

Literary Realities of Malaysian Women: Views from Malaysian Women Short Story Writers Writing in English

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Abstract— Malaysian Literature in English (MLE) is a sectional literature of less than a century old. Marginalised because of the English medium and enjoying a limited audience, MLE contributes to the treasure trove of Malaysian works. This paper attempts to explore current issues written by women writers in works published from 2001 to 2004. Their writings show women in various subjectivities from the young professional urban woman to the old forgotten sex worker in the winter of her life. By studying this gamut of women through the voices of women, we show the ways in which Malaysian women have been affected by modernity and fast development. While women have made great leaps in the educational and professional sectors, but they too suffer from alienation due to the disparity between personal ambitions and society's expectations.

Keywords-*Malaysian Literature in English, women writers, gender*

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian literature in English contributes towards the literary fabric of Malaysia. Marginalised by the language medium of which writers have chosen to write in and weathering under very little support and limited audience, the presence of these works makes interesting study of the ways in which a sectional literature raises issues of concerns to fellow Malaysians. As a literary tradition, Malaysian literature in English is still in its infancy in terms of its existence and output. Its modest beginnings can be traced in the 1930s but its path has not always been easy. The 1980s especially saw this marginal literature declining but from the 1990s to the present, it has managed to stay afloat, thanks to several small publishing houses which bravely overcome the odds and losses to add to the Malaysian literary scene. As aptly characterised by Amir Muhammad [1], Malaysian literature in English "lacks a medium for consistent exposure." He tries to theorise this sad state of affair:

Perhaps there aren't enough readers.
Perhaps there aren't enough writers.
Perhaps the writers are afraid of
censorship. Perhaps the readers are
afflicted by a kind of cultural cringe and

prefer the foreign stuff. Perhaps the
writers are afraid of the readers. Perhaps
the readers are afflicted by the writers.

By 2004, though, thanks largely to the persistent effort of a publishing house, some writings of quality have emerged can be further nurtured provided that support is given. Women writers, too, show that they are a vibrant community as can be seen in the course of this paper. In Elaine Showalter's [2] parlance, these women are a community of writers who forms "a literature of their own" where their concerns, world views and aesthetics are significantly different from that of a male tradition.

This paper focuses on recent Malaysian writings published from 2001 to 2004 by women writers. These writers have not produced much in terms of output but collectively their works make up a significant corpus worth studying. While the male tradition in Malaysian writings has never been properly established, Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf and Mohammad A. Quayum [3] have traced Malaysian women's writing in English from 1940s to 1990s. Their study reveals that Malaysian women writers explore diverse issues to "reflect not only their female experiences/voices but also the conflicts of the world in which they live." As succinctly argued by Raihanah M.M. [4], "however private or personal a work of art may be, in a multicultural world, it is still anchored" in "the lived context of culture, history, and environment." Noraini Md Yusof [5] further illustrated that

a literary writer would like to think of
himself, or herself, as creator, who creates
a reality on paper that is the product of his
or her own imagination. ... [W]hether
consciously or not, it is always influenced
by his or her own environment.

Therefore, it is pertinent to scrutinize these more recent works because they articulate the realities of Malaysian women. By writing out their stories, the writers seek to empower that is to persuade the listeners that they can act effectively in the world and that they can be agents of change. Malaysian women today are far much more

progressive than their ancient sisters of the previous millennium.

II. CORPUS

Due to the lack of written corpus, the women writers chosen here mainly come from one publishing house but they too show useful insights into the lives of contemporary Malaysian men and women. In many ways, these works depart from earlier Malaysian writings which emphasized the experiences of immigrant people and the problems faced in building a Malaysian nation. Writers had communal interests at heart and while they attempted to show a multicultural Malaysia, their works foregrounded the concerns of the writers' respective communities. Muhammad Haji Salleh wrote about the Malays, KS Maniam the Indians, and Wong Phui Nam spoke compellingly about the Chinese experience. The younger women writers, while they still speak about their own ethnic communities, highlight a different set of issues, equally important in our effort to forge our identity as a Malaysian nation.

III. ANALYSIS

The stories below range from depictions of both single and married women at their thresholds as well as the end of their lives. From young to old, they represent women facing various challenges, how they defy these trials and tribulation and how they crumble in humiliation or defeat. These are not nice stories sugarcoated with elements of female agency. Some of the women are shown as strong but there are many others who lose their battles with life.

