

# REVIEWING THE SHORT STORY ANTHOLOGIES OF ZURINAH HASSAN: CONVENTION VERSUS INNOVATION

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## Abstract

This discussion will focus on two anthologies produced by Zurinah Hassan entitled *Meneruskan Perjalanan (The Continuation of the Journey)* (1987) and *Menjelang Pemilihan (As the Selection Dawns)* (2004). The study will examine the issues of convention and invention that are evident in her short stories. The discussion will thus be divided into two parts. The first relates to convention in terms of the parallelism and acquiescence or obedience of Zurinah Hassan in cultivating issues or conflicts that can be extracted from short stories in both anthologies. The second relates to the context of invention and refers to the discoveries in her written work which have escaped or become free from conventional characteristics. In other words, her creativity has achieved a new level and is not tied down to conventional rules. The results of this study will assess Zurinah Hassan's development and the transformation of her talent of authorship that is evident from its creativity, imagination, illusion and fantasy. The existence of improvisation or growth in knowledge, discipline and knowledge of assistance and her experiences in cultivating current issues are also evident.

Furthermore, women's issues are highlighted through the short story genre to be shared especially with other women and with readers in general.

**Keywords:** Conventional laws, creativity, invention, imagination, illusion, fantasy and genre.

## Introduction

Among literature enthusiasts, Zurinah Hassan is best known as a poet, one of several female poets, others being Siti Zaleha Hashim, Siti Zainon Ismail and the late Zaihasra, competing with scores of male poets. Zurinah's prominence as a poet cannot be denied. However, how do the public identify with Zurinah Hassan as a short story writer? I was perplexed, among other things, as to how to find resources? Where could I find her short stories? Are references analysing her short stories readily available? Who has been studying them? Are there many short stories written by Zurinah Hassan? These issues began to surface one after another as I was well aware that Zurinah Hassan is a poet. Her works are rarely discussed, more so since she has just produced *Memoir Zurinah Hassan Menjejaki Puisi (The Memoir of Zurinah Hassan Tracking Poetry)*, which is mainly a conversational discourse sharing her personal "secrets" concerning the world of poetry! Nevertheless, with limited references, I attempted to delve deeper into the depths of her works. It is hoped that this concise study will become a catalyst for future studies.

I found out that Zurinah Hassan has produced 27 short stories to date, with the first, entitled *Menanti Suria Pagi (Waiting for the Morning Sun)*, published in July 1972 in the national daily *Berita Minggu*. Twelve of her early short stories published on a small scale were included in the anthology *Meneruskan Perjalanan (The Continuation of the Journey)* which was drawn from many print media sources including *Berita Minggu*, *Dewan Sastera*, *Jelita* and *Widya*. The short stories included in this anthology were published between circa 1972 and 1987. One of the short stories from this anthology, "Nenek" (Grandmother) received the Literary Works Award in 1982/1983 and was published in *Dewan Sastera* in June 1982. The short story "Dari Hari Ke Hari" (From Day To Day) or,

from the notes of the book, “Wajah: Biografi Penulis” (Faces: A Writer’s Biography), was written as “Dari Hati Ke Hati” (Heart To Heart), published in Dewan Sastera in July 1986, also received the Literary Works Award. So did the short story “Pulanginya Pemuja Ombak” (The Return of the Wave Worshipper) that achieved top honours in the Sixth Islamic Short Story Competition organised by the Prime Minister’s Department in 1985.

Furthermore, in the latest anthology published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 2004, 15 short stories written by Zurinah Hassan were included. These were collected from various broadcast or print media sources such as *Dewan Sastera*, *Dewan Budaya*, *Berita Minggu*, *Wanita*, *Karya* and *Utusan Zaman*. These short stories were produced from 1989 to 2003.

