

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

It is a fact that through the merging processes of multiculturalism and globalization, Malaysia's current community is fast changing. Malay women are among those who are undergoing transformations in which their religion and race continue to serve as tools in overcoming passions of recognition and marginalization so as to enable them mainstreaming their voices. The objective of this paper is to investigate and analyse the representation of women characters in contemporary Anglophone women's writing in Malaysia, focusing on predominant themes in creative prose fictions of three Malay Muslim writers – Che Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman and Ellina Abdul Majid. These three writers are not widely known; much less celebrated or studied in Malaysia, and knowledge about them is limited only to handful of people. This study is all the more important because of its being woefully under-researched. Moreover, there is rarely any focus on the contemporary Malay Muslim women writers who are part of the legacy and continuation of the Malaysian Anglophone women literary tradition seeded in pre-Independence years and who now form a larger presence in contemporary literary scene in Malaysia. The method used in the study is based on Islamic theoretical framework focusing much on Islamic principles found in the Quran, Prophetic Hadith and Sunnah and Muslim writers' scholarly writings. The data for this qualitative study is based on the writers' collection of short stories and novels – Che Husna Azhari's *Melor in Perspective* (1993); Dina Zaman's *Night and Day* (1997) and Ellina Abdul Majid's *Perhaps in Paradise* (1997) and *Khairunnisa: A Good Woman* (1998). In addition, interviews with the writers are done in person to gain inside information. The findings of the writers' works in terms of the characterization of women, predominant themes and women-centred topics show that the writers are writing as women who are conscious of their female identity while depicting various portraits of women who faced all kinds of problems and heartaches in facing challenges in the dynamic changing of Malaysia's coming community. Islamic message and articulation show that Islamic mores and values are still embedded in their writings. They are consciously aware of their identity as Muslim writers despite exposure to Western education and years of living abroad. The implication of the study is to add to the body of critical studies on contemporary Anglophone women's writing in Malaysia as the selected writers are not widely known. Knowledge of them is limited to a certain group of audience. Future researchers should conduct more studies on other contemporary Malay Muslim women writers in areas of stylistic and aesthetic aspects of the writings.

Keywords: representation, fiction, Malaysian literature, women's writing

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the representation of women characters in contemporary women's writing in Malaysian Literature in English by focusing on predominant themes in the selected works of three Malay Muslim women writers – Che Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman and Ellina Abdul Majid. We choose these women writers' narratives because they introduce issues and concerns rarely addressed by critics and scholars of New Literatures in English especially when dealing with Malaysian Literature in English. Women writing in English have made a significant contribution to the Malaysian literary scene for decades. However, despite the fact that Anglophone women's writing is an important body of literature, it remains marginalized in a male-dominated Anglophone literary world. Syazliyati et al. (2009) stated that "women's voices are silenced and they are denied existence, consequently, they are marginalised." Women writers writing in English in the country are never considered a serious part of the established literary circle. Just because the canon traditionally has been male, and because men have been in positions of power to determine what is accepted as canonical, women's works are generally ignored. Women writers are fewer in number and they generally have received little attention and acclaim from readers, critics and scholars alike in comparison with their male counterparts. Even though women writers may have been published since pre-Independence years, for decades they have continued struggling for recognition in Malaysia

and trying to be a part of the Malaysian literary canon (Nor Faridah & Quayum, 2001). In fact, the Anglophone women writers in the country today are still fighting hard to be accepted in the Malaysian literary world alongside their male counterparts.

