

# THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SHAPING FEMALE CHARACTERS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MAWAR SAFEI'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF "MAHABBAH"

*(Peranan Budaya dalam Mempengaruhi Pembentukan Karakter Wanita: Analisis Kritis terhadap Cerpen-cerpen Pilihan Mawar Safei Menurut Perspektif "Mahabbah")*

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## Abstract

Culture is an identity formed by members of a society as a reference for intellectual development and is expressed in various forms, including the literature of that society. Accordingly, this study aims to discuss the role of culture in influencing character formation portrayed in Malay literary works. Focusing on female characters, this paper explores

Mawar Safei's tendency to elevate the image of the Malay Muslim woman in her works. This inclination provides justification for the capability of female authors to portray the ideal female Malay character from their own perspective. This is an important topic to address, given previous research findings that tend to align the depiction of female Malay Muslim characters with Western thought models. These findings have sparked a paradigm of reductionism or the neglect of Malay-Islamic philosophical aspects and worldview in discussions of female characters in literary works. Thus, the current study examines the role of culture in shaping female Muslim characters using an analysis framework based on the Islamic concept of *Mahabbah* (divine love for Allah) to emphasise the author's commitment to this aspect. The discussion on Malay culture based on the concept of *Mahabbah* is subsequently focused on three of Mawar Safei's short stories—*Gempa Pulau Perca*, *Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit*, and *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi*—in the short story collection *Narasi Tanah Selandia Baru dan Kisah Lainnya* (2021). The analysis and findings conclude that the cultural elements used in shaping the female Muslim characters in Mawar Safei's works reflect the intellectual depth of a female author in guiding the intellectual development of her readers.

Keywords: Culture, character, women, *Mahabbah*, short story, Mawar Safei

### **Abstrak**

*Budaya merupakan identiti yang dibentuk oleh sesebuah anggota masyarakat sebagai satu rujukan kemajuan pemikiran dan digambarkan dalam pelbagai bentuk termasuklah sastera masyarakat tersebut. Sejarah dengan itu, kajian ini bertindak untuk membincangkan peranan budaya dalam mempengaruhi pembentukan karakter yang dipaparkan dalam karya kesusasteraan Melayu. Menerusi penilaian yang ditumpukan kepada watak wanita, makalah ini memilih untuk meneliti kecenderungan Mawar Safei yang giat mengangkat model wanita Melayu-Islam dalam karya-karyanya. Kecenderungan ini dikesan dapat memberikan justifikasi tentang kemampuan penulis wanita dalam memperagakan karakter watak wanita Melayu yang unggul menerusi penulisan pengarang wanita sendiri. Hal ini juga penting untuk dibincangkan berikutan dapatan kajian-kajian lalu yang cenderung memperakukan watak wanita Melayu-Islam signifikan dengan model pemikiran Barat. Hasil dapatan seterusnya mencetuskan paradigma "reductionisme" atau pengabaian aspek falsafah dan pandangan alam Melayu-Islam dalam perbincangan tentang watak*

wanita dalam karya. Oleh itu, kajian ini membincangkan peranan budaya dalam pembentukan karakter wanita Islam dengan menggunakan kerangka analisis berteraskan Islam, iaitu Mahabbah (cinta Illahi) bagi mengukuhkan iltizam pengarang dalam aspek berkenaan. Perbincangan aspek budaya Melayu berdasarkan konsep Mahabbah ini seterusnya difokuskan dalam tiga buah cerpen Mawar Safei, iaitu cerpen Gempa Pulau Perca, Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit serta Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi dalam Kumpulan Cerpen Narasi Tanah Selandia Baru dan Kisah Lainnya (2021). Analisis dan dapatan kajian ini seterusnya merumuskan bahawa unsur budaya dalam pembentukan karakter wanita Islam dalam karya Mawar Safei merupakan refleksi ketinggian ilmu pengarang wanita dalam membimbing kemajuan pemikiran khalayak pembacanya.

*Kata kunci: Budaya, watak, wanita, Mahabbah, cerpen, Mawar Safie*

## INTRODUCTION

The discussion of female characters in literary works generally invites a broader discourse for a new study in Malay literature. Such a discourse, which encompasses various aspects of life, is done in tandem with setting a new benchmark in keeping with the modernity of female characters. However, the modernity derived from the study of female characters somewhat leans towards the application of the Western approach, and its framework was found to dominate studies that elevate the dignity of female characters, including that of the female Malay. According to Abdul Rahman Embong (2003), the understanding of modernity is generally directed towards the notion that the only way towards progress and modernisation is by embracing Western materialism and civilisation. However, this act of glorifying Western idealism ultimately creates a flawed understanding of the identity of Muslim women as portrayed in Malay literature. In actuality, most writers, especially Muslim women writers, are highly creative in elevating the beauty of culture as a reflection of the high dignity of female Malay characters in their works.

The above scenario can be seen through three polemics that dominate the study of female characters in Malay literature. First, the focus is on the paradigm of reductionism or neglect of Malay-Islamic aspects of philosophy and worldview. Second, the rejection and dispute made by local critics on the application of Western theory, especially the theory of feminism as a framework for the study of female characters in Malay literature. Third, the

unjustified dismissal of the aspirations of female characters regarding the aspirations of female characters in the works of female writers themselves. These three polemics clearly show the disorganisation that occurs in the study of the female Malay characters based on the Western framework. The tendency to apply Western theory and approach consequently creates identity disorder for the Islamic female characters because the demands of the feminist ideology in itself fundamentally does not favour the high dignity of Islamic Malay women. According to Zalila Sharif (2004:27), feminism is an idea that raises the element of equal rights between genders and this foundation clearly produces findings that contradict the identity of Malay women themselves. In addition, the selection of Western theory as a tool to study female characters can also be connected to evolutionist philosophy, which considers Western civilisation to be superior and nobler compared to Eastern civilisations (Rahimin Affandi et al., 2012:3). This refers to the act of applying the Western approach without taking into account the aspects of religion, philosophy and worldview that are held by the Malays and Islam. Such studies also create alienation in the Malay literary tradition by portraying the image of Muslim women in Malay literary works to be vague. As stated by al-Attas (1972:63), the nature and essence of Malay civilisation and culture is the nature and essence of Islam. Therefore, these aspects cannot be separated in a pure scientific conception.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Female Characters from a Dominant Perspective**

In general, several studies have been undertaken on female characters in Malay literature. However, there are two types of finding that dominate the discussion in this context. The first is study findings that acknowledge the contribution and suitability of Western theory. The second is study findings that dispute the suitability of the Western framework and display efforts to link the discussion with Islamic principles. Therefore, the current study will observe the findings of previous studies in these two clusters in order to obtain understanding and content that will be discussed alongside the findings of this study.

For the first cluster, namely the study findings that recognise the contributions and suitability of the theory of feminism in elevating the position of Malay women in literary works, one study that highlighted

this discourse was Norhayati Ab. Rahman's (2012) which examined the characteristics of women-centeredness. The focus of women-centeredness in this paper referred to the aspects of women's own experiences, voices, desires, insights, languages, and cultures. It examined Nisah Haron's novel entitled *Lentera Mustika* (2009) based on the five principles of Cheri Register's feminist theory. These principles are the texts that serve as a forum for women to help achieve culturism and androgyny, to provide role models, to promote sisterhood, and to augment awareness to the people. These five principles led to the finding that *Lentera Mustika* is a feminism-based literary work. Norhayati Ab. Rahman formulated that the feminist approach succeeded in elevating the dignity of the position of women in *Lentera Mustika* in various aspects. Although this paper sought to connect the aspects of knowledge in the principles applied, the examination of the dignity of Malay-Muslim women was limited only to the issues of alimony, hibah (gift), and inheritance. Norhayati Ab. Rahman's paper is considered significant to the current study as it opens up an understanding of the dignity of female characters according to Western perception, which is an aspect that is discussed in the analysis section.

