

SABAH FEMINIST NOVELISTS: VIEWS OF THEIR OWN

(Novelis Feminis Sabah: Sudut Pandangan Mereka)

Sim Che Cheang
susansimcc@yahoo.com

Fatin Najla Omar
atindz@gmail.com

Faculty of Humanities Arts and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Sabah.

Corresponding author (*Pengarang koresponden*): *

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Abstract

This paper scrutinizes five award-winning novels by five Sabah female writers and the issues of sexual discrimination, lack of opportunities, patriarchal hegemony and the negative perceptions of the body that plague Sabah Malay women. A discursive analysis of these issues is anchored upon a gynocritic feminist approach first introduced by Elaine Showalter in her famous essay entitled “Toward a Feminist Poetics” (Newton, 1997). The purpose of this study is to uncover the concept of the feminine “self” in the Sabah context through a thirty-year interrogation represented by these five female authors’ novels and narrative styles, which include an exploration of their themes, language styles and poetics through the five novels entitled *Malisiah* by Obasiah Hj Usman (1986), *Dari dalam Cermin* by Azmah Nordin (1992), *Gadis Adikara* by Ruhaini Matdarin (2007), *Pagi di Hujung Senja* by Kathirina Susanna Tati (2013) and *Helaian Linangkit* by Dayangku Mastura Pg. Ismail (2016).

Keywords: Sabah writers, female writers, feminist poetics, gynocritic theory

Abstrak

Artikel ini meneliti karya lima penulis novel wanita pemenang anugerah novel dan isu yang dibangkitkan berkaitan dengan diskriminasi, kekurangan peluang, hegemoni patriaki dan persepsi negatif oleh badan tertentu yang mengekang wanita Melayu Sabah. Analisis diskursif tentang isu ini menggunakan pendekatan feminis ginokritik yang diperkenalkan oleh Elaine Showalter dalam esainya yang terkenal "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (Newton, 1997). Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menyingkap konsep feminin "diri" dalam konteks Sabah menerusi 30 tahun pengalaman yang dipersembahkan oleh lima penulis novel wanita ini dalam gaya naratif, yang memuatkan penerokaan tentang tema, gaya bahasa dan puisi melalui lima novel bertajuk Malisiah oleh Obasiah Hj Usman (1986), Dari dalam Cermin oleh Ahmah Nordin (1992), Gadis Adikara oleh Ruhaini Matdarin (2007), Pagi di Hujung Senja oleh Kathirina Susanna Tati (2013) dan Helaian Lingkit oleh Dayangku Mastura Pg. Ismail (2016).

Kata kunci: Penulis Sabah, penulis wanita, puisi feminin, teori ginokritik

INTRODUCTION

A text is often a reflection of the author, in particular his/her identity that is connected to the aesthetics of creativity and content. As aptly described by Muhammad Haji Salleh (1979:1), "creative work is highly dependent on language and its possibilities". Through the language of a text, themes are expressed, plots are developed, messages are communicated and the aesthetics is emphasized through its unique narrative method, which is why he describes the whole process of writing in these terms:

The beauty of literature comes from the language and feelings or thoughts... the best words with images, expressions, comparisons and life seen in his words, we get a partial effect of this aesthetic effect. A good language is a mature language, flexible, sensitive to old or new meanings, always fresh and does not look stale. (Muhammad, 1979:3)

Therefore, the existence of the concept of the "self" of an author as a writer and creator is expressed through writing, which Marcel Proust defines as a "right" (quoted in Farid, 1984:84) of the author to define him/herself in a text. While the creative use of language is a tool that is often regarded as the mark of a writer that distinguishes his/her narrative form and is usually

referred to as an author's "style", a clear and developed self-concept is indicated by the author's sensitivity and creativity towards something or an event that touches his/her soul expressed through his/her creative work (Muhammad, 1979:121).

However, another aspect of the concept of the authorial "self" resulting from the interaction between a text and its readers, particularly the target audience, is not to be ignored. Rahimah (2017) states that in a creative process, an author is simultaneously interacting with society, commenting about it and positing him/herself within the society to be critiqued by the readers. The rationale behind this creative process is that an author successfully connects intellectually with the community through his/her work, especially through the reviews, discussions or criticisms generated by the response to a text. The author's concept of the self will be formed by these reviews that are directed personally to his/her views located within his/her text from his/her targeted audience. This explains the need for an author to have hindsight and foresight with a positive outlook to begin his/her creative journey as a writer (2017:119).

Elaine Showalter's (Sohaimi, 2014:25) famous essay entitled "Towards a Feminist Poetics" outlines two basic approaches in critiquing writings from a feminist perspective. The approaches are a feminist critique or a gyno critique approach, with the first being a gendered critique of any creative work from a woman's perspective, while the second emphasizes on the female perspective that is focused mainly on creative works produced by women themselves. As such, a feminist critique of the selected five Sabah female novelists would involve an interrogation of their creative process and writing styles that will conclusively expose their concept of the "self" through their novels. The selection of *Malisiah* (1986) by Obasiah Hj Usman, *Dari dalam Cermin* (1992) by Azmah Nordin, *Gadis Adikara* (2007) by Ruhaini Matdarin, *Pagi Di Hujung Senja* (2013) by Kathirina Susanna Tati and *Helaian Linangkit* (2016) by Dayangku Mastura Pg. Ismail is an attempt to locate the feminine "self" across a timeline, from the rise of the first female novelist, Obasiah Hj. Usman, in 1986 with *Malisiah* to the award-winning female writer, Dayangku Mastura Pg. Ismail, with her 2016 novel entitled *Helaian Linangkit*. Besides being renowned writers who charted numerous awards for their masterpieces, these female writers raise the issues of sexual discrimination, economic inequality, patriarchy, body image, access to equal opportunities and the silenced gender in their novels. They are purposefully selected for this study as a reflection of the changing mindsets of women in the

last thirty years in Sabah. Their consciousness as writers and perceptions of themselves as women appear to have evolved over time, closer to Kristeva's "abject" self (1986) that has left behind the need to embrace society's idea of the feminine self as delineated by the masculine subject (Roudiez, 1982). The poetics within these selected novels demonstrate the fact that women writers have used their writings to reject the restrictions levelled at them by religion and government institutions, give voice to their experiences and push back at attempts to silence them, especially in areas about their sexuality and subjectivity (Oliver, 1997:21).