Many reasons can be cited for the phenomenon of why women's writing in English continues to be under-valued and under-represented. For instance, in her interview, Che Husna Azhari opined that writers who write in English can never be National Laureates be they male or female. Women writing in English in Malaysia will only be known among the academic circle because the public do not read much of their work. As a result, these become trials and tribulations for women writers in Malaysia. Meanwhile, Dina Zaman and Ellina Abdul Majid voiced similar comments when asked for their views on women's writing in English in the country. Dina named insufficient supports from the government, the corporate sectors and authorities to help the up and coming talents. Similarly, Ellina too spoke up on the lack of supports and encouragements from the powers-that-be. She added that because of the gender difference, it is quite difficult for a woman to get published in Malaysia. On top of that, "given the small pool of readers in English in the country, and as is generally expected in a profit-driven capitalist economy, publishing a book is an extremely challenging task for writers since publishers avoid works that are likely to incur loss" (Quayum, 2007). Thus, any woman writer must resort to self-publishing provided that she has sufficient finances. To make matter worse, Zawiah Yahya (1994) stated that a Malaysian critic has made a negative remark condemning that "English-language fiction in Malaysia does not make good literary research material. It has an incredibly brief history, is of little literary merit, has no tradition it can call its own" (cited in Sercombe, 1997). Besides the three contemporary Malaysian Anglophone Malay Muslim women writers' viewpoints on women and obstacles to their creative writing, Virginia Woolf was among the first to voice her concerns on the real material circumstances that long kept women from writing. Her remarks were well expressed in *A Room of One's Own* (1971):

The little women and fiction mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write, or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer – to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever. All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. (cited in Goodman et al., 1996)

The three writers discussed in this paper are writers who represent the new generation or the coming community of Anglophone women writers in the country. The presence of these writers increases the number of Malay women writing in English as well as challenges the male dominance within the institutionalised literary circles consisting mainly of male elite groups. They have helped change the scene of today's female literary discourses, particularly through their women-centred fiction: *Kelantan Tales: An Anthology of Short Stories* (1992), *The Rambutan Orchard* (1993) and *Melor in Perspective* (1993) by Che Husna Azhari; *Night and Day* (1997) by Dina Zaman; and *Perhaps in Paradise* (1997) and *Khairunnisa: A Good Woman* (1998) by Ellina Abdul Majid.

These new women writers create highly individualized characters, and their writings focus on a woman's point of view. They offer different perspectives on a variety of social issues

relating to women and their interests. In reading and studying the works of these three writers, we can become acquainted with some of the promising Malaysian women writing in English today. We may discover that their works deserve a place in the mainstream of contemporary Malaysian Anglophone literature. As they portray female characters, they highlight the issues of real importance to women's lives and take them centre stage. They also represent the 'Muslim voice' in the Malaysian Anglophone women's literary world by looking at some subjects from an Islamic viewpoint.

The study is of great importance because when it comes to examining literary works of Anglophone women's writing in Malaysia, there is rarely any focus on the contemporary Muslim literary figures. Those that are usually studied are the older generation non-Muslim writers, for example Shirley Lim Geok-lin or Hilary Tham. Besides, the Anglophone women's writing in Malaysia lacks a Muslim voice talking about Muslim writers and literary criticism from an Islamic perspective. A renowned scholar Badawi (1996) expressed his concern about this absence by insisting on the need for "an Islamic literary critical tool." We need Muslims analysing the writers' works from an Islamic point of view so that some Western bias on Islam and Muslim women justifiably corrected. Che Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman and Ellina Abdul Majid are among those few Malay Muslim Anglophone voices in Malaysia whose creative writings encapsulate stories of women. Their stories display sharpness that is both mesmerising and shocking. The writers' presentations of women characters cover all strata of Malaysian society (peasantry to urbanised metropolitan), and their explorations of women's issues, experiences and concerns are acute observations of life.

The objective of the study is to provide an analysis of the predominant themes in the writings of Che Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman and Ellina Abdul Majid, which have not been fully examined before. The study firstly wants to find out how female characters, female-related issues and female experience presented in the contemporary female literary discourse. Secondly, the study wishes to know if the writers are conscious of their own identities as Malay Muslim women, and to what extent do their gender and religious values affect their writings. Thirdly, the research aims to identify what conclusions can be derived from the writers' feminist views as studied from an Islamic framework. There is a need to address the writers' concerns over feminist issues and controversial subjects such as female sexuality. The issues should not forever remain unchallenged and unexplored by critics. They are important matters, which need detailed elaboration to produce a true picture of Malaysian women, particularly Muslim women, who the West perceives as victims of oppression mainly because these women are not seen and heard. Therefore, by reading works produced by Malay Muslim women writers writing in English, the world audience and the Western readers can both "learn about the diversity cultures and also come to see the prejudiced ethnocentricity of their own thinking" (Zach, 1999).