On a similar note, Ida Roziana Abdullah and Abdul Halim Ali's (2019) paper discussed the internal and external characteristics of Malay-Muslim female characters in Aminah Mokhtar's prose. This paper also gave rise to a discussion based on the combined concepts of gynocriticism and the position of women in Islam by Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The external characteristics examined involved elements of personality, piety, and culture based on Elaine Showalter's concept of feminism. Meanwhile, the internal characteristics involved elements of personality, piety, psychology, noble values, and spirituality based on the concept of women in Islam by Yusuf al-Qaradawi. This paper concluded that the female characters in the short story *Akar Cinta* embody the elements contained in the concept of developed generation. In addition, this paper also emphasised that the concept of Talbiah Feminism is able to totally reject the influence of Western feminism in the study of Malay literary works. With this, the study of female characters in Malay literary works within the concept of Talbiah Feminism does not ignore the element of *tauhid* as the main cornerstone when discussing the characteristics of Malay Muslim women and Malay women of faith. However, the conceptual framework of this paper is seen as less robust when it also refuted the basic concept of gynocriticism that was used as it did not reflect the norms of Malay-Muslim community living.

Ida Roziana and Abdul Halim's paper is considered significant within the parameters of the current study as it opens up an understanding of the characteristics and position of Malay-Muslim women, an aspect that is discussed in the analysis section. Table 1 shows the first cluster of studies.

**Table 1** First cluster of studies.

Researcher	Research Title	Level	Methodology	Finding(s)
Norhayati Ab. Rahman (2012)	<i>Pemartabatan Wanita dalam Lantera Mustika: Daripada Lensa Feminis</i> (The Dignification of Women in <i>Lentera Mustika</i> : From the Lens of a Feminist).	Paper	The five principles of the feminist theory by Cheri Register.	<i>Lentera Mustika</i> is a feminism-based literary work.
Ida Roziana Abdullah and Abdul Halim Ali (2019)	<i>Terapan konsep Feminisme Talbiah dalam Cerpen Akar Cinta Karya Aminah Mokhtar</i> (Application of the Talbiah Feminism Concept in Aminah Mokhtar's Short Story <i>Akar Cinta</i> ).	Paper	The combined concepts of gynocriticism and the position of women in Islam by Yusuf al-Qaradawi.	The conceptual framework of this paper is seen as less robust when it also refuted the basic concept of gynocriticism that was used as it did not reflect the norms of Malay-Muslim community living.

Next, the review turns to the second cluster of studies on female characters, namely studies that dispute the suitability of the framework of feminism and display efforts to connect studies with Islamic principles. This study pattern can be detected in Ungku Maimunah Mohd Tahir's paper (2012), which established an argument to dispute the relevance of feminism in the study of Malay literature. The discussion of this paper focused on the findings of Siti Hajar Che Man's study on the liberation of female characters from the grip of patriarchy in *Harga Sebuah Maruah*.

Through the feminist perspective, specifically the symbolism of the “mighty woman,” Siti Hajar Che Man stated that the character of Cah manages to suppress the patriarchal practices that are considered to have restricted the role of women to a limited space in life. For this reason, Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir revisited the discussions of these findings through the idea of New Literature expounded by Mohd Affandi Hassan (2019) to achieve two objectives: first, to examine the effectiveness of the framework of feminism in proving the empowerment of female characters in Malay literature; and second, to assess the extent to which the findings of this framework can be scientifically accounted for. To achieve these two objectives, this paper focused on two of Siti Hajar Che Man’s papers entitled “*Keperkasaan Wanita dalam Harga Sebuah Maruah*” (The Empowerment of Women in *Harga Sebuah Maruah*) (2009) and “*Jiwa Raga Wanita: Memahami dan Menyelami Pemikiran Azizi Hj Abdullah dalam Novel-novel Terpilih*” (Women’s Body and Soul: Understanding and Deep-Diving into the Thoughts of Azizi Hj Abdullah in Selected Novels) (2009). These papers applied the concept of New Literature by Mohd Affandi Hassan (2019) related to knowledge, stories, and the position of stories in creative works. The findings of these papers concluded that the theory of feminism is neither critical nor substantive as it acknowledges the mere manifestation of the story. This further refutes the notion of Siti Hajar Che Man’s study which stated that Azizi Hj. Abdullah had made a shift in the portrayal of female characters through his work. This paper also confirmed that the theory of feminism does not offer any scholarly advantages because the obtained findings can be responded to by ordinary reading and subsequently be easily refuted. Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir’s paper is considered significant to the purpose of the current study, which is to open up an understanding of the impropriety of examining Malay-Muslim female characters within the Western framework.

Another relevant study in this cluster is by Elizatul Nastaysah Kamarudin and Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani (2017), which sought to criticise the results of the analysis of female characters in Hamzah Husin’s works based on the framework of feminism. In addition, their paper was also undertaken to provide a new benchmark for the study of female characters in Malay literature for an analysis framework based on Islam. As such, the discussion of this paper served two objectives, namely analysing the character of Fatimah in the works of Hamzah Husin and then summarising its manifestations within the framework of an Islamic-based analysis. Two

short stories by Hamzah Husin were chosen as the study material, namely *Perempuan Gusti* (1951) and *Fatimah Kahwin* (1951). This paper also utilised the concept of New Literature by adopting the Taklif principle by Mohd Affandi Hassan (2019). Through three philosophies derived from the Taklif principle—namely the Factuality of Man, the Factuality of Knowledge and Charity, and the Factuality and Function of Literature—this study proved that the female characters in the aforementioned short stories are contradictory to Islamic principles. The three aspects that contradicted Islamic principles are physical appearance, behaviour, and perceptions of the protagonist. The presentation of Fatimah’s character as a modern woman with an indecent appearance, who is rough and uncompliant of the boundaries of social interactions, and whose presence is a manifestation of liberation from patriarchy were refuted as the appearance of Malay-Muslim women within the framework of Taklif. The paper by Elizatul Nastaysah Kamarudin and Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani is considered significant to the current study as it opens up an understanding of the characteristics and position of Malay-Muslim women in literary works. Table 2 features the second cluster of studies.

## METHODOLOGY

The current study applied the methods of library research and textual analysis. Library research was conducted to review past studies on female characters in Malay literature. Therefore, the current study examined theses, journals, papers, and book chapters related to female characters. In addition, textual analysis was also carried out to obtain data related to women in Islamic culture. The parameter of the current study focused on three short stories by Mawar Safei (hereinafter referred to as Mawar) entitled *Gempa Pulau Perca*, *Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit*, and *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi* from the anthology *Narasi Tanah Selandia Baru dan Kisah Lainnya* (2021). The selected short stories were originally published in 2014, 2014, and June 2019 respectively (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, n.d.). To describe the role of culture in the formation of female Muslim characters, the current study also connected the concept of Mahabbah (goodwill) inspired by the thoughts of Jalaluddin Rumi (hereinafter referred to as Rumi), as discussed in this section.

According to the Quran, the word *Mahabbah* is derived from the word *hubb* or *habb*, which means seed or kernel (Jalaluddin Rakhmat,



**Table 2** Second cluster of studies.

<b>Researcher</b>	<b>Research Title</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Finding(s)</b>
Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir (2012)	<i>Apabila Teori Feminis Ternyata Tidak Diperlukan (When the Theory of Feminism is Clearly Not Needed: A Case Study)</i>	Paper	Examining the effectiveness of the feminist framework in proving the empowerment of female characters in Malay literature and evaluating the extent to which findings from the feminist framework can be accounted for from a scholarly standpoint.	The theory of feminism is neither critical nor substantive as it acknowledges the mere manifestation of the story.
Elizatul Nastaysah Kamarudin and Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani (2017)	<i>Wanita Menurut Taklif: Satu Analisis Terhadap Watak Fatimah dalam Cerpen “Perempuan Gusti” dan “Fatimah Kahwin” Karya Hamzah Husin (Women According to Taklif: An Analysis of Fatimah’s Character in the Short Stories Fatimah Kahwin)</i>	Paper	Benefiting from the idea of New Literature by adopting the three philosophies within the Taklif principle by Mohd Affendi Hassan, namely the Factuality of Man, the Factuality of Knowledge and Charity, and the Factuality and Function of Literature.	The female characters in the short stories are proven to have contradicted Islamic principles based on three aspects—the physical appearance, behaviour, and perceptions of the protagonist character portrayed.