An initial literature review in the area of feminist studies in Malay literature specific to Sabah uncovered only four books that are primarily focused on the development of Malay literature. They are *Berkenalan dengan Novel* (Ramli, 1988), *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Novel Moden* (S. Othman Kelantan & Abdullah, 2003), *Puitika Sastera Wanita Indonesia dan Malaysia Satu Bacaan Ginokritik* (Norhayati, 2012) and *Mediasi dalam Perkembangan Novel Sabah* (Asmiaty, 2019), the last of which presents the most comprehensive history on the rise of the Malay novel in Sabah. While Ramli and Asmiaty's respective books detail the rise of Sabah Malay literature with a diachronic emphasis, S. Othman Kelantan and Norhayati's respective books are more interested in a general overview of the rise of Malay literature in Malaysia, with a particular focus on a comparison between the feminist literatures of Indonesia and Malaysia. As such, this paper hopes to fill in the gap for textual analysis that focuses on novels written exclusively by Sabah female novelists across thirty years in order to unveil the distinctive identity of Sabah female writers through the gynocritic lenses used to analyse their style of writing, language and poetics. A gynocritic approach to analyse the literary language, narrative styles and poetics of the selected authors and their novels will reveal the concept of the female "self" that forms the identity of the Sabah female novelists.

GYNOCRITIC INTERROGATION

Safian *et al.* (1988:88) believe that reference to a "style of writing" is actually a reference to the "arrangement of words that convey best the ideas and meanings of a writer". In *Glossary Mini Kesusasteraan* (1986), Hashim adds to this definition of style as a way of using words to convey thoughts and feelings. His definition rests on the belief that a good style of writing will yield better communication between the text and its reader. However, this

study hopes to show that the style of writing is not merely an arrangement of words to convey ideas, but also unconsciously or consciously reveal the nature of the writer. Za'ba appears to agree with this conclusion, as he observes in his critique of early Malay literature that the language style of an author can reveal his/her personality (1965:71). By virtue of these definitions, the Sabah female novelists will reveal their gendered styles through their novels.

Individual styles refer to many aspects of the use of language by an author (Mana Sikana, 2006:146) which, in this context, refers to the Sabah female authors. The analysis of the novels necessitate the focus on the use of figurative language and poetical devices that are used for the feminist discourse imbedded within these novels. Harun (1981:24) believes that a gendered symbolism is uncovered through the scrutiny of figurative language, such as symbolism and semiotic elements that form the poetics of a text pertaining to its plot, theme and message. This approach is dictated by Showalter's gynocritic approach as a woman writer is assumed to "own" and utilize language in their own way (1982:20). The use of language in their own style will not only mark the literature as their own, but give voice to the female dreams, ambitions, visions and identity that are not evident in literature written by men, as Christiane Makward discovers. Makward claims that women's writings are:

... open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or 'didactic' languages. (1987:49)

Added to this is Shoshana Felman's (1982:21) opinion that women have deliberately created a language to confound and oppose the "phallogocentrism" that is a patriarchal structure. Thus, Showalter claims that women should create their own style of writing and "no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning" (1982:21), a meaning dictated by hegemonic patriarchy. Hence, the rampant use of metaphors to convey meaning implicitly or symbolically appears to be dominant in the five novels written by the five Sabah female writers. Their narrative styles appear as feminist semiotics—like implicit utterances, erotic body metaphors, figurative language and expressions—against male domination. This is because "feminist semiotics" analyse language as the means of uncovering, understanding and challenging gendered power and posits similar principles, such as the power of readers

to construct meanings. Buker (1996) points out that “when speakers choose words, they also are bringing along sets of meanings that both they and readers connect to the words”.

The focus of this analysis is on how each novelist outlines, highlights, exposes, unpacks and deliberately introduces to reverse Saussure’s semiotic principles, which are considered “gendered” or inclined to give priority to men, as described by Gilgun. This study uses a basic semiotic model by Barthes that interprets in two stages of signification, referencing the relationship between the signifier and the signified of a symbol. Barthes calls it “denotation”, which is the most obvious meaning of a sign. Meanwhile, “connotation” is a term Barthes uses to indicate the significance of the second stage. “Connotation” is an inspired meaning related to the content or work that is unconnected to the extrinsic meaning, such as the meaning behind a myth. The meaning of a myth requires an understanding of the culture of a race that translates the reality or explains its nature (Putu Krisdiana Nara Kusuma & Iis Kurnia Nurhayati, 2017:201). Barthes points out that there is an interaction between a text and an author’s personal and cultural experiences; in other words, it is about the interaction between the conventions in the text and the conventions experienced and expected by an author. Thus, this study is confined to identifying the signs and meanings within the text that is extrinsically related to the Sabah female writers through the gynocritic feminist lens.