On the basis of both these anthologies I will try to focus the discussion here on convention and invention, both of which are evident in her short stories. Among other things, this method will become a barometer significant enough for examining form, structure, issues and questions, style of thinking, message and techniques of cultivation. Has Zurinah Hassan created an element of surprise through making renewals in the context of issue, story, theme and thought? And are her published short stories interpreted from different perspectives and through different reading methods, or do Zurinah Hassan’s ideas still remain at the same level or conform to the conventional style? These issues can be resolved by looking at important aspects of the structure of a literary work, namely convention and invention/innovation. From the perspective of literary values, convention may be defined as ways or rules that are well established and are accepted by members of the public. In ancient Malay literature, various story-telling conventions are evident with a story being told in a certain way which is used repeatedly in a literary work. Depictions of nature, of young royalty, of stepmothers or of heroes/heroines do not differ much from one story to another. In other words, in ancient Malay literature there exist patterns that should be followed in story-telling. This also applies to tales depicting war, sailing, adventure, depictions of the army and of the physical appearance of princes and princesses who were portrayed in a stereotypical and monotonous manner. The stories mostly ended with “happily ever after”. According to Hashim Awang, convention or conventional is also referred to as the regulation, theme, style or

form of literature, such as the construction of poetry, that has been accepted by the public (1987: 52).

The opposite of convention is invention or, simply innovation. Invention or creation is what a fiction writer does to escape from convention as long as he fully utilises his talents to create something new. He no longer has to ensure a thug rewards a hero. The hero does not necessarily end up with the heroine and live happily ever after. The hero is not necessarily tall, dark and handsome with a smile that can take one's breath away. He may be a disabled young man or a dishevelled one. Even in day-to-day experiences not every good deed is rewarded accordingly and not all evil deeds result in a sentence to life in prison. This definition of invention also sees transformations in portraying characteristics, backgrounds, incidents, plots and the way of expressing roles to the readers. However, not all authors are successful in escaping convention and not all authors are skilled in exploiting all literary elements and breaking barriers of convention. Therefore, invention is sometimes dubbed non-conventional or in-conventional which is said to digress from conventional characteristics or laws (Siti Hajar, 1992:44). The term "non-conventional" basically means uncustomary, which is defined as something deviant, branching out from the norm or not ordinary. In reality, non-conventional short stories reveal new looks, variations in strength, transitions from the old, new styles, strong ideas or new tendencies and strong interest in the build-up of structure.

"Non-conventional" is thus defined as new variations and new tendencies that exist in terms of how a story or issue is presented in fiction. On more detailed consideration, it can be seen how the construction of character, the intricacy of the plot, the style, point of view and character are brought to the surface. This type of production shows that authors combine elements of sensitivity with creativity and imagination. It can be said that the authors try to erode patterns of conventional creation that are deemed not to be viable for dialogues and monologues about the complex and sophisticated nature of humankind. Thus, the strong realist position that has held for many years has finally received a tremendous challenge. Various terms have been applied to this new strand of writing including *introverted novel*, *anti-novel*, *irrealism*, *surfiction*,

*new fiction, fabulation, magic realism and metafiction.* This approach seems to declare such styles as anti-characteristic, anti-plot, anti-message and anti-reality. These creative arrangements are no longer bound by the laws of cause and effect as conventional characteristics.

In reviewing Zurinah Hassan's short stories contained in the two anthologies, I was reminded of a phrase used by Helena Cixous (1978: 880) that suggests "write yourself. Your body must be heard." This was exactly what Zurinah Hassan embarked on in her era of creative writing, particularly with her short story compositions. Through some of her earlier works such as "Catatan di Meja Makan" (Notes at the Dining Table), "Siti Hawa dan Pengembara Yang Singgah" (Siti Hawa and the Traveller Who Visited), "Kelahiran" (The Birth), "Anita", "Perjalanan Sendiri" (Own Journey) and "Seperti Ibu" (Just Like Mother), she portrayed the experiences of women. Overall, the issues that take centre stage in these short stories revolve around women in the roles of grandmother, mother, wife, granddaughter, student, lover and also as career woman. Events portrayed in the short stories reveal how women persevere in bearing the burden of their responsibilities, combined with the inevitable stress. Therefore, the portrayal of women as passive or natural victims must be revised in order to produce more effective characterisations and a more meaningful representation in literature. Thus the role of Zurinah Hassan in raising this issue should be commended as it is difficult to relate to these experiences if they have never been experienced personally, or seen first-hand or personally revealed by women who have experienced them themselves. Hence the writings of women represented by Zurinah Hassan focus indirectly on transforming the status of women by translating the way they are represented in literature. This is because women frequently become stereotypical victims and are often excluded from the history of literature.