2008:22). Throughout the Quran, *habba* is mentioned seven times, namely in *Surah al-An'am* (6:95, 99), *Surah Yasin* (36:33), *Surah al-Naba'* (78:15), and *Surah 'Abasa* (80:27). In these seven verses, Allah SWT reminds mankind that the various grains that grow on earth are created for human needs. This can be seen in *Surah al-An'am* (6:95), as follows:

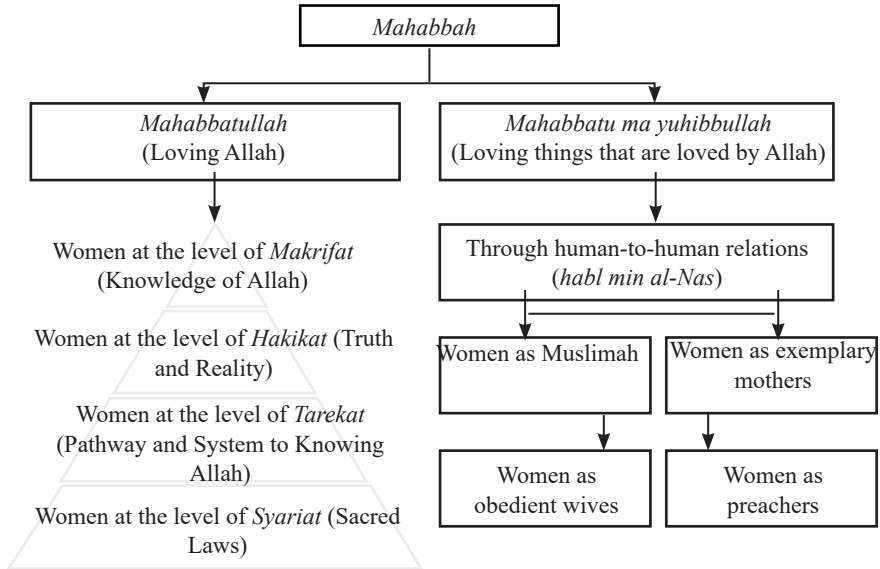
“*Sesungguhnya, Allah yang menumbuhkan butir (habb) (padi-padi) dan biji (nawa) (kurma). Dia mengeluarkan yang hidup daripada yang mati dan mengeluarkan yang mati daripada yang hidup. Itu adalah (kekuasaan) Allah, maka mengapa kamu masih berpaling?*”

[“Indeed, it is Allah who grows grains (kernels) and seeds (dates). He brings out the living from the dead and brings out the dead from the living. It is (the power of) Allah, so why are you still turning away?”]

Furthermore, these creations are reminders to mankind of the manifestation of Allah SWT’s majesty and power. The aim from this reminder is for mankind to be made aware of the nature of His love and power, which leads to gratitude (Akademi Pengajian Islam Universiti Malaya, 2011:179). The nature of Allah SWT’s love and power can then be traced to at least three verses that connotes *habbah* in the same meaning, namely Verse 261 in *Surah al-Baqarah*, Verse 6 in *Surah al-An'am*, and Verse 47 in *Surah al-Anbiya'*. In Verse 261 of *Surah al-Baqarah*, for example, *habbah* refers to the promised reward as a repayment for those who do good.

To obtain findings that are in line with this connotation of *Mahabbah*, the current study selected the concept of *Mahabbah* formulated by Rumi, which is highlighted in the translated edition of *Fihi Ma Fihi*, as a framework that is consistent with the meaning and connotation of divine love. In *Fihi Ma Fihi*, Rumi rationally describes *Mahabbah* as divine love. This rationale is referred to as a comparison of *Mahabbah* promoted by earlier scholars that was based solely on the absoluteness of the servant’s love for his God (Atmonadi, 2018:188). However, Rumi’s concept of divine love is more rational and universal because it involves all elements in the universe (M. Maulana Marsudi, 2017:65). According to him, every process that occurs in life is based on love. Thus, the expression of love is an expression of the phrases *Bismillah* and *al-Fatihah*, which represent the process of creation of the universe and the seven hierarchies of *maujud* (existence) of all of Allah SWT’s creatures. According to Rumi, the first thing created by Allah SWT was love (*Bismillah*). In his *Mahabbah* concept, Rumi attributes his

concept of love to two foundations, namely reason and the power of love (M. Maulana Marsudi, 2017:65). Based on this observation, Rumi’s two principles of the manifestation of divine love are identified as *Mahabbatullah* (loving Allah) and *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah* (loving the things loved by Allah) as shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1** Jalaluddin Rumi’s Concept of *Mahabbah*.

**Source:** Jalaluddin Rumi. (2019). *Fihi Ma Fihi – Translated Edition*.

However, in researching the cultural elements that shape the female characters in the works of Mawar, the discourse of the current study uses the second principle, namely *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah* (loving things that are loved by Allah), which refers to the desire to love everything that Allah SWT loves. Rumi explains in *Fihi Ma Fihi* that a believer who has perfect faith will do everything that Allah SWT does (Jalaluddin Rumi, 2019:249). God is true beauty and, therefore, one who loves beauty also loves his God (Syamsul Ma’arif, 2017:65). In *Fihi Ma Fihi* (Clause 9), Rumi affirms this principle by stating that the main axis of *Mahabbah* is God, but the tendency of the human soul towards various other forms of desire is also classified as a reflection of man’s love for his God (Jalaluddin Rumi, 2019:84):

Every form of strong desire, inclination, love, and affection that dwells in man towards all things – father, mother, lover, sky, earth, gardens, palace, knowledge, work, food, drink – is a form of strong love and desire for God.

Based on the above statement, it can be explained that every process that occurs in life is based on love. Rumi perceives *Mahabbah* in a universal context by taking into account various aspects of human life as a reflection of divine love (M. Maulana Marsudi, 2017:65). Thus, it is clear that in this second principle, Rumi utilises intermediaries, namely man's love for Allah SWT's creatures (Assya Octafany, 2020: 224). Therefore, to obtain structured findings based on this principle, the current study elected to discuss female characters based on aspects of human-to-human relations (*habl min al-Nas*). *Habl min al-Nas* is the second order in the pattern of relations that was postulated in Islam. The essence of human relations is stated in the following Verse 3 of *Surah al-Imran* (3:112):

“*Mereka itu ditimpa kehinaan di mana mereka berada, kecuali (kalau berpegang) dengan tali Allah (janji-Nya) dan tali manusia (perdamaian)*”.

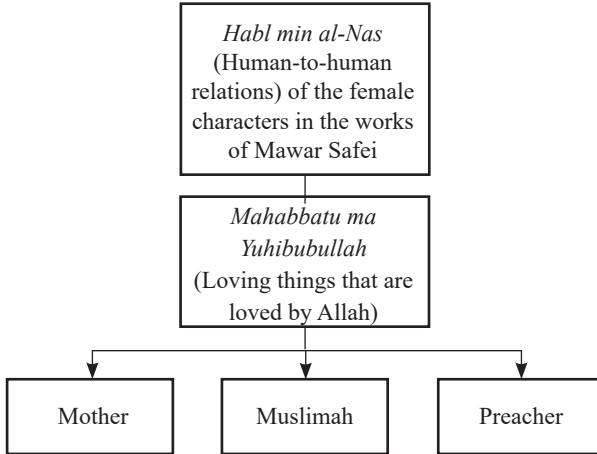
[“They are afflicted with disgrace wherever they are, except (if they hold on to) the rope of Allah (His promises) and the rope of man (peace)”].