FEMINIST LANGUAGE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In producing a creative work, the author sets out to convey a profound idea that hopefully stimulates the readers positively and in an entertaining manner. This is where figurative language is effective to infer meaning to the reader, which is then perceived by the reader as the interpreted value of a text. This cycle of creativity is displayed in Obasiah’s novel, *Malisiah* (1986), which highlights the value of women’s dignity, gender differences and even religious morality. *Malisiah* is considered as the first Malay novel written by a female novelist that incorporates “local colour” that is highly stylized by one-dimensional characters and typical folkways setting (Suhaila Sulaiman & Sim, 2019). Unconsciously, her novel’s profound effect is still relevant to this day. Through the character Linah, Obasiah’s authorial intrusion is obvious. Linah is heard saying (1986:36):

...Bercakap tentang kesopanan, saya merasakan seolah-olah zaman sekarang ini adat-adat lama tak sesuai lagi. Ada di antara kita yang dah tak tahu duduk bersimpuh. Kalau tak duduk di kerusi tak selesa rasanya.

[Speaking about politeness, I feel as if these days old customs are no longer appropriate. Some of us do not know how to sit cross-legged on the floor. If you do not sit on a chair, it feels uncomfortable.]

The author appears to highlight how indigenous Malays have changed by giving an analogy to the erosion of customs in today's modern society, with reference to the discomfort of people today when they sit cross-legged on the floor as their ancestors have done. This analogy is an example of semiotic feminism specific to Malay culture in which young rural girls and boys are always asked to sit cross-legged, which is summed up as a polite expression in a host's house during visitation. The style of language that is communicated by analogy or implicitly contains meanings that are related to the moral and ethical values are not specifically targeted at the male gender but both. The style in which meaning is conveyed by Obasiah in *Malisiah* (1986) is likely implicit utterances using metaphors of the female body and figurative language that is intended to deliberately defy male claims on expression only.

Implicit Symbolism

Among the most obvious feminine style of writing detected in the Sabah female writers is the propensity toward implicit statements through the use of feminine semiotics, such as metaphors and symbolism that deliberately overturn the usual perception of particular customs associated with women. Perhaps the genre of local colour at this early stage of novel writing may have influenced Obasiah's writings, but the feminist discourse that is extrinsically detected in *Malisiah* (1986) cannot be ignored. For example, at the beginning of *Malisiah* (1986), the title character appears helpless as she is forced by her father to marry Zainal, a man she did not choose. Her powerlessness and despair at not having a choice to determine her life or reject her father's wishes is expressed as a "darkness" that envelops the room she is in. Obasiah writes (1986:93):

... Kegelapan bilik itu Malisiah rasa bagaikan kegelapan hidupnya. Malisiah berasa kesal. Kenapa dia menjadi perempuan untuk dikuasai bukan menguasai dirinya. Dia merenungi dirinya. Dia berasa dirinya lemah.

[... The darkness of the room Malisiah felt like the darkness of her life. Malisiah felt sorry. Why is she a woman to be ruled instead of controlling herself. She thought to herself. She feels weak.]

The word “darkness” indirectly implies sadness, failure and pain felt by Malisiah. The depth and reasons for her emotions are implied and can only be interpreted through the unboxing of the “lack of light”, which is darkness associated with a feminist discourse. The association between darkness and her feelings of being “controlled” instead of “controlling” suggests that she has lost a battle to gain freedom and dictate her own life at the face of patriarchy, which is represented by her father at this point.

The implicit play on the symbols of marriage as a kind of death is further implied when the author deliberately has Malisiah rejecting the marriage ring as a symbol of love, peace and a future between a man and a woman. Instead, it is perceived in direct opposition as a symbol of destruction, thievery of her ambitions, her own love and, most of all, condemnation to a lifetime of loneliness. Malisiah is heard saying:

13.2...*Cincin pembunuh! Cincin perampas! Cincin jahanam!* (1986:92).

[...Killer ring! Thief ring! Damn ring! (1986:92)]

Malam bagaikan cita-citanya dan cintanya. Gelap! Sepi! Seperti dadanya tidak berilmu. Tandus! (1986:99)

[The night is like his ambitions and his love. It’s dark! Lonely! Like his chest is ignorant. Barren! (1986:99)]

The unconventional overturning of traditional symbols, such as marriage and the marriage ring that is often celebrated as an equal union, not only invite readers to explore the feminist diatribe against arranged marriages that were still being practiced as late as the 1980s, but to empathize with Malisiah’s character or even affirm the frustration and anger at the victimization of women. Although it appears as though Obasiah is against the institution

of marriage, she underlines that she is against the oppression of women through old customs in culture, such as marriage determined by parents for their daughter. This is clearly perceived when Obasiah explains the effects of arranged marriages:

... Malisiah rasa dirinya lemah. Terlalu lemah. Dia ibaratkan dirinya sebagai sebuah ladang. Dia hanya menerima apa sahaja tanaman yang akan ditanam di atasnya. Malisiah tahu kini bahawa dia sebenarnya hanya seorang perempuan. (1986:105)

[... Malisiah feels weak. Too weak. She likens herself to a field. She only accepts whatever crops are to be planted on it. Malisiah knows now that she is actually just a woman. (1986:105)]

Kalaulah luka di dadanya dapat dilihat, keparahannya akan ketara. Cita-citanya untuk menjadi seorang pensyarah sebenarnya telah musnah. Dia menjangkakan bahawa masa depannya dalam pembelajaran akan pudar. Kegagalan ini menjadi penyiksaan yang berat baginya. (1986:116)

[If the wound on her chest can be seen, the severity will be obvious. Her ambitions to become a lecturer are shattered. She sees that her future in learning will fade. This failure is like a torture that is worse to her. (1986:116)]

Clearly, Obasiah is using feminist semiotics to provoke an acknowledgement of the powerlessness of women in her time in determining their own future and the loss suffered by them because their ambitions were never taken into consideration by “fathers” and “husbands” alike.