In addition, writing styles and the interpretation of materials and ideas give the impression that women have their own brand of literature, as long as history retains its strong male bias particularly in the academic world and social institutions. Their male counterparts seemed to be subtly conspiring to drown out and exclude the voices of women. This is not helped by the fact that the Malay community is bound by constraints and firmly rooted in

the patriarchal system. Zurinah Hassan has, in her compositions, successfully escaped the tyrannical male-dominated system. This path was not an easy one to manoeuvre along. Zurinah Hassan's success in expressing her repressed feelings, emotions, aspirations and hopes has been deemed similar to that desired by feminists. Thus it has given new hope to many minority groups. Through her short stories, it can be seen that Zurinah Hassan has unearthed, analysed and clearly expressed the prevailing patriarchy, criticised it and waged a war against it.

Furthermore, she inspires a "way out" for women whose freedom has been restricted, as well as championing the rights and dignity of women and empowering women to become independent and content in a harmonious way.

Zurinah Hassan is the best example of a female author successfully portraying these themes. She has broken the silence of women and channelled them towards the world of eloquence. This situation is evident from Zurinah Hassan's creation of female characters who champion relevant issues, such as the character of Hamimah in the short story "Catatan di Meja Makan" (Notes From the Dining Table). I can imagine Zurinah Hassan inserting herself, her experiences, her emotions and behaviour in the character of Hamimah. Whatever Hamimah has experienced, I seem to have experienced as well! The same goes for the character of Siti Hawa in the short story "Siti Hawa dan Pengembara Yang Singgah" (Siti Hawa and the Traveller Who Visited) . This character was constructed by Zurinah Hassan with a principled maturity and she was able to ponder upon a future that is frequently dictated by tradition, the male gender and social status. For instance, Hawa, as an intelligent and educated person, realises that (1987:13):

Now I realise this is the kind of education that has shaped the viewpoint of young girls of my society to envision their future as merely a wife and mother.

Hawa also has solid principles and is especially confident in matters that shackle women and the Malay race, as her friend Andy expressed (pg. 14):

The women of your race have never owned themselves. Their lives are channelled towards a single direction.

This is followed by a more forceful stance expressed by Zurinah Hassan through her female characters. These instances are as follows:

- (1) I am not anti-marriage because it is a meaningful life and as a normal human being we desire to start a family. But, before you restrict life to marriage, take the opportunity to venture out and learn about a life full of variety (pg. 15).
  
- (2) I will not get married early because a married woman's life will be devoted to her family. It is the woman who will face demands to maintain harmony in the family whereas a man can still explore the world even after marriage, if he wants to! (pg. 15).

The complaints, feelings, desires and voices from deep within a woman are also expressed by Zurinah Hassan, for example the feelings of love and affection of a mother towards her child really reflect "a mother's undying love" (kasih ibu sepanjang hayat). Examine the expressions below:

I have heard someone say that he would not hesitate to substitute his child's life with his own. But I do not feel that way. Thus I would say the child would be better off dying. If my child dies, I would carry the burden of utmost sorrow, but if I were not around, my child would be an orphan whose life is yet unknown (pg. 24).

However, Zurinah Hassan also realises that irrespective of female independence, wisdom, and how intellectual and active a woman is, if she lives in the depths of an arrogant society dominated by men, it will be difficult to penetrate because the adversary of women is not only the system but also women themselves! This reality was revealed by Zurinah Hassan through the short story "Anita". Let us examine Zurinah Hassan's recommendation to readers in general and to women in particular. The paragraph is as follows (pg. 51):

Before I left I was able to see Anita.

"It is difficult to be a woman," I said.

"It is not difficult, being a moderate woman like you."

I understood what he meant and answered, “the difficult part is being a capable woman with her own determination like you, Anita.”