METHODS

Theoretical Framework

The study explores and analyses the three authors' writings on the basis of certain thematic elements. The themes identified are mainly concerning women's rights, roles and status in various aspects of life; taboo subjects pertaining to female experience, female sexuality and man and woman relations.

In its evaluation of feminist themes in selected fiction in English by the three contemporary Malay Muslim women writers, the study adopts Islamic principles as found in the Quran, Prophetic Hadith and Sunnah and scholarly works by Muslim writers. This Islamic

framework is important because as Muslim authors, Islamic values are still embedded in these women's writings.

Studying the writers' feminist views from Islamic perspective based on Islamic ideals is significant because Badawi (1996) noted that "Art and literature have always been integral and essential parts of Islamic culture; and the Quran itself, the Muslims' Holy Book, is – in one of its aspects – a literary miracle of superb literary expression." In *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, Al Faruqi & Lamiya (1986) stated that "the Quran has affected the culture – and a fortiori the literatures – of all Muslim ..." and the Holy Book "has been the unchallenged, absolute literary ideal." As for Prophetic Hadith and Sunnah, they were "living illustration and explanation of the Quran, and we can do no greater justice to the Holy Book than by following him who was the means of its revelation" (Muhammad, 1999).

Data Analysis

The data for this qualitative research paper is based on the three women writers' selected novels and short stories. The study is of a qualitative nature as it adopts a content or textual analysis to the prose fiction. Therefore, each of the texts is examined on the basis of content and textual analysis. By content analysis, Wallen & Fraenkel (1991) meant "an analysis of the written text or visual contents of a document. The conscious and unconscious beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideas of people or groups are often revealed in the things they write (or draw, paint, and so on)." As for this study, it looks at the articulation of Islamic themes or ideas in the creative writings with special emphasis on the representation of women.

In addition, the data obtained from the interviews with the three writers both in person and by electronic mail buttress up this study. The interview is necessary to the study as it provides the researchers with current information and personal insights that may not result from consulting other sources. Besides, information from an interview adds a dimension of human interest to a paper that might otherwise be mainly narrative or simply monotonous.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Che Husna Azhari

Che Husna Azhari was born in Melor, Kelantan. Melor, a village-town situated between Pasir Puteh and Kota Bharu is the model as well as the setting frequently used by the writer for the characters in many of her short stories. As a Kelantanese born, this very fact influences her scope of writing as she opts to record stories of "rural Malay people, places and customs especially of Kelantan" (Nor Faridah & Quayum, 2001). If we are to categorise Che Husna's creative writing, they can easily be pigeonholed. Her stories belong to the "cultural and traditional fiction category" (Nor Faridah & Quayum, 2001). This is based on her insistence on retaining Kelantanese dialect, which is "one of the five groups of the Malay dialects of the peninsula" alongside English in her narratives (Asmah, 1991). In the Preface to *Melor in Perspective* (1993), Che Husna wrote:

I have clung to the usage of original Kelantan words when they have been found to be untranslatable. I did so for two reasons: (i) so as not to impair the story and (ii) out of my own stubbornness. Readers may find the glossary at the end of the book helpful.