The symbolism of the “farm” that accepts anything in its field is deliberately manifested as a rape metaphor, just as a helpless rape victim who has to accept everything that is done to her body. The sexual reference indicates the level of violation felt by the female “self” who is forced to marry without the freedom to choose or pursue her ambitions. There is no denying that Obasiah uses strong feminist semiotics to deliver her views on the rights of women.

Azmah Nordin, in her novel entitled *Dari dalam Cermin* (1992), brings the feminine discourse a step further by breaking conventional publication in regard to a woman’s body by not shying away from lurid discussions in her attempt to expose male debauchery through their lascivious survey of a woman’s body as a “hole in the ground”. She writes in her novel (1992:20):

...bagaimana agaknya tanah Rohayu jika dilakukan penyelidikan bagi tujuan mengetahui keadaan tanah, untuk memastikan cara menggali, keperluan penahanan atau timbering dan sebagainya? “Bagaimana pula dengan lapisan tanah Rohayu yang tembam boyak itu? Apakah tanah itu mempunyai berbagai-bagai jenis lapisan pasir, lapisan tanah liat, lapisan batu dan sebagainya?. Riad tersenyum sinis lagi, suatu senyuman yang amat sukar ditafsirkan.

[... how about Rohayu’s land if research is done for the purpose of knowing the condition of the soil, to ascertain how to dig, is there a need for shoring up or timbering and so on? “What about the thick layer of Rohayu’s soil? Does the soil have different types of sand layers, clay layers, rock layers and so on?” Riad smiled cynically again, a smile that is very difficult to interpret.]

The male characters’ (Riad and Hj. Salam) implicit reference to Rohayu’s body shape is a deliberate metaphor to expose the vileness of the male predator who preys upon women, similar to men who destroy land that is ironically often referred to as “mother earth”, implying the destruction of a much more valuable commodity. The use of the phrase *tembam boyak* by Azmah Nordin is certainly sexual in nature and displays the courage to touch on a topic that is taboo among the Sabah female novelists at that time. These words are directly linked to the act of sexual intercourse that the two men are contemplating as they violate Rohayu with their thoughts. Despite the daring reference to the sexual act, Azmah’s subtlety by using implicit elements, such as the metaphor of the violation of the land, to imply the many ways a man violates a woman physically and mentally supersedes any kind of vulgarity that appears to be the mark of these female novelists. The use of the phrase *tembam boyak* in Sabah Malay dialect locates the feminist discourse of the novel within a Sabah context. The author has projected her disgust at the verbal assault of Rohayu as a form of physical assault engendered by the disgusting Riad and Hj. Salam. Azmah exposes and incriminates those responsible for women’s fear and existence as the second sex through Rohayu’s victimization. The short episode reveals the meticulousness of the author in inserting the feminist discourse into the Eastern Sabah cultural setting.

Theoretically, the feminist discourse of symbolism within these texts reflects Kristeva’s belief that “symbolism” and “semiotics” are different in that the “symbolic” is often controlled by a universal signification governed

by conventional male standards, while “semiotics” is the “organization of drives” (Oliver, 1997:xiv) in language that allow other significations. The female protagonists and characters have rejected the conventional female, maternal, marital and sexual symbols that they have been forced to accept and, instead, have verbalized their disgust or “abjections” of the subject and the object roles forced upon them by their fathers and husbands. It is obvious that all the novelists have embraced Kristeva’s semiotics, which discharges the meaning of conventional symbols by using language and bringing the discourse towards the physical body to enact significance in what she calls “sem-analysis” (Oliver, 1997:21).

The Erotic Metaphor of a Woman’s Body

The Sabah female writers have since become more brazen and vocal in communicating their perspective as women within a close and conventional cultural background. Preferring to use a woman’s body as illustration, these novelists—especially Azmah Nordin and Ruhaini Matdarin in their respective novels, *Dari dalam Cermin* (1992) and *Gadis Adikarya* (2007)—stand out from their other three peers. There are obvious similarities between these two prolific female writers who boldly highlight the erotic element of the woman’s body without flinching from the taboo subject of sexual intercourse between men and women by using connotative meanings in their narratives. For example, the continuous use of the land violation metaphor is carried through to the consummation between Rohayu and Riad in Azmah Nordin’s *Dari dalam Cermin* (1992:117):

... Rohayu terus menjerit-jerit kesakitan, apabila Riad merempuh seluruh daerah perbukitan tulennya yang subur dengan kehijauan lembah likunya, dengan seluruh himpunan kekuatan yang didorong oleh rasa dendam yang membara dalam diri Riad.

[... Rohayu continued to scream in pain, as Riad stormed the whole of its pure hilly district which was lush with the greenery of its winding valley, with the whole set of strength driven by the resentment that was burning within Riad.]

The connotation of Rohayu and Riad’s consummation is deliberately expressed symbolically like a battle on the beautiful pristine environment

that is Rohayu's body from a female perspective—it is painful, degrading and completely opposite of Riad's perspective. Rohayu's scream of pain against Riad's brutal assault on her body is not only an expression of female violation, but also explains the implied metaphor of marriage as death that Obasiah introduced in *Malisiah* (1986).