Through my readings and analyses, the issues exposed by Zurinah Hassan tend to converge towards the life of women. And this is not a trivial subject. This is what you would deem as the expression of female experience in women’s works. This aspect should be highlighted accordingly as a large topic or the main issue in the generation literary genres. All parties (especially male authors and critics) should know that is the reality of a woman’s life! This situation provides a true representation that is far more appreciated, evaluated, refined and as detailed as possible. This is in accordance with Mary Ellman’s writings in her book *Thinking About Women* (1968) concerning the images of women, in which she mentioned the stereotypical characteristics of feminism portrayed by male and female authors in their works. Their compositions are said to be very much related to elements of sexuality in which women’s works are *multifocal* in nature in the sense that it has more lascivious zones while men’s works are *unifocal* in nature. Thus, women’s language is more ambiguous, delirious and nonsensical, and goes off in all directions as well as parallel to women’s own behaviour particularly when they are in their own world of “culinary matters”, whereas men’s language is clearer and more straightforward. Therefore, these differences make women’s text seem more interesting, accurate and sensational. Hence we have to remind ourselves that the interest and desire of women “represents the interest of women” and not women composing on the basis of fulfilling the desire or taste of men, whose works are usually devoted to the appearance of the woman’s physique, as mentioned by Miller, “the body of her writing and not the writing of her body”. In implied form, Zurinah Hassan ensures that her works stray away from being continuously placed in a situation where “women and women’s labour have been traditionally and systematically down-graded, suppressed, ignored or patronised” (Humm, 1989:159).

Referring to her latest anthology published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2004) entitled *Menjelang Pemilihan (As the Selection Dawns)*, I found that the appearance of a cluster of ideas, thoughts, issues, questions, messages and narration techniques are a world



apart compared to her works produced between the years 1972 and 1987. These changes have given indirect meaning to Zurinah Hassan's intellectual transformation besides the enhancement of her cultivation of the story as a result of the reading process, experience, observation and mastering of assistance discipline in the knowledge of literary critique. This issue is evident through a number of short stories included in this anthology which mark the return of the portrayal of mythical stories, legends and questions that have been included in texts of ancient Malay literature, comical stories, oral stories, and episodes and feature stories in *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)*. Zurinah Hassan is also able to relive the sensitivity in the style of illusion, fantasy and can be imaginative with characteristics whose role, episode or story has ended its run with previous authors. These stories made a comeback refreshed, complete with a new look, a new hope and a new emotion to live in the latest situation and phenomenon. She is proclaimed as a "story connector". It is indeed not a simple task to weave together these kinds of narrative structure. Only skilled, experienced and knowledgeable (well-read) authors such as Shahnun Ahmad, Anwar Ridhwan, the late Othman Puteh and Fatimah Busu (among others) are capable of achieving this level. However, with a shift in the mind and continuously polished creativity, Zurinah is capable of placing herself among the big forces in producing works in the short story genre.

This situation is evident from the short story "Bendang Lahuma" which relates the life of Jeha and her independent teenage children, especially her first-born, Senah. Shahnun Ahmad would understand Jeha's desire to live in the modern world but her spirit is with Lahuma's soul as seen in the expression "our paddy field is our dignity". Other short stories portraying similar motives include "Malim Permainan" (Game Pilot), "Si Kunani", "Perempuan Melaka Episod Terakhir" (The Malacca Woman: The Final Episode) and "Putera Tanpa Bumi" (Prince Without Earth). The style of narration used is a breath of fresh air which also reminds me of short stories penned by Fatimah Busu in her anthology *Al-Isra* and also of Shahnun Ahmad's short stories such as "Gunung" (Mountain), "Igauan" (Delirium) and "Wan Empuk Kakak Wan Malini" (Elder Sister of Wan Malini). Zurinah Hassan is able to create stories by interweaving influences, a phenomenon that has been used since the time of

Plato and Aristotle. Influence as a literary phenomenon happens anywhere and at any time and is not an offence or prohibited. It is thus not unusual for Zurinah Hassan to utilise various techniques in a genetic approach in a number of her short stories. Among other things, Zurinah Hassan interweaves several of her short stories as a piece of work built on the context of imitation, and the study of acceptance as a study of the manifestation of influence in a piece of work such as parody, burlesque, travesty, pastiche, hoax, spoof and stylization. Through the short story "The Malacca Woman: The Final Episode" (Perempuan Melaka Episod Terakhir), it can be seen how Zurinah Hassan combines the heterogeneity of characters in the story 34 of the *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)* as result of the downfall of the Malay kingdom of Melaka. The female characters who were affected directly or indirectly by this, for example Tun Kudu, Princess Hang Li Po and Tun Fatimah, are reincarnated with renewed views and hopes. Zurinah Hassan viewed the downfall of Melaka through the conscience of women isolated and oppressed for ages. They lamented the attitude of men crowned as emperor by the perception that "an emperor does not shed tears for his family. His tears are only for his country. To him politics are more important than family and power is more important than danger" (pg. 170).