The above verse clearly calls on mankind to maintain their relationship with Allah SWT (*habl min Allah*) and with each other (*habl min al-Nas*). In this connection, self-love is the beginning of the formation of human values in a human to create a sense of love for other humans (Muhammad Uthman Najati, 2005:79). Thus, the determination of faith is needed to balance self-love and love for others in order to harmonise this relationship as well as to create solidarity within society. This is proposed by Rumi in *Fihi Ma Fihi* (2019:38):

A person must cleanse the special character in himself from all goals and ambitions. He must ask a friend for help in religious matters. Religion is how one knows a friend.

In the above Clause 2, Rumi advises that one should first strive to love oneself in order to obtain divine love. This is also reiterated in Clause 61, which states that love is to seek out Allah SWT and someone who does not have it should be in the company of one who has it (Jalaluddin Rumi, 2019:404). The above quote also clearly confirms that the process of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah* (loving things loved by Allah) encompasses human-to-human relations so that all the good that one does will be exemplary and emulated. Therefore, people who achieve this status are those who reflect noble traits, such as obeying all of Allah SWT's

ZARIAT ABDUL RANI AND PABIYAH HAJIMAMING@PABIYAH TOKLUBOK commands, propagating goodness, avoiding evil, and striving in His path (Rushdi Ramli, 2010:62). The principles of *Mahabbatu Ma Yuhibullah* by Jalaluddin Rumi is as shown in Figure 2:



**Figure 2** Principles of *Mahabbatu Ma Yuhibullah*.

**Source:** Jalaluddin Rumi. (2019). *Fihi Ma Fihi – Translated Edition*.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Islam as a Basis for the Formation of Culture

Malay-Islamic culture was developed over hundreds of years and has since been embedded in various aspects, including language, literature, art, thought, and norms of life (Baharuddin H. Puteh & Mohamad Nasli H. Omar, 2014). Therefore, there should be no isolation in discussing the universality and beauty of Islam through the cultural identity of the Malays. Al-Attas (1972:63) opined that discussions of the characteristics, nature, and culture of Malay civilisation should be combined with that of the characteristics and nature of Islam itself.

The same applies with the short stories of Mawar, in which the power of Islam is portrayed as an important element that shapes the attitudes and thinking of Malay women. The role of women portrayed by Mawar in her short stories is integrated with a culture that is synonymous with the high level of dignity of Malay women, such as the culture of a mother caring for her children (educator), the culture of women facing the challenges of life (Muslimah), and the culture of women propagating goodness (preacher).

## Reflection on Islamic Spirituality in the Works of Mawar Safei

The selection of Mawar's short stories in the current study was made in consideration of her inclination to produce works with Islamic spiritual themes. Her stance on Islamic spirituality as the basis of her narrative can be proven in her notes when she accepted the S.E.A Write Award in 2018, as quoted below (Mawar Safei, 2020:24):

*Penciptaan karya kreatif yang saya jalani lebih 20 tahun ini sebenarnya menumbuhkan kepercayaan saya terhadap asal kejadian saya. Ia sangat mengasuh saya untuk selalu dengan penuh kerendahan hati mengakui tidak ada daya kita sebagai manusia selain Dia. Ia mengajak hati dan fikiran saya untuk selalu mengakui kebesaran Allah. Maka dengan seruan itu juga saya akui setiap kelemahan saya dalam berkarya walau sebaiknya cuba mengadun yang bermanfaat antara baris-barisnya untuk yang sempat membaca.*

[The production of this creative work that I have lived for more than 20 years nurtured my belief in the origin of my being. It is very nurturing for me to always humbly acknowledge our powerlessness as humans before Him. It invited my heart and mind to always acknowledge the greatness of God. So, with that I also realise each of my weaknesses in my works although I should try to blend the beneficial within the lines for those who have the time to read].

Mawar's stance is in line with the main pillar of the Islamic creative process, which leads to the Essential Truth. This is common in the journey of the human soul that is so often displayed in literary works, from Western alienation (occidental exile) to the Eastern region (original enlightenment) (Salleh Yaapar, 2002:75). Therefore, it is demanded of Malay literature researchers to place the right justification when discussing an author's vision in a work, even though its storytelling is hovered in the present context of modernity. As suggested by Jelani Harun (2004:28), a work that incorporates Islamic values in a new atmosphere and picture should be accepted and assessed accordingly.

Another opinion that acknowledged the authorship of Mawar in the context of Islamic spirituality is that of Hashim Ismail (2020:38):

NUR LAILATUL AKMA ZAINAL ABIDIN, KAMARIAH KAMARUDIN, MOHD.

ZARIAT ABDUL RANI AND PABIYAH HAJIMAMING@PABIYAH TOKLUBOK

*Karya Mawar bukan sahaja ada nilai-nilai murni dakwah, malah Mawar merupakan seorang pengarang wanita yang berani menerapkan elemen sufi (tasawuf), memperkatakan tentang persoalan cinta (Mahabbah) kepada Pencipta. Adanya perkaitan dengan Jalaluddin Rumi yang turut mengagumi cinta. Ini yang ditonjolkan dalam karya-karya mutakhir Mawar Safei. Mengolah perjalanan sufi dan berani meneroka dunia sufi Jalaluddin Rumi. Mawar mampu mengaitkannya dengan cinta Tuhan.*

[Not only does Mawar's work have the noble values of dakwah, but Mawar is a female author who dares to apply elements of Sufi (Sufiism) on the question of love (*Mahabbah*) for the Creator. There is a relationship with Jalaluddin Rumi who also admired love. This is clearly presented in the final works of Mawar Safei, exploring the journey of Sufiism and with the courage to explore the world of Jalaluddin Rumi's Sufiism. Mawar was able to relate it to God's love].

In addition, Sobariah Baharom (2020:59) also acknowledged the attachment of Islamic spiritual elements in Mawar's work when negating the influence of feminism in the narrative of the female character "I" in *Seribu Pohon Sukma Seribu Jalan Menuju Cinta*. In the said short story, "I" admires the character of Buraq and criticises the personalities of several men for being disrespectful towards women. However, Mawar asserted that it was a generalisation and not intended to antagonise all men (Sobariah Baharom, 2020: 59). In addition, Mawar was found to apply elements of Sufiism by capitalising on Rumi's poetry in *Diwan Syamsi Tabriz*. Through Sufi love poems, Mawar's short story is seen as an unconventional work of prose. The resulting religious idea presents a lesson about seeking Allah SWT's love in order to attain perfection in life.

Thus, the discussion of the current study also serves to prove Mawar's inclinations within the context of Islamic spirituality through the selected short stories by applying the second principle in the concept of *Mahabbah*, that is, *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah*. Rumi emphasised that the tendency of the human soul towards various other forms of desire is also classified as a reflection of man's love for his God (Jalaluddin Rumi, 2019:84):

*Setiap bentuk keinginan kuat, kecenderungan, cinta, dan kasih sayang yang bersemayam dalam diri manusia terhadap segala sesuatu – ayah, ibu, kekasih, langit, bumi, taman-taman, istana, ilmu, pekerjaan, makanan, minuman – merupakan bentuk cinta dan keinginan yang kuat kepada Tuhan.*

[Every form of strong desire, inclination, love, and affection that dwells in man towards all things – father, mother, lover, sky, earth, gardens, palace, science, work, food, drink – is a form of strong love and desire for God].