"The Evening Pilgrim" by Muslin Abdul Hamid [6] gives an insight into the life of an old sex worker who now struggles to make ends meet because of her age and stiff competition from younger women. Every evening the unnamed sex worker roams the streets in search of customers. One night, a foreigner solicits her services and pays one hundred ringgit in advance. He leaves, promising to return in a few minutes. She waits in vain but he does not turn up. The woman goes back to her rented flat. When her friends come back, they are surprised to find her dead with two ringgit tightly clutched in her fist.

Muslin illustrates the plight of an old woman who has lost her beauty and youth, crucial endowments in her profession. In her youth, the woman was respected:

At the house, every man you touched felt his manhood restored, like he'd won the lottery. ... It was more than gestures, more than beauty, more than sexual positions, more than muscle control, definitely more than the men. (ibid, 14-15)

The woman's musings reveal her skillfulness not only in matters regarding sex but also her humanity which touches the men. She believes that they have solicited her services to be bodily and mentally rejuvenated. Therefore, in her old age, she lulls herself into thinking perhaps this interpersonal

skill, more than her sexual skill, will keep the men coming. But she is hugely disappointed:

But it's not in your nature to give up, oh no, you're a great believer; the feeling will return only if you keep going. And when the feeling returns, they'll be drawn to you, to your flavour; even if the unsuspecting ones sense you. (ibid, 15)

The woman stubbornly reassures herself that she is still attractive. But her surroundings dictate otherwise: her Madam's house has been taken away by the bank, the street now houses a pub for exclusive people. She is the collateral damage of modernization.

We know the extent of the woman's false consciousness when she is found dead by her housemates.

They drew closer and flinched at the cuts on your shorn scalp, grey-orange hair sprinkled over you and the reeking thin mattress, as if you had a battle with the hair demon in your dream and lost. ... Two ringgit notes peeked out from your tightened fist, allowing the dead King to turn his sobering gaze on them. (ibid, 18)

The foreign client does not want her services, rather he gives the measly notes out of pity. The improbability of attracting clients is made obviously clear:

Crouching in the dim light, you wipe the two straight lines drawn beyond your broken lips, then your creased cheeks. As you grimace, threads of saliva suspend like cobwebs through the gaps surrounding your three blackened stumps. You notice some cream in your hair. (ibid, 18)

However, the writer does not moralize; by showing us the loneliness and alienation of the protagonist, Muslin gives voice to the marginalised.

Saffura Chinniah's [7] story titled "The Tamarind Tree" tells a story of a depressed retiree who immolates himself underneath the tamarind tree. The story, told from the perspectives of a third person and a voice of a child, reveals how Uncle Das, recently retired now faces a future with a wife who no longer loves him. Although he is devoted to his twelve year old daughter, his marital woes and unsupportive neighbourhood make his life unbearable and he seeks to end it by carefully planning to end his life by dousing himself with gasoline after his daughter goes to school.

Chinniah's story is characteristic of many works in recent Malaysian writings which show the fragility of human lives in modern Malaysia. While citizens of Malaysia enjoy a higher standard of living, many of them are spiritually depraved. Uncle Das is one such example. Other neighbours portrayed in the story reveal similar

degeneracy by either being bitter, self-righteous or arrogant. Das, burdened by a broken marriage and driven to despair with the unneighbourliness of those around him thus seeks to end his life in a dramatic way. The acidity of the tamarind fruit whose tree he chooses to commit suicide is metaphoric of his own bitter life.

While Chinniah shows sympathy for the melancholic Das, she also positions her readers to abhor the Das' wife. Going off at midnight, deliberately coming home only when Das is away, and finally refusing to look at her dying husband as he struggles to live, construct a portrayal of a wife who deliberately drives her husband to his grave. However, another interpretation is available. Mrs Das, considerably younger than her husband, is probably feeling the burden of having to shoulder the burden of being the sole income earner. Her husband, after retirement, suffers from low self-esteem, forgetting how to look good and feel good. As the protagonist himself says:

With a head of dark, curling hair and a washboard stomach, he held the world in the palm of his hands only to realise, years later, that the world was a joke and he, the designated fool. (ibid, 33)

While killing himself is Das' way out to erase his own pain, the trauma suffered by his child and wife lives on. Hence, his wife's refusal to look him in the face while he struggles with his life reveals her anger at her selfish husband who has been unable to face his problems head on.

"Cik Jamilah" by Melissa Maureen Rizal [8] describes a young girl's perception of her Bahasa Malaysia teacher who has lost interest in teaching and does not motivate her school children to learn. One day, she gives a lift home to the narrator, and a little of the teacher's life is revealed. Cik Jamilah had once been a beautiful sought-after woman who has given her life to her husband. However, she has lost everything she has given up for.