Mixing the "original Kelantan words" with English in her writings, Che Husna displays anthropological studies of lives of the Kelantanese peasantry – men and women. As this study is interested in analysing the representation of women in her selected stories, it is important to note that the author's work offers numerous characters of strong women in the likes of

Mariah, the sought-after, beautiful and independent Kelantanese divorcee; Cik Yam, the epitome of sacrifice and piety in "Mariah;" Mek Teh, the animist traditional beautician in "Mek Teh, Mother Andam;" and Inayah, the politician in "Ustazah Inayah." The writer's characterisation of the women of substance "coping with the pressures of the secular world and materialist demands placed upon them" is a fact, which is itself some sort of statement (Nor Faridah & Quayum, 2001). Her women-centred fictions have feminist themes; depictions of the ordinary, mundane and familiar stories of women from a unique perspective. She challenges popular images of women, and presents what it is like to be a woman in a male-dominated Kelantanese society.

The short story "Mariah" in *Melor in Perspective* (1993) deals with the Molo village Imam, "the guardian of modesty and propriety and enforcer of stringent mores," and husband of Cik Yam, who falls for a pretty face; lusts for a much younger woman, named Mariah, the *nasi* seller. Mariah who "was without a husband" becomes the Imam's object of passion because she resembles the daughter of his Pattani Sheikh, his first and long lost and unrequited love. In this story, Che Husna raises her voice on behalf of the women who are victims in the polygamous relationship. She reveals the abuse of polygamy institution and even ridicules the ageing lustful Imam whose world, after his fateful meeting with Mariah, turns upside down. The Imam blames his amorous attraction and his decision in asking Mariah's hand for marriage on fate and destiny. Most Muslim men use religion to make polygamy look divine. They "enjoy the pleasures of the flesh and sanctioning their sexual drives in the name of Islam" (Siddique, 1990).

Women are averse to their husbands taking an additional wife. In reality, no one can feel the psychological impact of the Imam's impending second marriage more than Cik Yam, his first wife of fifteen years. It is reported, "most polygamous marriages cause agony to at least one of the persons involved – most often the first wife" (Polygamy under scrutiny, 2000). Cik Yam, based on the writer's depiction, symbolises the good, pure Muslim woman throughout the story. The descriptions centre on her character and spiritual qualities. And even though she realises the disadvantages of the polygamous relationship, she obediently agrees to the Imam's request. Probably the writer wants to convey a subtle message for Muslim women, particularly Malay women, not to blindly oppose polygamy, but look at the issue in a balanced manner – objectively and rationally, and not emotionally. In her own words, Che Husna Azhari said that the characterisation of the too-good-to-be-true Cik Yam was actually a parody; her subtle way of making fun.

The characterisation of the 'other woman' – Mariah – is not portrayed as a stereotyped seductress. Even though she appears sensuous, the writer claims that Mariah is not a harlot who goes around seducing men but rather "a representative of a true woman – true to herself; very independent, a representative of Kelantan women" (Nor Faridah, 1996). She belongs to a group of women neither easily seduced nor seducing. This is well reflected in her decision to stay single even though there have been many suitors after her husband's untimely death. However, she opts for celibacy and the Quran condemns celibacy "as an evil intention" (Ebrahim, 1998). Mariah's monastic lifestyle has no place in Islam as celibacy connotes boredom, lonesomeness and a deprivation (Muhammad, 1979). Therefore she chooses to marry again. She has chosen a God-fearing candidate (or so she thinks). However, based on the ending of the short fiction with "His eyes closed, his dream realised, the Imam managed a hoarse "Thank You, God, for Your Bounty," before Mariah's perfume completely enveloped him and his senses," we know that as the Imam's bride, she completes him; fulfils his long overdue sexual fantasy. Bouhdiba (1985) observed:

By confining woman to pleasure, one turns her into a plaything, a doll. By doing so one limits love to the ludic and one reduces the wife to the rank of woman-object, whose sole function is the satisfaction of her husband's sexual pleasure. Marital

affection is reduced to mere pleasure, whereas in principle pleasure is only one element of it among others. Thus, the wife is devalued.