Based on the above statement, it can be explained that every process that occurs in life is based on love. That love is directed to man's love for Allah SWT, and this is demonstrated by Mawar through the characters in her literary works. This depiction parallels with what is detailed by Rumi (2019: 249) in Clause 31, whereby a believer whose faith is complete will do everything that is decreed by Allah SWT. Such can also be seen in Clause 48 (*Jalaluddin Rumi*, 2019:336):

*Ketika Allah mencintai seorang hamba, Dia akan mengujinya. Bila hamba bersabar, Allah akan memilihnya, dan bila hamba bersyukur, Allah akan membuatnya menjadi orang terpilih. Karena syukur ubat yang mengubah kekerasan menjadi kelembutan. Manusia seperti itulah yang dipilih Allah.*

[When God loves a servant, He will put him to the test. If he is patient, Allah will choose him, and if he is grateful, Allah will make him the chosen one. Because gratitude is an ointment that turns hardness into tenderness. Such is a man that is chosen by Allah].

The above clause clearly expresses that patience and gratitude are among the traits beloved by Allah SWT. Therefore, those who have these traits are representations of humans who love the things that Allah SWT loves. In this second principle, Rumi also includes intermediaries, referring to man's love for God's creatures (Assya Octafany, 2020:224). Thus, in order to obtain findings for the current study, discussions were carried out based on the concept of love between humans and other creatures through human-to-human relations (*habl min al-Nas*).

The verse in *Surah al-Imran* (3:112): clearly calls on humans to maintain their relationship with Allah SWT (*habl min Allah*) and with other humans (*habl min al-Nas*). *Habl min al-Nas* is the second order in the pattern of relations that is propounded in Islam. Thus, in harmonising this relationship, the steadfastness of faith is needed in balancing self-love with love for others in order to create solidarity in society. This is also proposed by Rumi in Clause 2 of *Fihi Ma Fihi* (2019:38):



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*Seseorang harus membersihkan karakter istimewa dalam dirinya dari berbagai tujuan dan ambisi. Ia harus meminta bantuan seorang sahabat dalam urusan agama. Agama adalah bagaimana seseorang mengenal sahabat.*

[A person must cleanse the special character in him from all goals and ambitions. He must ask a friend for help in religious matters. Religion is how one knows a friend].

In the above clause, Rumi asserts that one is advised to strive to love oneself first in order to obtain divine love. This suggestion is also stated by Rumi in Clause 61, in which love is a desire to seek out Allah SWT and someone who does not have it should find companionship in one who has it (Jalaluddin Rumi, 2019: 404). The above clause also clearly confirms that in the process of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah* (loving things loved by Allah), there is human-to-human relations so that all the good that one does will be exemplified and emulated. Those who have achieved this level portray noble characteristics, such as obeying all of Allah SWT's commands, propagating goodness, avoiding sin, and striving in His path (Rushdi Ramli, 2010:62). Therefore, this reflection of personality will be highlighted in the context of the role of women as mothers, as Muslimah, and as preachers when describing the elements of Malay culture embodied by female characters in Mawar's selected short stories.

## DISCUSSION

### Culture of Women Caring for Children

Mawar's three selected short stories have the same strength in the context of a woman's role as a mother. The female characters that Mawar portrays as mothers are described as having strong faith and raising their children based on Islamic teachings. Through these characters, Mawar acknowledges that religion not only shapes the morals and ethics of a Malay women, but also serves as a reflection of strength and calmness in facing life's challenges, especially in carrying out the role of a mother. The character of "I" in *Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit* (2014a:16), for example, shows the religion not only shapes the morals and ethics of Malay women, but also serves as a reflection of strength and calmness in facing life's challenges, typical culture of a mother caring for her child:

**Table 3** *Mahabbatu ma yuhibullah* (loving things loved by Allah SWT) clauses in *Fihi Ma Fihi*.

Clause	Reference Quotes	Page
16	<p><i>Setiap orang berpaling dari sesuatu kepada sesuatu yang lain, tetapi sebenarnya yang dicari oleh semua adalah Allah.</i></p> <p>[Everyone turns from one thing to something else, but what they are all really looking for is Allah].</p>	148
29	<p><i>Kecintaanmu dan pencarianmu kepada sesuatu itu sesungguhnya demi sesuatu yang lain sampai kau mencapai puncak tujuan, yakni Allah, lalu kau mencintai Dia demi Dia semata, bukan demi selain Dia.</i></p> <p>[Your love and your search for something is really for the sake of something else until you reach the peak of the purpose, which is Allah, and then you love Him for the sake of Him alone, not for anything other than Him].</p>	243
45	<p><i>Demikian juga dengan mengingat Allah, meskipun kau tidak akan sampai pada wujud-Nya, tetapi penyebutan nama-Nya Yang Mahaluhur akan membekas pada jiwamu dan akan memberimu kebaikan yang sangat besar.</i></p> <p>[Likewise, by remembering Allah, even though you will not come to His form, but the mention of His exalted name will be imprinted in your soul and will bring you immense goodness].</p>	325
47	<p><i>Allah Taala mengkehendaki kebaikan dan keburukan, tetapi Dia hanya meridai kebaikan. Kerana itulah Dia berfirman, "Aku adakah harta terpendam, dan Aku ingin dikenal." Allah juga mengkehendaki perintah dan larangan.</i></p> <p>[Allah created good and evil, but He will only accept the good. That is the reason He said, "I have hidden treasures, and I want to be known." Allah also wishes for there to be commandments and prohibitions].</p>	331
49	<p><i>Rasulullah SAW bersabda: "Barang siapa menjadikan seluruh keinginannya menjadi satu keinginan saja (yaitu akhirat) maka Allah akan mencukupkan seluruh keinginannya yang lain."</i></p> <p>[The Prophet Muhammad said: "Whomever makes all his desires into only one desire (i.e. the Hereafter), then Allah will fulfill all of his other desires"].</p>	342

*Anak saya sangat menanti-nanti azan fajar yang memanggil. Bahagianya dia mahu menyertai ayahnya ke surau kecil kami saat dingin pagi. Saya tahu, dia akan mendongak mencari bintang dan saya selalu mahu dalam hatinya mengenang kebesaran Pencipta langit yang indah itu.*

[My son [emphasis added] is eagerly awaiting the call of the dawn. He is happy to join his father to our little surau in the morning cold. I know, he will look up to find the stars and *I always want him to remember in his heart the greatness of the Creator* [emphasis added] of the beautiful sky].

The desire and hopes harboured by “me” as a mother for her child to always glorify the greatness of Allah SWT is a reflection of Malay culture that parallels the demands of Islam in the process of educating children. Al-Hashimi (2006:301) asserted that the responsibility of a mother in educating and shaping the personality of children is greater than that of the father. This echoes the words of Allah SWT in *Surah al-Tahrir* (66:6):

*“Hai orang-orang yang beriman, peliharalah dirimu dan keluargamu dari api neraka, yang bahan bakarnya adalah manusia dan batu”.*

[“O you who have faith, save yourselves and your families from the flames of hell, which fuel will be people and stones”].

Thus, the desire portrayed by the character of “me” in *Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit* can be traced to the culture of Malay women raising children, especially with regard to religious upbringing. The culture of a mother as a child educator is also reflected in the character “I” in *Gempa Pulau Perca* (2014b:105):

*Bukankah pernah bonda memberitahu saya, bercakap dengan Allah, mengadu kepada Allah, kerana Allah adalah sebaik pendengar. Allah sebaik-baik pembantu dan sebaik-baik pelindung saat tiada siapa yang mahu mengerti. Cukuplah hanya Allah!*

[Did you not tell me [emphasis added] to talk to Allah, lament to Allah, as Allah is the best of listeners? Allah is the best assistance and the best protector when no one is willing to understand. Allah is sufficient!]