While it is easy to accuse and condemn the opposite sex for a woman's unhappiness, Ruhaini Matdarin explores the power within a woman to overcome the challenges that a patriarchal society has in store for her in *Gadis Adikarya* (2007). Although a woman is acknowledged as being equal in society, there are still all forms of discrimination that needs to be addressed, as demonstrated by Ruhaini's character, Usu Timah. The tool of magic realism is used to create a female character that is fluid, meaning neither male nor female, but, more importantly, one that is seamless as the identity that Julia Kristeva (Keohane, 1981:299) describes as the third-generation post-feminist female identity. Using magic realism as a tool, Ruhaini exposes the rudimentary discriminations faced by women who are often blamed and considered as a trigger. Similar to the ethereal Pandora who curiously opened the forbidden box, the character of Usu Timah is depicted as both the protagonist and antagonist." Through Usu Timah, Ruhaini criticizes how gender is often blamed for the irresponsibility and lack of ethics that is the real culprit of evil. Through this Sabahan writer, the female victim is no longer cloaked in metaphors, but directly referred to as a naked woman born. Ruhaini takes the courageous step to view the female as objectively as possible in her novel without relying on connotations or metaphors to circumnavigate the breaking of cultural taboos, as did Obasiah and Azmah Nordin before her. Ruhaini's direct and refreshing style is displayed in the following excerpt (*Gadis Adikarya*, 2007:114):

... Pakaian yang berlonggok di sebelah kanan susuk tubuh yang harum dipandang sekilas. Darah menyirap di kepala merenung susuk tubuh yang langsing menggoda manja tanpa seurat benang di depan mata. Tubuh yang sebelum ini sudah kerap dipeluknya dan ditiduri beberapa kali.

[... at a glance the clothes are piled up on the right side of the fragrant body. Blood dripped on his head as he stared at the slender figure seductively displayed without a thread in front of his eyes. The body that he had previously hugged and slept with several times.]

Ruhaini might be condemned as being “obscene” by some Muslim Malay communities, but her realistic depiction of the sexual act equalizes the genders. While Azmah Nordin’s *Rohayu* and *Riad* are on opposite ends of sexual experience, with *Rohayu* being depicted as a victim forced into submission by *Riad*, the two characters in *Gadis Adikarya* appear to unashamedly enjoy the sexual act and find fulfilment, which should be the case if both are perceived to be equal in power.

Shame is not given a chance to arise because there are no obscene or rude words in the passage that, instead, displays a reciprocal relationship between a man and a woman, with the latter being in control of the situation and her own body (*Gadis Adikarya*, 2007:115):

... Tanpa sedar, dia menanggalkan pakaian dan terus menerkam hidangan di depan mata yang selama beberapa hari ini mengganggu ketenangan jiwa dan fikiran. Wanita itu juga tidak pernah menolak, malah memberikan layanan yang mampu membuatnya gila kerana setiap nikmat yang tidak mungkin diperolehnya daripada wanita lain. Walaupun dia terpaksa membuat kerja gila sebagai harga untuk mengecapi kenikmatan tersebut.

[... Unconsciously, he took off his clothes and continued to pounce on the food in front of his eyes which for several days had disturbed his peace of mind and soul. The woman also never refused, even taking steps to entice him further that drove him crazy because it was what he could not possibly get from other women. Although he had to do crazy work as a price to enjoy the pleasure.]

Using the verb “pounce”, Ruhaini Matdarin has leveraged the metaphor of a tiger, which is not usually used to describe a woman, much less an amorous woman, who is secure in her gender and identity. Through *Usu Timah*, Ruhaini implies that women should cast away the “weak”, “victim” mentality and fearlessly embrace their feminine “self”, reaching out for what they want and turning the tables on patriarchy, just as *Usu Timah* has done with her “victim”.

Ruhaini Matdarin also appears to project the fearlessness of female writers through her bold and direct approach with matters pertaining to the awareness of sexuality in a woman.

... Di atas permukaan rumput yang ditumbuhi lalang liar, adegan ganas berlanjutan. Ranting-ranting kering patah dihempap tubuh sepasang

manusia yang tenggelam oleh kerakusan nafsu. Nyamuk serta agas turut berpesta darah (Gadis Adikarya, 2007:117-118).

[... On the surface of the grass overgrown with wild weeds, the violent scene continued. The broken dry twigs were crushed by the bodies of a pair of human beings drowned by the greed of lust. Mosquitoes and gnats also feast on blood. (Gadis Adikarya, 2007:117-118)]

... Rintihan halus bertukar hentakan-hentakan kasar di lantai pondok, langkahnya kaku di satu penjuru yang kesamaran apabila melihat sepasang tubuh manusia tanpa surat benang yang sedang beraksi ganas lalu menyebabkan kepala berpinar, pening. (Gadis Adikarya, 2007:147).

[... Subtle groans turned into rough blows on the floor of the hut, he stiffened when he saw in an obscure corner a pair of human bodies without a thread acting violently causing his head to spin with dizziness. (Gadis Adikarya, 2007:147)]

The above passages describe the sexual awakening of the female character that is not denied, repressed or unacknowledged. That a woman should be acknowledged for her own sexuality—just as the sexual act is akin to nature, with mosquitoes and gnats feasting upon the couples—appears to be the message that Ruhaini Matdarin conveys. The personification of the sounds made by the mosquitoes, gnats and dry twigs signals the similarities between nature and natural sexual act, which is nothing to be ashamed of.