Che Husna Azhari's narratives reveal that being a Malay Muslim woman is one of the factors that provoke her to write. In her stories we get to know that she gains her literary strength through being in touch with her Kelantanese women – Mariah, Cik Yam, Mek Teh, Inayah – who are portraits of good and evil. We see the diversity of her characterisation ranging from the exquisitely beautiful Mariah to virtuous Cik Yam to blasphemous Mek Teh and to the intelligent Inayah. Readers can relate to these women characters because of their human and lifelike representations. The characters are based on reality, not myth or fantasy. Thus, the women representatives leave a long lasting impression in the readers' hearts.

Dina Zaman

Dina Zaman, whose bestseller non-fiction book *I Am Muslim* (2007) writes because “there is nothing left I am capable of doing!” (Dina, 1997). She is a young local talent who does not believe in censoring herself. Dina said, “I don't believe in censoring myself. I do whatever I do” (Kuttan, 1997). This brave young woman is an unconventional writer in several aspects of writing: language, character and theme. She experiments in her use of the language by “her unpretentious way of incorporating pidgin languages of Malaysia” (Nor Faridah & Quayum, 2001). Contrary to many writers who use almost perfect English, she uses lively new English, which is Malaysian English – a unique spoken language that is more colourful than the restrictive original language. Malaysian English or Manglish is simply local expression in English. It does not observe the rules of grammar of English. Dina's language is a “mixture of Malaysian English and Bazaar Malay” (Nor Faridah & Quayum, 2001). This new English is not “a kind of pidgin regression, but rich social variants on the world range of Englishes, every bit as valid as American street talk and rap, Caribbean patois, or Glaswegian dialect” (McRae, 1994). Hence, due to the writer's exploitation of this new kind of Malaysian English, local readership can relate to her depiction of life and society and feel familiar with her characters as the Malaysian reading public too speak similar pidginised Malay and English. Also, in relation to her language use, she displays her non-censored style by allowing her female characters a total freedom in speech; they are allowed to say anything including swearing and obscenities.

In terms of characterisation, she is a writer who defies social convention, speaks bravely and writes defiantly. She writes about people who do not live in the mainstream of society. She presents groups whose troubles are conventionally ignored: prostitutes, housemaids, mentally and emotionally disturbed women and other female outcasts who are often neglected and forgotten in Malaysian society. She attempts to give voice to the voiceless; to portray those countless and shrouded lives. Her characters are not educated; they do not earn high salaries (if they work at all). She looks beneath the surface of their lives. We get to know the lives of some of the marginalized and unfortunate women in her *Night and Day*, a collection of nine short stories published by the now demised Rhino Press.

In studying her thematic exploration, it will dawn on us that she writes from a more detached perspective than her contemporaries. She narrates stories that are disturbing and even shocking! She presents new ideas – unconventional and daring – and that is usually a challenging thing to do. She is unafraid of tackling controversial and difficult issues in her work. Dina Zaman's *Night and Day* is overtly concerned with taboo subjects. Female experience in terms of illegal abortion, the female body, female desire, female sexuality and female repression are fragile and sensitive topics in the context of Malaysian society. Her unconventional approach to these taboo issues received critical feedback. She was accused that her writing is sensationalist – some of its content is sexual. In this context, she shares similar predicaments with Kate Chopin whose novel *The Awakening* (1899) was considered

“too strong drink for moral babes and should be labelled ‘poison’” (Eble, 1964). One of Dina’s very pieces – published in *Men’s Review*, “scandalised the whole world or at least her father. “Young Malay girls don’t write such things,” intoned her old man” (Kuttan, 1997).

One of the most provocative stories in *Night and Day* is “Ani,” named after the main character, a local housemaid. Dina Zaman in “Ani” depicts the travails of being young, single and female, and the author breaks the rule of silence on overtly sexual matters, which other Malay Muslim women writers are trying to avoid. The view of sexuality is considered taboo and shameful in Malaysian context. Thus, those writers’ apprehension of projecting issues of sexuality in their writing is understandable. Furthermore, there are the cultural and social ideas that men can talk about women’s sexuality while women should not be explicit.