The surrender of the character “I” to Allah SWT was developed by Mawar through the upbringing by a mother, as connotated in the phrase, “did you (mother) not tell me.” This mother’s advice is a form of upbringing that is demanded in Islam, as evident in *Surah al-Ahqaf* (46:15): “We command mankind to be kind to their parents.” The mother’s advice is seen to have succeeded in shaping the personality of her daughter in carrying out her daily routine. Through the side character of Nurfa that Mawar developed in the same short story, the power of a mother’s upbringing is elevated through the messages revealed by Nurfa, in which she becomes a strong woman, living life as an orphan after her mother’s death. The perseverance seen in Nurfa’s character is built on the upbringing and examples handed down by her late mother.

Although this style of storytelling is excessively in favour of the strength of the female character, the character of Nurfa is not portrayed by Mawar as being opposed to men. On the contrary, Nurfa is shown to have respect and love for her father. Mawar’s creativity is pointed out by Sobariah Baharom (2020:59) as having a relevant balance and not antagonising men. This reference is clearly proven through the actions of Nurfa’s character as a daughter who also prays for her father. This depiction is clearly voiced by Mawar in the following dialogue of Nurfa (*Gempa Pulau Perca*, 2014b:106):

*Sementara ayah masih tidak dapat menerima apa yang terjadi, saya tumbuh sebagai anak yang diasuh oleh takdir untuk reda. **Saya belajar erti sabar dan solat untuk berhadapan dengan ayah** dan bayangan emak yang ditimpa gempa. Saya kian kenal betapa Pengasihnya Allah, mencipta takdir yang melihat sendiri emak ditelan gempa di Pulau Perca adalah saya; dan bukan ayah. Allah Maha Tahu saya anak kecil yang kuat menerima takdir ini dan sebaliknya bukan ayah yang cukup dewasa.*

[While Father was still unable to accept what had happened, I grew up as a child who was trained by fate to be accepting. *I learned the meaning of patience and prayer to deal with my father* [emphasis added] and the vision of my mother being hit by the earthquake. I gradually learnt how loving Allah is, who created a destiny where the person who witnessed my mother being devoured by the earthquake on Perca Island was me and not my father. Allah knew that I was a little child who was strong enough to accept this fate and not my adult father].

Based on the narrative of Nurfa's character in *Gempa Pulau Perca*, it is discovered that Mawar places the status of a father as an individual who warrants respect and love, no matter the circumstances. Mawar gives Nurfa's character the value of perseverance, as nurtured by her late mother, which satisfies the three categories of female status in Islam, namely a mother, wife, and daughter (Zeenath, 1995:7). This was clearly stated by Rumi in the process of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah* (loving things that are loved by Allah), whereby humans who nurture their relationship with Allah SWT (*habl min Allah*) will exhibit exemplary traits in relationships with other humans (*habl min al-Nas*). This conceptual depiction can clearly be connected to the upbringing and lessons garnered from the character of "mother" to the formation of human values in her children, as presented by Mawar.

### Culture of Women Facing Challenges in Life

In spirit, mankind loves Allah SWT, seeks Him, and worships Him. All human hope rests upon Him and recognises that He has absolute power (*Fihi Ma Fihi*, 2019: 197). In this regard, the spiritual journey of the character "I" in *Gempa Pulau Perca* clearly gives a reflection of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah*. This short story is the voice of Mawar who, as a woman, embedded a message of self-love and the benefit of submitting to the commands of Allah SWT. It lingers on the spiritual adventure of the character "I", as envisioned by Mawar, in portraying the personality of a Muslim woman (*Gempa Pulau Perca*, 2014b:106):

*Saya berusaha untuk luruskan hati sepertimana saya mahu selalu luruskan sujud dan ketundukan saya kepada Allah. Ya, di baris bibir saya menggetarkan ayat **tunjukkanlah kami jalan yang lurus**, saya akan dilintasi permohonan dia yang diiringi sebak dan keharuan.*

[I strive to straighten my heart as I have always strived to straighten my prostration and submission to Allah. Yes, my lips quiver upon the verse *show us the straight path* [emphasis added], I will cross his supplication accompanied by tears and emotion].

Based on the above excerpt, it can be observed that Mawar's cultivation of this divine message is done through the female character "I" who submits to Allah SWT. Within the confines of the meaning of submission, the character "I" begins to recognise the essence of *rahmah* (grace) of

Allah SWT as a manifestation of His love. This is evident in the following excerpt from *Gempa Pulau Perca* (2014b:106):

*Rahmanya Allah, melalui jalan petaka ini, saya tahu sebenarnya makna solat. Ini bukan sahaja tentang 13 rukun, lebih daripada itu ia merupakan ruang yang semakin saya cinta. Ya, saya mencintai solat kerana ia menjadi tempat pengaduan. Solat menjadi kesempatan yang saya nanti-nantikan untuk bercakap sendiri dengan Allah.*

[By the grace of Allah, through this path of disaster, I know the true meaning of prayer. This is not just about the 13 pillars. Beyond that it is a space that I grow to love more and more. Yes, I love prayer because it becomes a place of lament. Prayers became an opportunity that I look forward to talking personally to Allah].

The excerpt above indicates Mawar's admission that worship not only drives people towards the path of goodness accepted by Allah SWT, but also lends the power of reason in interpreting all of His manifestations through the character "I". In addition, the awareness of divine love within the character "I" conforms to Mawar's vision of developing the ultimate Muslim woman in her literary works. The character "I" in this short story is her female voice on the importance of being the best woman in Islam. This is also in line with the concept of *Mahabbah* according to Rumi (2012: 86) as a resonance of human love that is necessary in the quest for seeking Allah SWT.

Mawar's influence in galvanising the role of Muslim women in the narrative of the character "I" representing the voice of women in *Gempa Pulau Perca* bears a series of similarities with *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi*. This short story tells the journey of a child who is nurtured through his mother's spiritual adventure. The journey of the character "I" is not only crafted into stories that portray the personality of Muslim women, but also to guide the human soul in recognising the power of Allah SWT.

At the end of *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi*, Mawar projects the authority of her female character "I" in conveying this message of divine love by taking example from the story of Ashabul Kahfi. This ending is seen as effective in leading the reader to the connotation of divine love when the character "I" finally concedes that eternal love is love for Allah SWT (*Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi*, 2019:169):

*Gua yang selama ini saya geruni tiba-tiba disinilah ia menjadi ruang kesendirian. Ruang untuk saya menaakul dan mahu memahami perjalanan siang kami yang meredah sangsi, kecurangan, dungu atau sahaja kegundahan antara lapis perbukitan dengan harapan. Dan ketika saya memerlukan pautan, saya tidak dapat mencari tangan umi. Dada saya sudah penuh, dan air mata saya tidak tertahan lagi untuk memindahkan kerinduan saya terhadap umi dan tangannya. Doa yang sama saat pemuda-pemuda **al-Kahf** mencari teduhan di dalam gua, ya Tuhan kami, berikanlah rahmat kepada kami dari sisi-Mu dan sempurnakanlah bagi kami petunjuk yang lurus dalam urusan kami.*

[The cave I had been living in suddenly became a space of solitude. A space for me to reason and want to understand our journey during the day that braved through suspicion, unfaithfulness, stupidity or mere anxiety between layers of hills with hope. And when I needed something to hold on to, I couldn't find Mother's hand. My chest was full, and my tears could no longer be held back to abstain my longing for Mother and her hands. The same prayer when the youths of *al-Kahf* [emphasis added] sought shade in the cave, O our Lord, grant us mercy from Thy presence and deliver us the right guidance in our affairs].

The above excerpt from *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi* clearly shows the seriousness and creativity of Mawar as an author channelling the concept of *Mahabbah* that is in line with the need to shape the personality of Muslim women facing challenges in life. This greatness can be seen in the way Mawar meticulously created the character of "I" to convey this message of divine love as demanded in Islam. The development of the female character in the context of divine love is also in line with the responsibility of an author who uses their writing talent in trying to usher people towards the path of Allah SWT.