The complaint that has long been suppressed was successfully revealed by Zurinah Hassan. She seemed capable of delving deep into the depths of pain and sorrow of the souls of the desperate women portrayed in the *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)*. Let us examine the feelings expressed by Tun Kudu which were unable to be interpreted by Tun Sri Lanang, but were successfully described by Zurinah Hassan. Beneath the beauty of Tun Kudu lies a vengeance (pg. 169):

I am deeply hurt. I was treated as a puppet to be played by men. Today I am owned by this person, tomorrow by someone else. I am bartered in exchange for what they deem as peace. However, I feel I am being used to strengthen the powers of the king. And for Tun Ali I am the instrument for him to embarrass the Sultan as a vengeance. Isn't there any meaning to love and affection in their lives?

Therefore, it was not surprising for Zurinah Hassan to write that "Melaka is full of strange men and Melaka is full of suffering women.

The women of Melaka have sacrificed their hearts and souls for the sake of their country and endure the pain in order to strengthen the power of the strange men” (pg. 166). It should be pointed out that the writing of *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)* was resurrected by a woman and was ended by a woman! This was how Zurinah Hassan cultivated her short stories with fresh ideas and a new lease of life and was brave enough to escape from conventional laws. This is a very tragic issue about the downfall of a great civilization. However, Zurinah fundamentally dealt with it without neglecting the experience of its women. Zurinah Hassan utilised this style in a tactful manner when giving a critique of any piece of work or idea.

Zurinah Hassan also enriches the inspiration of her works with a style of imitation in a study of acceptance by verbally expressing works of travesty and burlesque. These works do not require readers to closely remind themselves of the original work because authors carrying out this style of imitation do not intend to earnestly imitate the original work (Sohaimi, 2001:36). This technique and style are portrayed by Zurinah Hassan in several of her short stories, namely “Pujangga Negara” (The National Poet), which relates the story of Awang Budiman who is the recipient of the highest literary award, Anugerah Pujangga Negara (The National Poet Award) in a country called Pura Cendana. Zurinah Hassan attempted to portray the constraints between the life of a man of letters free to produce his works and the life of a man of letters oppressed and controlled by the wishes of the palace which wants him to produce the greatest works for their king and dignitaries to the point that they offer bribes. This is contrary to Awang Budiman’s principles and those of his parents in the village. In my opinion, Zurinah obtained inspiration for this short story from the Malay film directed by M. Amin entitled *Gurindam Jiwa* starring Nordin Ahmad and Latifah Omar.

The same goes for the portrayal of the character of “Malim Permainan” (Game Pilot). Zurinah Hassan depicted the situation in the story of *Hikayat Malim Deman* and reblended it so that the original story supports the motive of her narration. The character in “Malim Permainan” is depicted with a new vision, as a reincarnation of the new character of Malim Deman living in the multimedia age in a borderless world. The “Malim Permainan” was generated as a visionary character who achieved success as the largest producer of games equipment and machines in the region.

Through the short story “Sri Kunani”, Zurinah Hassan has inspired a sequel depicting descendents of Pak Kaduk who rose to seek vengeance over a piece of land inherited from their ancestor which has been confiscated by the king through deceit. Zurinah Hassan has recorded the lineage of Pak Kaduk, where this was researched by his grandson, the ancestry of Alimuda, who is Alimuda bin Zamanbaru bin Zamanlama bin Kaduk. Alimuda is an only child thus he is automatically the legitimate heir of the piece of land belonging to Pak Kaduk which was illegitimately taken away by the king. Some Malays who are negligent and preoccupied with other things to the point that their inherited land can be pawned or are too engrossed in making money through their newly acquired wealth thus forgetting the inheritance left behind by their ancestors.