Melissa gives an insight into the life of a Malay woman who has lost her husband, children and wealth. We are not told of the events which have led to these losses but the fact that Cik Jamilah cares little of her appearance and career show that perhaps she, too, is a victim of a broken marriage:

Our teacher was Cik Jamilah, a short, wiry woman with frantic, panicky eyes, a mouth that never smiled, and an endless wardrobe of "baju kurung" in the worst combination of colours. ...

Most of the girls would ignore her, close their books and engage in soft chatter with each other. Those who worked, did it slowly and half-heartedly. Sometimes, Cik Jamilah would look out the window towards the houses that faced the school. She'd stare at them for the longest time, a strange expression of utter sadness on her face. (ibid, 50)

Here we have a portrayal of a woman who has lost everything but carries on with her life albeit as an automaton. In comparison to the story about the broken-hearted Das, the loss of Cik Jamilah is greater. By mystifying the circumstances surrounding the past life of Cik Jamilah, Melissa emphasizes the tragic dimension of the story.

"A Woman from Hell" by NF Manaf [9] tells a story of Juliana Omer, a middle-aged unmarried professional whom everybody hates at her office. Her favourite past time is overfeeding her fish so that they die. One day, her maid discovers some letters which reveal that Juliana is actually an adopted girl from Peshawar. In the process of reading, Juliana comes back. A week later, a maid is found dead in a bathtub of an abandoned condominium.

NF Abdul Manaf highlights the product of modernity in Malaysia. Juliana, the successful professional, is a "woman well-connected." She is not afraid to show that she is the boss:

She loved competition. If she lost, she showed it. Men got slapped. Women rivals spat at. Office doors slammed. Rubbish bins kicked and office pot plants smashed. No one liked her. But no one dared to touch her. (*Silverfish New Writing 2*, 152)

This aggressive, well-to-do professional, however, is unable to find a husband because "her luck had not been so good." (ibid, 153). Only the immigrant cleaner, Kak Yati, is able to withstand the ups and downs of Juliana. But when the part time maid finds out Juliana's background, she suffers the same fate as the overfed gold fish.

Another marginalised woman, Juliana is probably a result of women's aggression into the professional world which seems to have produced imbalanced women who have difficulty finding partners or do anything maternal. NF Abdul Manaf's story seems to show that success in the professional life does not equate with success on the home front.

"Polishing" by Charlene Rajendran [10] highlights the problem of wife abuse. In this story, two women are preparing for a Hindu religious occasion. Rekha, an accountant in her mid twenties, and her aunt, Savithri, a retired teacher in her late fifties, contemplate their present predicament of domestic chores and servitude of women. Their conversation reveals that both Savithri and Rekha are victims of abuse. Savithri is abused by her husband, and Rekha is harassed by her own brother. The story ends with both women taking off their aprons and leaving their abusive surroundings.

In this story, while Rekha is the young professional woman, she is not still unable to reveal to the authorities the extent of her injuries:

In the course of things, Rekha places the lamp in the kolam and pours the oil. As she is working her sleeve moves up her

hand and a nasty bruise is exposed. Savithri watches her. As Savithri leans forward to put in the wick she lifts her saree and there are bruises on her legs. (*Nineteen*, 14)

Rekha is afraid to inform the authorities: I can't go to the police. I can't go to a shelter. I can't do it." ... If this does not work it will blow up in our faces. It will make things worse. I will lose everything. (15). Her aunt is the one who persuades her to report the abuses, saying that "we need to do something now". The agency of the older woman to put a stop to the abuses suffered by both of them highlights current awareness of the plight of women and what they need to do to stop further abuse.

"Mariah" by Che Husna Azhari [11] focuses on the issue of polygamy in the Islamic context. The village religious leader, the Imam, has set eyes on the local businesswoman despite having a wife of fifteen years. The businesswoman, Mariah, reminds him of his first love whom he has tried to forget but failed. Thus, he seeks his first wife's permission by using gentle persuasion, first crying on her lap lamenting his problem, then kissing her hands, and finally kissing her feet in humility. The next morning, his wife, Cik Yam agrees to his plan and even arranges the wedding for her husband.

Polygamy is a sensitive issue for many Muslim women. Muslim men are allowed to marry up to four women provided he can be fair to each of them. Also, men who wish to practise polygamy should choose widows and orphans because these women need protection. Thus, the Imam, in marrying Mariah, is fulfilling one of the guiding principles because Mariah is a widow. Furthermore, even after fifteen years' of marriage, the Imam and Cik Yam have not been blessed with any children:

Why couldn't his wife bear children like other women? Some women, it seemed, have the fecundity of rabbits, but not his wife. (*ibid*, 23).