As a Malay Muslim woman writer Dina Zaman is not afraid to go against the social and cultural conventions. She dares to shatter sexual taboo by having her women characters – Lal, Midah, Letchumi and Ani – freely discuss and express their sexuality. However, Ani who is portrayed as the voice of morality is not as open as her friends in discussing the explicit subject. Ani is a traditionalist, an old-fashioned woman who believes that sex is not something you talk about in public, even if you are of marriageable age. In the story Dina gives us two contrasting pictures of women: lady versus whore. The lady is in the form of the good and moral Ani who believes female virginity should not be relinquished easily as Islam highly regards the value of chastity or virginity before marriage. Regarding this matter, Bouhdiba (1985) noted: “Virginity is an essential element of Arabo-Muslim erotic. The Prophet himself advised Zayd to marry a virgin for preference. And indeed is not the houri of paradise an eternal virgin?” And the whore representatives are the three sexually active women – Lal, Midah and Letchumi – who claim to be good lays and not prostitutes. They belong to those who think that premarital and casual sex empowers women. Women are now liberated and they can do whatever they want. They want to be equal to men in every sense, including sexual relationship. Their premise is, if single men can sleep around and ‘sow their wild oats’ without society frowning on them, why should single women be barred from doing so?

While in “The Fat Woman” we meet with an unnamed woman character – a fat old prostitute who is one of the society’s outcasts or quite simply one of those who live on the fringe of society. The representation of a prostitute as the story’s main character is due to the writer’s fondness of bringing to the fore the lives of those neglected, forgotten and unheard souls of the community. Dina Zaman’s tendency to depict the lives of the downtrodden women is basically due to her idealism that these women have their own personal stories that are worth narrating and reading. In her interview, she pointed out that those marginalized women have different or unusual unreported stories compared to the common ones we hear – about the high society that can always be read in the daily newspaper or magazines. She confessed that she tended to project the unappealing and less sublime women characters such as this fat old woman prostitute because pretty things do not interest her and in addition, she was fascinated by the unsavoury creatures’ lives and eccentricities, and thus attempted to explore the psychological aspect of it.

The featured stories with their women representatives disclose that driven by the desire to understand the insignificant characters of society, Dina Zaman undertook the task of writing a series of stories on them. Her narratives help the women, that society will have a more sympathetic and open view on these unheard souls who form part of the diversity of the human landscape. The principle is that no one should be excluded from society. Dina’s women’s stories are distinguished due to the seriousness with which typically mundane women’s issues are treated. Marginalized women in some of the lowest paid jobs and despised jobs are rarely represented as a larger part of a woman’s story – even in the most realistic of literary texts. Here, in *Night and Day*, we get an almost honest account of these women’s lives as Dina writes with the purpose of telling stories without prejudice. She voices

the suffering of the under-represented women – portraits of the decadent, distressed and diseased. As a writer she has portrayed the various kinds of emotional entanglements and conflicts, which the women face with great depth and sensitivity. By and large, this writer who represents the voice of a modern nation through her use of language and theme writes with lucidity and boldness, and her writings reveal that literature plays the role of exposing social ills and problems in the coming community of Malaysia.

Ellina Abdul Majid

Like Che Husna Azhari and many other local women writers, Ellina Abdul Majid writes in her spare time. Her self-published *Perhaps in Paradise* and *Khairunnisa: A Good Woman* “are woman/family-centred stories of growing up and gaining self-knowledge amidst, and in spite of, unstable and disruptive family relations” (Fadillah Merican et al., 2004). Her novels have won her both ardent fans and ferocious critics. Some critics have bombarded her with accusations of producing trash literature through her using romance as a genre in narrating her women-centred fiction. According to *Icon Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, the term ‘romance’ “covers a considerably wide-genre – ranging from the short stories found in women’s magazines to the most infamous of all, the Mills and Boon novels – all of which portray the idyllic world of heterosexual love” (Gamble, 1991). Meanwhile, Light (1997) stated that “romance is read by over fifty percent of all women, but it is no coincidence that the two largest audiences are those of young women in their teens and ‘middle-age housewives’”. In relation to this, critics associate her romantic literature with the love stories of Mills and Boon, the publishing house specialising in romantic fiction with women, and also the late Dame Barbara Cartland’s romances.