A similar issue can be traced from the short story “Putera Tanpa Bumi” (Prince Without Earth). Zurinah Hassan has taken the “Alkisah Cetera yang Kedua” (Second Story) as the basis for the narration by reimagining the role of the treaty of Demang Lebar Daun in the form of an MOU. The author portrays the character of Puterabumi who was extremely worried that his position would not exist without Earth. His dreams showed that “planet Earth was inherited from his ancestors who successfully established several Malay kingdoms. But they did not look after them well. The dignitaries were seditious and power-crazy. Your king kept engaging in merry-making with his courtesans. The people were left to suffer,” proclaimed the voice (pg. 207). It continues:

The reckless behaviour of your ancestors is an example up until today. Look at your kinsfolk fighting with each other. Your peers devote their time to frivolous pleasures. Your people no longer care about the safety of their country. Your people no longer think about the viability of the nation. The time will come when your adversaries will strategise to confiscate this fertile land. Your adversaries are not entirely to be blamed. Your ancestors are also guilty. Your generation is also guilty.

This short story is styled in a cynical manner. Implicitly, Zurinah Hassan attempted to reprimand the youngsters of our native land represented by the “prince” who lives in the country called Malaysia. The author conveys the message so that “we must adhere to the customs and laws of the country we live in” (the Malay proverb “di

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mana bumi dipijak, di situlah langit dijunjung”). This land should be preserved from falling into the hands of “foreigners” who are gradually taking their place in the country and are probably able to do as they please (such as immigrants from Indonesia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines, whether legal or illegal). Hence leaders should be more honest, sincere, trustworthy and responsible in carrying out their duties and refrain from ill-treating the people. The author intentionally lists down Malay descendents who have been sentenced as a consequence of the “power” of the king, resulting from the reckless behaviour of the ruling party. For instance, Puterabumi was given a report containing the names of people accused of committing offences and who were brought to justice which comprised of two categories, namely:

- (1) Rulers who were Demang Lebar Daun and Paduka Seri Maharaja, and
- (2) The general public

Among the general public was Hang Nadim, the boy who saved Singapore from being attacked by the swordfish, who made the people afraid to think. And there was Si Luncai who ridiculed the King and the tragic tale of Wan Empuk and Wan Malini. The report and situation caused Puterabumi to be very worried about the fate of his nation. In this way, Zurinah Hassan portrayed this issue analogically based on events recorded in the nation’s history. She retold the story cynically as this situation is now happening in our country. Clearly, Zurinah Hassan attempted to remind and inform the public so that they might exercise more caution in their actions, be they leaders, rulers or the masses, particularly youngsters who are the heirs of the future. For Zurinah Hassan, past lessons should be learnt.

In examining Zurinah Hassan’s short stories, particularly the anthology “Menjelang Pemilihan” (As the Selection Dawns), it is evident that she has opened up her mind and created a new style in cultivating various lifestyles. Personally I am of the opinion that Zurinah Hassan’s thinking is identical to male authors especially in describing issues directed to the development of the nation! But Zurinah Hassan, as a female author, is adamant in using her personal experiences as a woman to expose the burden of the

duties and roles of women as a mother, wife, daughter as well as a career woman. Zurinah discusses similar issues but in a different context, more directed and focused towards the thoughts and roles of women in the development of the country. A similar thing happened to a female author in Tanzania: Tsitsi Dangarembga in her novel *Nervous Conditions*. In this kind of situation, male authors could not delicately monitor a woman's conscience in their works! One of the reasons this happens is possibly because male authors usually like to create a woman's character as a sidekick in their works. In this matter, women are capable of writing like men but men are not capable of writing like women. Zurinah Hassan has proven this phenomenon true.

For both these anthologies, Zurinah Hassan has undertaken a huge responsibility by portraying the most valuable experiences of women. This is consistent with the agenda of the feminist stream that truly hopes the experiences of women are not neglected. These experiences will never be exposed if they are seen through the framework of men's thought! Her short stories have undergone an intriguing transformation which is not evident in other female writers.

As a summary, I have chosen an appeal by Elaine Showalter (1993:141) who says "we cannot will ourselves to go back to sleep ... the anatomy, the rhetoric, the poetics, the history, await our writing ....". With Showalter's expression, it is true that Zurinah Hassan is proclaimed as "sireh pulang ke gagang" (returning to her roots). Delicately put, Zurinah Hassan has omitted herself from the definition and the common perception frequently made of female writers, that after getting married and having children, the determination to write would wane and eventually fade.

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