While Cik Yam may seem like a victim in this story because she falls for the flimsy excuses that the Imam uses to rationalise his decision to take on another wife, it is the Imam whose image as the pious man which Che Husna deconstructs. The Imam, well respected for religious matters, cannot help falling in love with the *kebaya*-clad *nasi belauk* seller. In all matters, his wife is far superior than Mariah – a better cook, a pious woman, an excellent homemaker. The Imam tries to justify his plans by referring to religion:

Did not the Prophet himself say that three things are pleasing to him: Prayers, women and perfume? There you are! Proof, exoneration for the Imam. He felt resolved to do what he had to do. (*ibid*, 27-28).

While the Imam is honest with his wife, it is shown here that he uses religion to satisfy his desires. By deconstructing the image of the Imam, Che Husna highlights that the Imam is as ordinary as any other men but his image as a pious person adds credibility to his decision to practise polygamy.

"Short Message System" by Mercy Thomas [12] highlights a recent phenomenon of the abuses of SMS. Reminiscent of several incidents in Malaysia whereby Muslim wives can be divorced by their husbands via the SMS, this story highlights how women become victims of modern technology. In this story, another young professional, Karisma Dravid, meets a man at a hotel. Drawn to each other but with their handphones ringing in between conversations, Karisma hears the man pronouncing "talak" (divorce) into his handphone. A little later, Karisma receives an SMS from a friend telling her that her husband has just divorced her through the phone. It is then she realizes that the man she likes happens to be the ex-husband of her friend.

As with the other stories, Karisma represents the professional woman who is full control of her life:

Her black briefcase sitting by her table in the hotel restaurant gave her away easily. The predictable laptop completed the picture. From head to toe she looked the part a – successful jet-setting professional. (*ibid*, 78)

But like other successful women, Karisma desires a man. She takes a "gamble on life" and follows her heart instead of her head:

But today was different. She wanted it to be different. She had been predictable and professional for too long. Her mind worked relentlessly without stopping to be surprised by life. She felt the urge to be adventurous. Giving in to a sudden impulse, she paused, cup in hand (*ibid*, 78).

Although attracted to the man, female friendship and common sense prevail. Hiding behind professionalism, Karisma "pick[ed] up her briefcase and laptop [and] stood up every inch the elegant professional" (*ibid*, 84). Thomas shows a woman with agency who reacts to the situation in a positive way. While the cell phone has been used by the man to victimize his wife, it has also helped Karisma's friend to relay the message to her friend quickly, helping Karisma avert a potential mishap.

IV. CONCLUSION

What aspects of Malaysian nationhood have the women writers raised in their writings? Most obviously, they have highlighted how women have been affected by modernity and fast development. While women have made great leaps in the educational and professional sectors, but they too suffer from alienation. It will be remembered that early

Malaysian writers spoke of alienation of the immigrant races. Women writers speak of a different kind of alienation, brought about by their achievements in the professional lives. Thus, characters such as Mrs Das's wife, Juliana Omer, Karisma Dravid are women who are highly successful in their careers but seem unable to form satisfying lasting personal relationships. Their aggression in the professional world does not seem to augur well in a society still clinging to patriarchal ideals. Thus, broken homes and relationships form a canvas of women's lives in many of these works.

The stories chosen represent women voices in Malaysian Literature in English. The corpus is not enough to show concrete patterns. Mostly though, they focus on matters relating to the lives of women, from the pious home maker like Cik Yam to the hellish woman like Juliana Omer. Indeed, Malaysian women are not homogenous, and they approach the conflicts in the lives in very different ways. What is particularly compelling are the representations of women coming to grips with modern Malaysia. As Fadillah Merican Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Ganakumaran and Raihanah MM explained "the socio-cultural change, economic, political change and conflicts, big and small, humorous or with tragic consequence, [have] affected and dislocated people" [13]. These women experience acute loneliness, psychological and emotional drifting apart. They are oftentimes disillusioned over urban life and love with its various forms of cruelties. These are perhaps the impact of the new order where women have become the new work force, and their responsibilities and the demands made on them have changed. Cik Jamilah is greatly affected by her losses but Karisma Dravid is able to walk away without regrets, but other women in the stories are equally unsettled by the new changes. By putting women's issues in the centre, these writers bring to our attention that they are not

suffering from the cultural cringe and their works are worthy of serious consideration.

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