Rejecting Physical and Spiritual Domination

Once again, Kristeva's idea of the female as "rhythms and tones" that defy phallic time and discourse (Keohane, 1981:299) resounds in Azmah Nordin's *Dari dalam Cermin*, which exposes the indecency and violence wrought on a woman physically and spiritually when she is forced into a sexual act with a man she does not love (1992:31):

...Tubuhnya menelentang kaku. Jari-jemarinya yang kini halus kulitnya, terketar-ketar meraba-raba perutnya yang membusung tinggi. Semakin lama semakin membesar isi kandungan dalam perutnya itu, macam semakin membesarnya kebencian yang terperap di dalam dadanya, kebencian terhadap Riad, suaminya. Kebencian itu bertumpang tindih, apabila dia terpaksa memenuhi sendiri sewaktu dia mengidam sesuatu.

Kebencian itu berbaur dengan kekesalan yang amat sangat; kesal kerana dia sering muntah-muntah, biarpun kandungannya itu tanpa disulam rasa kasih sayang daripada kedua-dua belah pihak.

[... Her body stretched stiffly. Her fingers, now smooth-skinned, trembled as she groped her swollen stomach. The bigger the contents of her stomach, the bigger the hatred that was ingrained in her chest, the hatred towards Riad, her husband. The hatred overlapped, when she had to satisfy herself when she craved something. The hatred mingled with intense resentment; regretted that she often vomited, even though the pregnancy were not embroidered with love from both sides.]

Rohayu, the female protagonist, likens her baby to her hatred for her husband. Moreover, the personification of the hatred that grows within her is at once a warning about the continual domination of women and a prelude to the consequences of these actions. The full implication of the despair felt by the female persona can only be understood through Kristeva's concept of *jouissance*, which rejects the Freudian theory of pregnancy motivated by "penis envy" (Oliver, 1997:296) that seeks to relate the maternal body to masculine sexuality or desire. Azmah Nordin underlines Rohayu's sacrifice when she submits to her forced marriage on her wedding night upon her marriage bed (*Dari dalam Cermin*, 1992:33):

... Begitu dia pertama kali melabuhkan punggung di katil pengantin menjelang hari perkahwinannya dulu, dia sudah membulat tekad, dia akan berusaha untuk menumpahkan seluruh bakti kepada bakal suaminya. Dia bertekad untuk melayani makan minumannya, untuk mengurus pakaiannya untuk memicitkan tubuhnya sekembalinya dari pejabat, untuk mengendurkan segala urat sarafnya andainya dia dilanda ketegangan dan akan sentiasa mendoakan kepada Tuhan agar suaminya selamat sentiasa.

[As soon as she first laid her back on the bridal bed on the eve of her first wedding day, she was already determined, she would try to shed all her devotion to her future husband. She is determined to serve her food and drink, to take care of her clothes to squeeze her body when she returns from office, to relax all her nerves in case she is hit by tension and will always pray to God that her husband is always safe.]

These words imply that Rohayu begins her domination and servitude on the marriage bed, where she vows to serve her husband physically and spiritually. Azmah implies this through the metaphor of a “golden cage” in which Rohayu is imprisoned in spite of it all (*Dari dalam Cermin*, 1992:99):

...Rohayu yang memanjangkan leher, menjenguk ke luar tingkap, berasa hidupnya bagaikan berada di dalam sangkar emas. Sebagai sebuah sangkar, biar bagaimana indah sekalipun, biar bagaimana lazat makanan yang dihidangkan sekalipun, dia akan sentiasa berasa terperangkap di dalamnya. Biarpun indah dipandang di luar, namun bagi dirinya yang terkurung di dalam sangkar itu, dapat merasai betapa kasar dan dinginnya dinding di sebelah dalam sangkar itu; sekasar sentuhan tangan Riad, sedingin pandangan mata Riad.

[Rohayu, who stretched her neck, looked out the window, felt like her life was in a golden cage. As a cage, no matter how beautiful, no matter how delicious the food served, he will always feel trapped in it. Although beautiful to look at on the outside, but for him who is confined in the cage, can feel how rough and cold the walls inside the cage; as rough as the touch of Riad's hand, as cold as Riad's eyes.]

The unconventional metaphors and personification attached to marriage, particularly the act of sexual intercourse that leads to the creation of a new generation, appear to be a deliberate attempt to overturn the patriarchal perceptions of women and marriage. In projecting marriage as a cage so men can continue to physically violate and subjugate their wives and pregnancy as a harbinger of hatred, Azmah Nordin has also exposed the female perspective of representing a “truth” that is not acknowledged by the patriarchy.

Jasni Matlani, in his book entitled *The Creative Work of Sabah Writers in Criticism* (2013), commented that Ruhaini Matdarin is a feminist as she knows herself (2013:76). In *Gadis Adikarya* (2007), the female protagonist Usu Timah is heard saying, “That was good”, in reference to the coupling between her and the male character; she also says, “Woe! To the whole Malaya as women are persecuted by men, but she on the other hand is afflicted by an unexpected misfortune” (2007:169). Usu Timah’s brazen view of herself is only exceeded by her ironic sarcasm delivered at the end when she refers directly to women who want to view themselves as victims rather than confident individuals like Usu Timah herself. This explains the reason why Ruhaini’s novel tells the story of the dominance of a female shaman, Usu Timah, who is both the protagonist and antagonist, and wields

her power as an individual over both men and women by using their own unfounded fears and beliefs in their archaic beliefs in rituals and mysticism (*Gadis Adikarya*, 2007:100).