The relationship and submission of the character "I" to Allah SWT demonstrates that a Muslim woman should not be arrogant when faced with challenges in life. The character of "I" was also developed by Mawar as a woman who must fortify her relationship with Allah SWT as the foundation of her life in this world and the hereafter, as quoted in *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi* (2019:167):

*Jangan pernah rasa diri hebat, pesan umi. Itu naluri orang sombong. Jika bukan belas kasihan Allah dengan kurnia ini, tidak mungkin kita*

*dapat datang, mendapatkan sumbangan, meyakini sahabat lain, dan segala keperihan fisik untuk sampai sejauh ini. Ketaatan ini bukan hasil usaha diri sendiri.*

[Don't ever feel that you are great, advised Mother. That's the nature of an arrogant person. If it were not for God's mercy, there is no way we could have arrived, received contributions, obtained the trust from other friends, and all the physical pain to get this far. This obedience is not the outcome of your own efforts].

The discussion proceeds with the short story *Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit*. Here, the narrative of the character "I" is used as a symbol of the culture that supports women who face challenges in life upon the death of their husbands. Mawar conscientiously portrays the character of "I" as being graceful in displaying the culture of Muslim women when emotionally helping other women facing difficulties in life. Umar's mother, who has lost her husband and is having to deal with her son's emotional conflict, is presented by Mawar as a typical situation in the life of a single mother. Therefore, the culture that Mawar portrays through the character of "I" begins with that of praying for the good of Umar's mother, being a good listener, and having trust in the plans of Allah SWT. This is illustrated by Mawar in the following passage from *Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit* (2014a:14):

*Saya mahu saja menasihatkan ibu Umar, **bersabarlah!** Saya mahu dia juga bersyukur dikurniakan seorang Umar. Saya sangat sedar betapa keringnya dasar hati ketika dia menuturkan watak lelaki dalam skrip Umar dapat bercakap dengan roh ayahnya. Saya tahu kedua-dua mereka, terutama Umar sangat merindui tangan ayahnya yang baru meninggalkan mereka dua tahun lalu.*

[I just want to advise Umar's mother, *be patient!* [emphasis added] I want her to also be grateful for the gift in the form of Umar. I was well aware of how obstinate he was when he spoke of the male character in Umar's script of being able to speak to his father's spirit. I know both of them, especially Umar who misses the hands of his father who had just left them two years ago].

In Clause 31 of *Fihri Ma Fihri*, Rumi further elaborated on this principle by explaining that a believer who has completely perfected his faith will



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*Ketika Allah mencintai seorang hamba, Dia akan mengujinya. Bila hamba bersabar, Allah akan memilihnya, dan bila hamba bersyukur, Allah akan membuatnya menjadi orang terpilih. Karena syukur ubat yang mengubah kekerasan menjadi kelembutan. Manusia seperti itulah yang dipilih Allah.*

[When God loves a believer, He will put him to the test. If he is patient, Allah will choose him, and if he is grateful, Allah will make him a chosen one. Because gratitude is an ointment that turns hardness into tenderness. Such is a man that God chooses].

The above clause clearly exemplifies that patience and gratitude are traits that are favoured by Allah SWT. This is also affirmed by Sefik Can (2009:159) an authority on Rumi's thoughts:

There is no doubt that as a result of knowing God, finding him in our hearts through the utmost efforts and long contemplations, prayers, good deeds and helping others, one will be able, even at the lowest level, to feel the secrets of existence.

The above quote in its entirety means that people who love Allah SWT will strive to carry out various good deeds. Hence, this principle is also relevant in the context of Islamic writing. The idea of reflecting human perfection was described by Shahnun Ahmad as a level that covers a comprehensive scope (1983:5). However, the scope is based on the existence and role of humans as servants and caliphs of Allah SWT, as stipulated in the divine revelations. This idea was also mentioned by Rahimah A. Hamid (2000:37) as a foundation of theocentricity, namely a system of belief that centres on the existence of the Divine One. Therefore, the mechanism for achieving this perfection must be related to the experiences brought by the female characters discussed thus far because, according to Rumi's principle of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibullah* (loving things loved by Allah), a believer who loves beauty also loves his God. This is similar to how Mawar creatively details the beauty of the Muslim woman's personality through her female characters in portraying the manifestation of Allah SWT's love as a form of strength when faced with challenges in life.

## Culture of Women Delivering Knowledge and Goodness to the Community

*Tarikat* carries the literal meaning of a path, journey, norm, custom, condition, school, system, *sunnah*, and so on. However, the most dominant definition of *tarikat* is “path” (Jahid Sidek, 1997:5). This can be further explained through the words of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), quoted from *Empat Puluh Hadis Kelebihan Ulama* (KH. Muhammad Syukeri Unus Al-Banjari, 2004:14), “Whoever travels down a path (Allah) to find knowledge, Allah makes easy for him a path to heaven” on this Hadith, it is clear that *tarikat* means the path to humans obtaining knowledge. In this context, Rumi (2019:165) also stated that the Quran is a repository of Allah SWT’s knowledge, and reading it with knowledge and the intention to garner meaning will lead people to His path:

*Gudang harta karun Tuhan sangat banyak. Ilmu Allah sangat banyak. Jika seseorang membaca al-Quran dengan ilmu, kenapa mesti menolak Al-Quran lainnya?*

[God’s treasure house is aplenty. God’s knowledge is abundant. If one reads the Quran with knowledge, why should one reject the Quran?]

Therefore, to achieve a high position, Muslims should place themselves under the protection of the Quran as often as possible with humility and willingness to understand its meaning (al-Hasyimi, 1999:34). Those who read, learn, or teach the Quran will gain multitudes of advantages and rewards from Allah SWT, as divined in *Surah al-Isra* (17:9):

*“Sesungguhnya al-Quran ini menunjukkan ke jalan yang paling lurus dan memberi berita gembira kepada orang mukmin yang mengerjakan amal soleh bahawa bagi mereka ganjaran yang besar”.*

[“Verily, this Quran guides to the path which is most just and right and gives glad tidings to the believers who do deeds of righteousness, that they shall have a great reward”].

The verse above clearly proves that the Quran is a source of guidance for mankind to the path of Allah SWT. *Da’wah*, or Islamic proselytism, through Quranic stories and lessons is seen to dominate the three selected short stories. This can be highlighted in the following excerpt from *Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit* (2014a:13):

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*Perempuan ini sekonyong-konyong disedarkan dengan dua pemberi nasihat daripada sabda Rasulullah, yang berbicara dan yang diam. Pemberi nasihat yang berbicara itu adalah **al-Quran** dan pemberi nasihat yang diam itu adalah kematian.*

[This woman was suddenly awakened by two advisors from the words of the Prophet, one who speaks and one who doesn't. The one who speaks is the *Quran*, [emphasis added] and the one who is silent is death].

The above quote clearly shows the integrity of the female characters that Mawar developed in order to educate her readers to love the Quran as mankind's path to divine love. In this regard, al-Hasyimi (2010:114) also emphasised that Muslim women must strive to increase their obedience, faith, and piety through the Quran.

As the author, Mawar presents the greatness of the Quran by inserting the story from *Surah al-Waqi'ah*, clearly displaying her voice and goals in empowering her female characters through the culture of knowledge. This can be seen in the following excerpt from *Gempa Pulau Perca* (2014b:103–104):

*“Saya membaca lagi al-Waqi'a. Ya, pohon bidara yang menjadi latar golongan kanan yang Allah janjikan. Saya tahu tentang ayat itu. Al-Waqi'a menyatakan tiga golongan manusia setelah perbukitan dan gunung menjadi luluh. Golongan yang mulia, ashahul maimanah. Golongan yang sengsara, ashahul masy'amah. Golongan awal yang beriman, sabiqun”.*

[“I read *al-Waqi'a* [emphasis added] again. Yes, the bidara tree that was the background of the righteous people that Allah promised. I know about that verse. *Al-Waqi'a* specified three types of people after the hills and mountains became flattened. A noble group, *ashahul maimanah*. A miserable group, *ashahul masy'amah*. The early believers, *sabiqun*”].