In terms of language use, like Che Husna Azhari and Dina Zaman, this writer too does not employ proper English in her novels. In *Perhaps in Paradise* (1997), in her ‘Note to the Reader’, she explained that her book “is, in essence, a Malaysian novel.” Thus, some readers particularly the non-Malaysian would “find certain aspects and passages of the novel a little difficult to follow....” Taking this into consideration, she includes footnotes to assist the readers’ comprehension of her debut work. Ellina added in her ‘Note’ that she purposely applies a literal approach in translating from Malay into English “in order to retain the essence of the original speech and also to allow the readers an insight into the structure of the Malay language and expressive style.”

In studying her novels, one cannot but notice that she tends to choose themes that are at once personal and close to home while smacking of larger social issues. She focuses on the hypocritical and materialistic lives of the upper class Malay families and addresses numerous topics that in true Malaysian elite society are never brought into the open for fear of loss of ‘face’. In *Perhaps in Paradise* (1997), Ellina Abdul Majid highlights the experiences of a highly positioned Malayan civil servant’s family in the late sixties whose female characters undergo socio-political transformations (Syazliyati et al., 2009). Domestic violence, extra-marital affairs, abortion, sex scandals, secrets and lies are the stuff her stories are made of. Her portrayal of society, life and family has always been brave and often from a woman’s perspective.

Ellina’s Abdul Majid’s second novel, *Khairunnisa: A Good Woman* (1998) is a story of interracial and intercultural marriage between an English woman Caroline and a Malay man, Shahadan or Danny. Readers may question, “What else could a love story between West-East couple who has a successful relationship despite wide differences in race and culture, mean, other than the obvious?” They would immediately be aware that the novel is not what it appears to be. They would realise that it is actually a social critique of the highest kind in the tradition of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* – a subtle yet harsh critique on humanity. Ellina’s book is a criticism on Malaysian – on the people, the people’s attitude and the culture through the eyes of the innocent Caroline. The characterisation of the critical Caroline is

basically due to the fact that coming from a different country and culture, she becomes the writer's most convenient vehicle to address issues and voice her comments. Caroline observes her new adopted country and does not hold back whatever she thinks while Malaysians may have similar opinions but will not dare say it out loud. Ellina takes into consideration the sensitivities and feelings of fellow Malaysians because if a Malaysian character criticises her own country, she is definitely branded as rude, unpatriotic and ungrateful.

The novel also is a social critique on a Muslim convert – on how easily she might succumb to failing in understanding Islam. As a woman, Caroline epitomises women who believe that a woman has the right to her body particularly regarding the controversial issue of abortion. Caroline's belief would be backed by the Western feminists who propagate that a woman has the right to her body and pregnancy is part of the woman's body. Thus, she has the right to make a decision regarding her pregnancy. On the contrary, Al Ghazzali made a clear stand on abortion as cited in Al Qardawi (n.d.): "Abortion is a crime against an existing being. Now existence has stages. The first stages of existence are the settling of the semen in the womb and its mixing with the secretions of the woman. It is then ready to receive life. Disturbing it is a crime." After her abortion, Caroline is portrayed as a woman who suffers for her action. She suffers emotionally. She is a portrayal of a modern woman who believes in her rights. Her decision is not shown as a heartless one, but as something that leaves her feeling empty and very aware of her loss. Even though the abortion decision is painful and difficult, she goes ahead and suffers the consequences.

As a writer, what Ellina Abdul Majid has is a flair for blending romance narrative with satire, social criticism and women-centred topics while being conscious of Islamic values and principles. Her writings reveal that beneath the humour, the hilarity and the romance lie the menacing and sad truths of the social condition. We see numerous types of Ellina's female characters ranging from smart and religiously conscious individuals to traditionalist-thinking mothers to typical seductresses and to emotionally strong and patient women. She reveals the inner strength of some of her women in facing the challenges in life with courage and perseverance; they are great in their powers of endurance and forgiveness. Through her representation of women, Ellina Abdul Majid conveys her stand on women-centred issues without forfeiting Islamic principles of ethics and values.

