a Lorry Fuelled by Anger”], the narrator accompanies his mother (a red identity card holder) to the National Registration Department (NRD) to apply for her blue identity card (i.e. to get her Malaysian citizenship). Due to his mother’s failure to communicate in Malay, the application for a new identity card is rejected (81). The story shows that a woman’s identity is shaped not only by constraints placed by the patriarchal system but also by bureaucratic constraints.

According to Chong, Mahua literature tends to focus on women’s inner voices; these voices confirm the strength of modern Malaysian women and they come out as strong and assertive, although being so would mean them ending up alone and filled with anxiety (175). In an interview with Chong, he points out that even more current works seem to be grim when it comes to representations of Chinese women in Mahua literature, but he agrees that this reading could be so because a feminist reading is not applied. There could be so many strong characters out there in Mahua texts but they were not read accordingly (Manaf, “Chinese Women” n.pag.). What is clear is that from the study done on Mahua literature by Emiloglu in the mid-1990s to that done by Chong in 2006, much change has taken place. While Emiloglu found in her study that writers shied away from political issues in the 1990s, Chong found that there were more writings on this now. This is partly caused by various foreign influences encountered by Mahua writers and intellectuals, especially those who studied in Taiwan. In a separate paper entitled “Nationalism and Nation-State: A Critical View on Mahua Literature,” Chong writes that students who studied in Taiwan returned to assist the development of Mahua Literature in Malaysia. He cites the statistics given by Taiwan Universities Alumni that no less than 30,000 Malaysian students have studied in Taiwan since the 1950s, and this group has developed, sustained, and protected Mahua literature in Malaysia. Well-known names are short story writers Pan Yutong, Pan Kwee Chong, Shang Wanyun (died in 1996), Gong Wanhui, and Mu Yan. The critics include Wong Yoon Wah, Zhang Jinzhong, Huang Jinshu, and Lin Jian-Guo (Chong 4).

Women in Malaysian Tamil Literature: between courage and fear

The Indian community makes for 8% of Malaysia's population of 26.9 million people (2000 Census), and according to Vinay Lal in his article "Multiculturalism at Risk: The Indian Minority in Malaysia," the South Indian Tamils account for 81 percent of the Indian population of Malaysia, and the bulk of them are Hindus. Other Indian ethnic groups include the Bengalis, Sindhis, Gujaratis, Malayalis, Telugus, and Sri Lankan Tamils (3764). Lal also raises concerns over the treatment of Indians as equal citizens of Malaysia. He hints at continued marginalization which is also evident in Andrew Willford's work on Tamils in *Malaysia Cage Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (2006) in which he points out that when non-bumiputras (Indians and Chinese) are categorized as one, they are seen as owning a high percentage of share capital (over 46%) when in reality, the Chinese are better performers in Malaysian economy than the Indians (29). Willford also highlights how estate poverty, "exacerbated by industrialization, subdivisions and foreign labour, has generated squatter problem and an urban underclass" (ibid.). Women are the ones who bear the brunt as they become victims of this subculture of poverty.

Much of these sufferings and struggles are reflected in Tamil literature as shown in the study of early Malaysian Tamil novels by Sababathy Venugopal. According to Venugopal, Tamil literature in Malaysia emerged "under the social and economic pressure as well as under the situation of easy exploitation of the labour of Tamils" (13). Poetry was the first mode of expression to reveal social ills and injustices but this came late despite it being an ancient tradition in motherland India. When the British brought in Indian labourers to clear forests, build railways and roads, most of them were illiterate, and as rightly pointed out by V.T. Arasu in his introduction to Tamil poetry, "Not many Tamil immigrants had the ability, inclination or opportunity to produce literary pieces" (qtd. in Thumboo et al. 142).

However, post-Independence, the Tamil writers became the boldest group to deal with taboo subjects like sex and sexuality apart from themes on social reforms and injustices encountered in a newly emergent nation. *Mallika*, for example, is a novel written by Arivanandan soon after Independence. Arivanandan stresses how sex is important to women by depicting the story of a sexually unfulfilled wife who runs away with a younger lover and later ends up being a prostitute. She then repents, and despite her husband's willingness

to forgive her, she commits suicide by drowning herself in the sea (60). Such a portrayal can be read both negatively and positively. On one hand, the message is to respect women as equal partners by acknowledging their sexual needs. In a male-dominated society—not only in the Indian society but also in Malaysia in general—this aspect of a woman's life is largely ignored. Arivanandan may be the spokesperson of many women, especially Indian women, who may be suffering in silence. On the other hand, a man writing about women's sexual needs is also prone to being accused of turning women into sexual objects. The ending of the novel with Mallika atoning for her sins by drowning confirms the stereotyping of women in literature—they have to be moral and saintly. So many stories run along this line that one wonders if sex is all women think of to indicate their freedom and emancipation. However, in a story entitled *Varicu* (1980) written by N. Mageswary, the situation of women is more hopeful. It is about an independent woman who walks out on her marriage to avoid further abuse by her husband. Loganayagi Nannithamby in her study on women in modern Tamil literature (1880-1960) unearths many stories of strong women who stand up to free themselves from shackles of oppression in their community. Arivananthan in "Poi Mugangkal" depicts the plight of a highly educated woman in a society which does not appreciate intelligent women. The protagonist, Gayathri, does not tolerate the violence inflicted by her unemployed husband upon their child and domestic helper. She reports her husband and her sister-in-law to the police, divorces him, and continues to live with her parents, child, and the children of the dead maid (144). Similarly in "Aval Varuvaalaa" by Kannan, a wife walks out on an unhappy marriage; every Ponggal, she sends her husband a card and he continues to hope that one day she would return to him (145). According to Ahchee Subramaniam in her study on women in Tamil novels (1910-1970), few independent women are depicted, but they exist in novels like *Pattumalai Kalvan*, *Necamalar*, *Mancal Kayiru*, *Itaya Vacal*, and *Munkir Palam*. In many of these stories, women are portrayed as courageous as they fight for their own happiness even if it means being disowned by their family and frowned upon by their community. They bravely resist the dowry and caste system (Subramaniam 187-8). This change may have come as a result of Malaysian women's access to education and awareness of their rights to get equal opportunity and mutual respect not only from Indian men but also from other Malaysians in general.

Conclusion

Malaysia celebrated its 50th year of independence in 2007. Its maturity as a nation shows not only in the rapid material development displayed proudly in its Independence parade but also in the progress made in its literatures. This paper has shown how changes have taken place over the years especially where representations of women in literature are concerned. Examples shown in all four literatures provide evidence that mental development has also taken place and that it is equally important to chart. It is evident that women in all four literatures do not have easy lives and that theirs are constant struggles. However, their voices should no longer be muffled by those who are prone to look at women as victims and objects. The paper has shown that Malaysian literatures are not short of strong and resilient women and it is these women one needs to project so that younger generations will have role models to look up to when faced by crisis and confusion, and realize that suicide is not an option.

These women may be images in literature but literature is often modeled after real lives. Writers study societies to produce literature and literatures are studied to understand societies. There is a strong tie between literature and society as it (literature) continues to define and re-define society. This paper does just that as it charts changes that have taken place since Independence in all four Malaysian literatures with regard to representations and existence of strong women in the country.

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