Figurative Language

Regardless of the genre, the theme or style of writing, the author's use of language will often convey an underlying feminist discourse. According to Za'ba (1965), figurative language refers to language that expresses a figurative word by associating it to another object in an aesthetic manner. This leads us to Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak and Mohd. Saleeh Rahamad's (1996) perception of figurative language as a style of language that communicates by analogy. Sara Beden and Awg Kasmurie Awg Kitot (2015) define figurative language as "the use of metaphors, proverbs, irony, simile and personification as expressions that deviate from the literal or literal meaning" because, as Julia Kristeva explains, a woman inherits her fluid subjectivity as she is conceived in her mother's womb (Oliver, 1997:305), where she not only acquires her socialization but also language skills. A female novelist like Kathirina Tati does not use poetic language in her novel entitled *Pagi di Hujung Senja* (2013), but instead tells the story through dialogue or conversations between the characters Sera and Mariana. This includes creating scenarios with little or no poetics—only a very brutally honest expression of the struggles of women suffering from uterine and breast cancer. The levels of despair and loss felt by a woman when her womb and breasts are removed is Kathirina's aim; she writes out the pain, insecurities and fears from a woman's perspective:

... Setiap kali melihat parut di perutnya dan kesan-kesan lebam picagari dan ubat rawatan kemoterapi pada kulitnya, dia semakin menjadi marah dan resah! Apa gunanya terus hidup kalau hanya untuk terus menderita sakit dan disakiti. (Pagi di Hujung Senja, 2013:2-3)

[... Every time she saw the scars on her stomach and the effects of syringe bruises and chemotherapy drugs on her skin, she became more angry and restless! What is the point of continuing to live if it is only to continue to suffer pain and be hurt.

... Akan sembuhkah aku? Dapatkah aku menumpukan perhatian dalam kerjayaku kelak? Akan teruskah aku disayangi, dicintai suami tersayang?

Adakah aku akan pulih seperti biasa, menerima hakikat dan menerima diri seadanya! Aduh!! (Pagi di Hujung Senja, 2013:4)

[... Will I recover? Can I focus on my future career? Will I continue to be loved, loved by my beloved husband? Will I recover as usual, accept the fact and accept myself as I am! O dear!!

Kathirina points out the emotional and physical scars a woman suffers as a result of cancer and the anxiety caused by her insecurity of her husband's love, something that a woman has to face that a man is oblivious of. Her plain prose is very effective in giving voice to the female malaise, affecting the imagination of readers at the level of suffering that is not emoted lavishly with descriptive literary devices, but instead is withheld to compound the suffering experienced by a woman who, in spite of her illness, has to cope as a mother, career woman and wife. Through her characters Sera and Mariana, who are both women with a family and career, Kathirina represents the voices of women who have great responsibilities yet bravely move forward with their lives with spirit and courage in spite of it all. *Pagi di Hujung Senja* (2013) is not only a story about battling cancer, but a celebration of the tenacious spirit of womanhood in the face of challenges encountered.

Mariana is heard equating the loss of her breasts with the loss of pride, while men would only view it as a loss of sex symbol (*Pagi di Hujung Senja*, 2013:158-159):

Mariana sedar, kehilangan payudara, kehilangan rahim atau mana-mana organ dalam tubuh, cukup memberikan tamparan hebat kepada para wanita, para isteri yang masih mahu menghargai cinta daripada suami dan masih mahu dihargai oleh suami. Walaupun Mariana tahu dan semua wanita juga faham, kehilangan itu tidak menjejaskan perhubungan suami isteri, semuanya masih sama. Namun hati nurani dan naluri seorang wanita, hancur berkecai! Merasai kekurangan apabila ada selapis kulit pun terhiris daripada tubuh. Apa lagi kehilangan payudara, kehilangan rahim yang menjadi simbol kebanggaan seorang wanita, tidak kira usia yang menjadikan bahagian anggota badan wanita seperti payudara dan rahim sebagai simbolik identiti wanita yang dianugerahkan Tuhan secara semula jadi yang tidak sewajarnya menjadi simbol seks kepada kaum lelaki.

[Mariana realizes, the loss of a breast, the loss of a uterus or any organ

in the body, is enough to give a great blow to the women, the wives who still want to appreciate the love from the husband and still want to be appreciated by the husband. Although Mariana knew and all women also understood, the loss did not affect the marital relationship, everything remained the same. But a woman's conscience and instincts, shattered! Feel the lack when there is a layer of skin sliced from the body. What's more the loss of the breast, the loss of the uterus which is a symbol of a woman's pride, regardless of age which makes female limb parts such as breasts and uterus as symbolic of a woman's God-given identity naturally which should not be a symbol of sex to men.]

The above excerpt is the reaction of Sera and Mariana, who are both suffering from uterine and breast cancer, to Dr. Teh's callous pronouncements of their conditions. It is obvious that Mariana and Sera's defiance and anger are registered in their response that is captured in the excerpt above. Kathirina uses the situation to raise criticism against the stereotypes of women, who are viewed merely as objects and their body parts perceived merely as sexual tools. Mariana and Sera give voice to the mothers, wives and daughters of men who are unable to empathize with a woman. The frank utterance in Kathirina's novel affirms Elaine Showalter's claims about the ability of women to understand the psyche of women themselves, as opposed to men. This is further expounded in the ending of the novel, where the authorial intrusion is clearly heard in Kathirina's affirmation of women's tenacity and ability to overcome adversities with a smile (*Pagi di Hujung Senja*, 2013:256):

Haruskah wanita menerima nasib begitu? Setelah menderita kerana penyakit dan harus menderita kerana perbuatan suami yang tidak bertanggungjawab! Sedangkan Mariana seorang isteri dan ibu yang baik. Anak-anaknya semua beradat. Ada budi bicara yang tinggi dan menghormati orang. Wanita yang jarang memperlihatkan kesedihan, sering kelihatan ceria walau diri dirundung malang.