CONCLUSION

In studying the three writers' creative narratives, this paper concludes that the writers' choice of representation of women and thematic explorations is very personal – something that is dear to their hearts and something that they passionately believe in. Consequently, all three develop their own individual distinctive style. The writers' individualised literary explorations are greatly attributed to their various backgrounds, upbringing and environment. Coupled with personal concerns and beliefs, they present us with a rigorously honest depiction of women and the naked truths of life. The analysis of Che Husna Azhari's series of stories affirms that for Che Husna, Kelantan is a source of inspiration: Kelantanese people, Kelantanese places, culture and tradition, and language. Clearly, her literature reflects her self-identification with her birthplace. Her close-association and firsthand knowledge of her subjects and added with her creative imagination and story telling ability are her literary strengths. Dina Zaman represents the voice of modernity in Malaysia and through her fictions, we are acquainted with her explorations of the repressed, over-stressed, lonely and frustrated women who find themselves alienated and unappreciated in life. Her thematic surveillance has more or less to do with her international literary influence e.g. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and the influence is further enhanced with her personal desire to understand the neglected group in society. Thus, we get stories that reflect her empathy with the social deviants and other insignificant souls' problems and heartaches. Her writing is best appreciated as a prose

painting of the marginalized human condition by a writer who lives in the centre but successfully captures the realistic periphery. Like Che Husna, Dina's firsthand knowledge on the materials as well as her imaginative ideas has produced an honest portrayal of the under-represented women.

In evaluating the writings of Che Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman and Ellina Abdul Majid, this paper affirms that Islamic values are still embedded in their works albeit with different priorities. Despite being educated abroad and using English as their main language, the content of their creative writings shows that they are consciously aware of their roles as Muslim writers in the Malaysian Anglophone literature. The Islamic viewpoints are scattered in their stories – obvious in Che Husna compared to the other two writers. This is not surprising because Che Husna herself is primarily conscious of being a Muslim writer. Articulating her female Muslim voice is her top responsibility and main vocation, while writing as a woman comes second. On the other hand, Dina Zaman comes across as a very open Muslim writer. Her belief in writing whatever she wants to write sometimes gives an opportunity for people to question her faith and condemn her writings. She simply wants to tell stories (any kind and every kind) as frankly as possible. Some Malaysian readers may not be ready for her spontaneity. Despite receiving negative and harsh criticisms, she still believes in non-censored writings. She simply wants to discuss the previously unsaid and unwritten and brings a critical discourse on the sensitive matters into existence. Similarly, Ellina Abdul Majid has tried indirectly putting across her Muslim voice in her novels. She is not so vocal about Islamic issues. This she sincerely explains is due to her inadequate and insufficient knowledge of Islam.

Finally, compared to Che Husna who specialises in the Kelantanese society, often rural and Dina who treats the insignificant individuals of the community, Ellina is somewhat different altogether. Her absorbing narratives of high society are the result of her own upper-class background. We can say that coming from the elite society, she has the right licence to paint a true picture of the group that she has access to and is familiar with. Her voice is a voice of moderation between the old order and the new order. She still emphasises respect both for the tradition and choices of the individuals. Last but not least, the presence and voices of Che Husna Azhari, Dina Zaman and Ellina Abdul Majid continue the legacy of Malaysian Anglophone female writings. By writing about women and their lives, the three contemporary Malay Muslim women writers are participating in the way women are represented in the coming community of Malaysian literary discourse.

The present study concerns only with analysing the representation of women in fiction and thematic aspects of the selected texts. Thus, the study recommends that other areas of investigation, such as, the stylistic and aesthetic aspects of the writings, to be explored by future researchers.

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