The above excerpt parallels with Rumi's concept of *Mahabbah*. In fact, Fariza Md Sham (2020:35) further confirmed that the method in which Mawar lifted the stories from the Quran was correct and these stories can be used as a guide and lesson for the reader. Furthermore, *da'wah* through the beauty of the stories and other examples from the Quran is also discovered in the narrative of the character “I” in *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi*. This short story relates the spiritual adventure of the said character in the pursuit of understanding the meaning and messages of the Quran.

Highlighting Mawar's aspirations in shaping her female characters in line with their spiritual journey in Islam, the character of "I" is also seen to be entrusted with carrying messages from the meaning of *Surah al-Baqarah* (*Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi*, 2019:164):

*Kebajikan itu bukanlah menghadapkan wajahmu ke timur dan barat, tetapi ia adalah keimanan kepada Allah, hari akhirat, kewujudan malaikat, kitab suci, dan nabi-nabi. Begitu juga memberikan harta yang dicinta kepada kerabat, anak yatim, orang-orang miskin, musafir, peminta-minta, orang yang sabar dalam penderitaan." Saya tahu umi menyitir kembali ayat daripada **Surah al-Baqarah** yang pernah dibahaskan dalam usrah kecil dalam kembara kami menyeberang belantara dan membelah pembukitan. Ia ayat tentang memberi.*

[Charity is not turning your face east and west, but it is faith in Allah, the Hereafter, the existence of angels, scriptures, and prophets. Likewise, giving away valuable properties to relatives, orphans, the poor, travellers, beggars, and people who are patient in suffering." I know Mother was reciting a verse from *Surah al-Baqarah* [emphasis added] that had been discussed in a small study group in our travels across the wilderness and beyond the hills. It was a verse about giving].

The above quote once again reinforces the element of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah* (loving things loved by Allah) through the character created by Mawar and reflects the superiority of the character of Muslim women in conveying the message of divinity to the reader. In addition, the character "I" also complements the characteristics of a Muslim woman who upholds the principle of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibbullah* (loving things loved by Allah) by projecting her love towards things loved by Allah SWT. Similarly, the character of "I" in *Gempa Pulau Perca* (2014: 105) tries to get closer to Allah SWT and His Messenger:

*Ia ternyata lebih praktikal, saya mudah membawa al-Quran digital hampir ke mana-mana. Hingga minum pagi di kafe, saya dapat menyudahkan bacaan satu-satu surah dan dengannya sangat menumbuhkan kecintaan saya terhadap al-Quran, sedang saya bercita-cita untuk sungguh-sungguh mencintai Allah dan Rasulullah.*

[It turned out to be more practical, I could easily carry the digital Quran almost anywhere. Even while having my morning drink at the cafe, I could finish reading one surah and with it greatly grew my love for the Quran, while *I aspire to truly love Allah and His Messenger* [emphasis added]].

Based on the quote above, the determination of the character “I” in pursuing the love of Allah SWT and His Messenger (PBUH) has led her to become better. This great desire is evident in the phrase, “I aspire to truly love Allah and His Messenger,” as demanded by Islam upon all its followers. This manifestation of love is also highlighted by Rumi, who insisted that people who were taught by the hands of those who love Allah SWT will have a clean and pure heart (*Fihi Ma Fihi*, 2012:81). Similarly, Allah SWT’s purpose of sending prophets and saints is for them to be exemplified and emulated so that mankind can be cleansed of all flaws (*Fihi Ma Fihi*, 2012: 82).

Rumi put forth that Allah SWT loves grateful, obedient, and righteous servants, and dislikes all that is bad (*Fihi Ma Fihi*, 2012: 332). The personality of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is seen as the best example of such love, as he only ordered his people to do all the things that Allah SWT loves and forbade all the things that He hated. In addition, the loyalty of the prophets cannot be denied in performing deeds that are loved by Allah SWT. Therefore, people who are at this level are those who reflect the noble personality of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), such as obeying all of Allah SWT’s commands, conveying goodness, avoiding evil, and striving in His way (Rushdi Ramli, 2010:62). This is acknowledged in the Quran in *Surah al-Taubah* (9:24):

*Katakanlah (wahai Muhammad): “Jika bapa-bapa kamu, dan anak-anak kamu, dan saudara-saudara kamu, dan isteri-isteri (atau suami-suami) kamu, dan kaum keluarga kamu, dan harta benda yang kamu usahakan, dan perniagaan yang kamu bimbang akan merosot, dan rumah-rumah tempat tinggal yang kamu sukai, - (jika semuanya itu) menjadi perkara-perkara yang kamu cintai lebih daripada Allah dan Rasul-Nya dan (daripada) berjihad untuk agama-Nya, maka tunggulah sehingga Allah mendatangkan keputusan-Nya (azab seksa-Nya): kerana Allah tidak akan memberi petunjuk kepada orang-orang yang fasik (derhaka)”.*

[Say, [O Muhammad], “If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your wives (or husbands), your relatives, wealth which you have obtained, commerce wherein you fear decline, and dwellings with which you are pleased are more beloved to you than Allah and His Messenger and jihad in His cause, then wait until Allah executes His command (the fury of His punishment). And Allah does not guide the defiantly disobedient people”].

Thus, the culture of loving knowledge and conveying goodness—especially through lessons from the Quran, as is illustrated in the literary works of Mawar—clearly conforms with what was mentioned by Rumi as a reflection of man’s love for his God through human-to-human relations (*habl min al-Nas*). In fact, the actions of Malay female characters who convey the goodness of Quranic teachings are indicative of the culture adopted by Mawar in her short stories, and are in parallel with the principle of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibullah* (loving things loved by Allah), which ultimately leads to the formation of a great *ummah* (Muslim community).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the current study offers findings that describe the role of culture in the formation of female Malay characters in Mawar’s three selected short stories—*Antara Dua Rumah di Lereng Bukit*, *Gempa Pulau Perca*, and *Tangan Umi dan Takwil Mimpi*—in the anthology *Narasi Tanah Selandia Baru dan Kisah Lainnya* (2021). The discussion in this context has unravelled the polemics found in earlier studies of female characters in Malay literature. The basis of the framework of the current study, which applied the concept of *Mahabbah* as expounded by Jalaluddin Rumi, has proven that female characters in the literary works of Muslim women authors have a strong attachment to the culture and worldview of Islam itself. This was observed in the female characters presented by Mawar in her three short stories. Through the application of the principle of *Mahabbatu ma yuhibullah* (loving things that are loved by Allah), the female characters in Mawar’s works were found to reflect noble qualities, such as obeying all of Allah SWT’s commands, conveying goodness, avoiding disobedience, and striving in His way. This finding is significantly seen through Mawar’s creative journey in line with her spiritual journey in knowing the Divine One. This has further validated the aspirations of female characters by the female author herself. It was also observed that Mawar’s works not only lingered on the axis of Islamic spirituality, but also raised a variety of other more serious and profound questions for the benefit of readers. Literary reviewers and critics have been recommending that Mawar’s literary works be given attention as part of efforts to empower Islamic literature. The discussion on the concept of *Mahabbah* has also highlighted the credibility and contribution of female

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ZARIAT ABDUL RANI AND PABIYAH HAJIMAMING@PABIYAH TOKLUBOK authors to the spiritual formation of Muslim women, particularly through culture. The research undertaken in the current study aims to serve as a source of knowledge about the greatness of Muslim women as spearheading the role of forming a great *ummah*.

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Nur Lailatul Akma Zainal Abidin: Ideas and writing of the paper; Kamariah Kamarudin: Supervision of ideas and discussion of analysis structure of the paper; Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani: Supervision of ideas and constructs of literature review; Pabiyah Hajimaming@Pabiyah Toklubok: Supervision of the collection of Quranic sources.

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## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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