[Should women accept such a fate? Having suffered because of an illness and have to suffer because of an irresponsible husband's actions! While Mariana is a good wife and mother. Her children are all well behaved. They high regard and respect others. Women who rarely show sadness, often look cheerful even when they are suffering and in despair.]

In *Women's Time* (1979), Julia Kristeva claims that “pregnancy is a dramatic ordeal; a splitting of the body, the divine co-existence of self and other, of nature and awareness, of physiology and speech”. The dramatization of pregnancy and the loss of physical body parts that contribute to the feminine identity recalls Kristeva’s belief that a woman can establish her identity and mourn for her loss of one only if and when she becomes a mother (Oliver 1997:364). Clearly, Kathirina Tati has embraced and expressed her feminine identity and the loss of it through her female protagonists, lamenting and celebrating giving voice to her feminine “abjected self”.

Their Own Similes, Ironies & Semiotics

Another popular narrative tool uncovered in these five novels is the use of simile. According to Rachmat Djoko Pradopo (1992:62) in Maniyamin (2006: 47), a “simile” is an “explicit comparison” where an object or situation is compared to another engendering an implicit meaning. A clear example is the description of how Rohayu in *Dari dalam Cermin* (1992) is compared implicitly to an animal being sacrificed to Riad (1992:30) on the marriage bed, emphasizing the disparate perception of a woman and a man towards an arranged marriage. The claim on a simile being a “woman’s language”, unlike the factual reporting of the male characters in the novels, appears to be emphasized through the analysis of these five novels. This is aligned with the feminist assumption of a woman’s identity being subjective and, thus, must reject the crude identification of women by men, such as Riad and his friend who describes women as “a tooth” that is to be removed when rotten (*Dari dalam Cermin*, 1992:55). The emphasis on the different perceptions of women about the relationship between a man and a woman is also promulgated in the treatment of love. In Riad and his male friend’s eyes, a woman is less than human and only to be used as a vessel for sex, but Mariana and Sera both reject this stereotype by drawing attention to the many roles played by a woman—as a wife, mother and worker who is respected by her children. The assertion of a woman’s role and her identity appear in the underlying narrative style of Azmah Nordin. She demonstrates the bold spirit of Sabah women through her skilful use of the Malay language and her fearless writing, challenging the stereotypes, old customs and taboo in her novel.

This is also demonstrated through the use of irony to convey criticism of men who have four wives, such as Hj. Salam (*Dari dalam Cermin*, 1992: 42). Maslida Yusof (2000:1239) and S. Othman Kelantan (1997:12) point

out how irony in satire aims to ridicule or mock, which is exactly what the character Hajjah Zainab (Hj. Salam's first wife) does when she says, "... Yes, just get married, bah!" and also "Add a wife, like adding property!" (*Dari dalam Cermin*, 1992:47). The direct criticism towards men's perception of women as objects ("teeth" and "property") is underlined using cultural similes and ironies. The use of similes is not entirely to ridicule, as demonstrated in Dayangku Mastura's *Helaian Linangkit* (2016), which embraces semiotics that is distinctly feminine. This is especially obvious in her penchant for referring to her female characters like Andui in flowery semiotics. Andui is referred to as "Melur" or "Jasmine", which is not the common jasmine, but a flower whose fragrance never fades and floats in its own *tasik larangan* (2016:110-112), or "lake of prohibition", implying a woman who is virtuous in her novel that is targeted at female teenagers.

CONCLUSION

A feminist analysis of the five selected Sabah female writers across thirty years have revealed the evolution of feminine projections of the female from the first generation suffragette fighting for equality with the rights of men, as observed in Obasiah's *Malisiah* (1986), to the discovery of the subjective feminine "self" that does not conform to the masculine idea of the female object in both Azmah Nordin and Ruhaini Mat Darin's respective female protagonists. The themes have evolved from a conservative approach to addressing the rights of women in education and choice to a growing awareness of themselves as being more than the roles that a patriarchal society has assigned to them. From this awareness of the male hegemony in Obasiah's *Malisiah* (1986), the feminine "self" begins to openly defy the gendered roles dictated by traditional customs, as identified in both Azmah Nordin's *Dari dalam Cermin* (1982) and Ruhaini Matdarin's *Gadis Adikara* (2007). They not only reject the homogeneity of conventional female constructs established by religious and cultural constructs that are already in their localized society, but create their own. Using a discourse that recalls Julia Kristeva's body discourse, the female writers overturn the conventional, the traditional and the phallic discourse by denying the meaning generated by symbols and creating fluid semiotics to indicate feminine subjectivity.

Moreover, within the defiance arises a celebration of the female strength to juggle the gendered roles of wife, mother and worker, while still retaining the "femininity" of a woman, as Kathirina Susanna Tati implies in *Pagi*

Di Hujung Senja (2013) through her two female characters who have lost their biological identity as women. Dayangku Mastura Pg. Ismail's novel entitled *Helaian Linangkit* (2016) reveals the new Sabah woman as being fearless, confident in her femininity, aware of her choices and in control of her future that is free from the manacles of patriarchy. Elaine Showalter's (1978) call to interrogate the identity of women through their writing has indeed borne fruit in this analysis. The feminist discourse that is reflected from many of Julia Kristeva's beliefs about female subjectivity and identity is demonstrated through the writers' use of language and semiotics, such as erotic metaphors, symbolism and the overturning of gendered perceptions sown by the misconception of customs and rituals associated with women and marriage. All of these are some of the traits demonstrated in these Sabah feminist works. From a covert style to an overt reference when addressing a woman's place, identity and ambition, these female writers appear to insist on being acknowledged not only as equals, but also possessing the freedom to create their individual identity that is free from a gendered identity, signalling a post-feminist mindset.

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