THE PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM WOMEN CHARACTERS
IN MALAYSIAN SHORT STORIES:
AN ISLAMIC FEMINIST POINT OF VIEW

DAZEREE JOAN JOANNES
(11836)

Bachelor of Education with Honours (TESL)
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

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DAZEREJOANJOANNES
(11836)

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(Yvonne Michelle Campbell)

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ABSTRACT

THE PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM WOMEN CHARACTERS IN MALAYSIAN SHORT STORIES: AN ISLAMIC FEMINISM POINT OF VIEW

Dazeree Joan Joannes

This study aims to investigate the representation of Muslim women characters in Malaysian short stories in unraveling whether or not discrimination and oppression towards the Muslim women characters are evident and to illustrate attempts made by the Muslim women characters to free themselves from religious and cultural practices discriminating against them. The four short stories selected are written by Malaysian Muslim authors consisting of two male authors and two female authors. The short stories, “Mariah” (2003) by Che Husna, “Night of Reckoning” (1997) by Adibah Amin, “Sara and the Wedding” (2005) by Karim Raslan, and “Perempuan” (1995) by Shahnon Ahmad are stories that reflect and embody typical lives of Malaysian Muslim women set in the Muslim society. The Islamic feminism theory is applied in doing a textual analysis of the portrayal of the Muslim women characters. In addition to that, the issues brought up in the short stories are viewed from the two factors that condition the social construct of the society that are religion and culture. From the findings, the Muslim women characters are overly being portrayed by their physical characteristics and that most of them are restricted to domestic roles pointing out that they are indeed discriminated and oppressed by the inherently patriarchal society and also due to the misogynistic bent of religion by the society. However, there are attempts made by some of the Muslim women characters to fight against the norms of the society.
ABSTRAK

GAMBARAN WATAK WANITA ISLAM DI DALAM CERPEN MALAYSIA:
PERSPEKTIF TEORI FEMINISME ISLAM

Dazeree Joan Joannes

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Dazeree Joan Joannes

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development (TESL)

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter is a brief discussion of the background of the study that is a historical background of Muslim women during the early period of Islam which also covers the issues and struggles faced by Muslim women in Malaysia. Islamic feminism, the theoretical framework of this research is introduced briefly in this chapter followed by the statement of the research problem and its main foci.

1.1 Background of the Study

In the course of time throughout history, women have long been the oppressed part of the human race in the society:

*She had been exploited in Greece, Rome (Byzantine empire), Egypt, Iraq, China, and Arabia... The Arabs regarded her very existence as a disgrace, and some cruel and totally insensitive persons used to bury their daughters alive or soon after birth. In India the widow was consigned to flames at the funeral pyre of her dead husband... She was*
contemptible and despised in their estimate. She had no social and political rights. She could not exercise her own free will in any financial deal. She was under tutelage of her father, later under the oppressive rule of the tyrant of a husband and lastly under the patronising care of the male offspring.

(Husain I)

Muslim women have been subjugated by males; fathers, brothers, husbands or any close male relations during the pre-Islamic Arabia (Abdullah 144). They were treated as property and did not have any rights to determine their own rights. A stepson could inherit his stepmother when his father died. In the pagan society, daughters born were killed because of shame and poverty. The Qur'an changed the inferior status of women and removed abuses towards women during the pre-Islamic period by introducing new provisions and modified existing practices and customs of the pagan society (Abdullah 144). In the early period of Islam, many Muslim women were active participants in social, political and economic activities and they were the Prophet Muhammad’s own wives: Khadija, Aisha, Ummu Habiba, and Zainab are among others (Abdullah 146). Muslim women continued to enjoy their freedom to participate in public affairs during the period of the Rashidun Caliph (632-651 C.E.), the Umawi Period (600-750 C.E.) and the early Abbasid (750-950 C.E.).

However, this situation did not prolong as by the end of the third century, the pattern and attitudes towards Muslim women changed in comparison with the early period of Islam which was a result of the changing lifestyles of the leaders and rulers (Abdullah 146). Once again, women were confined at home and their lives governed by the rules determined by men. Women must remain subservient to their husbands and give total obedience. Rulers of Byzantine, Persian, and Sasanian civilisation maintained large harems and women were strictly guarded from outside people which was eventually followed by other members of the rulers and finally adopted by the public (Abdullah 147). Nashat stated that “the male dominance of women was symbolised by the seclusion of women” (qtd. in
This became the norm of the medieval Islamic society and whoever disagreed was considered as not practising Islamic virtues. The higher authorities used religion to justify the abuses towards women. The executive director of Sisters in Islam, Zainah Anwar, stated that “many Muslim countries today, women’s groups are at the forefront in challenging traditional religious authority within government and Islamist political activists and their use of religion to justify women’s subordination and perpetuate discriminatory laws and practices” (1).

Although Malaysian Muslim women are not directly attached with labels such as submissive, inferior and subjugated by men like women in the Middle Eastern society, they have also strived to gain their equal rights in the society. In the 1990s in Malaysia, a slew of laws were introduced or amended that discriminated against Muslim women which happened at the same time when the Government, in response to long standing demands from women’s groups, was taking steps to amend laws that discriminated against women (Anwar 4). In the name of Islam, Muslim women were denied the privilege of enjoying the same legal rights and protection granted to women of other faith. The negotiations for a Domestic Violence Act in the early 1990s also saw attempts to exclude Muslims from the jurisdiction of the Act because of the belief that Muslim men have a right to beat their wives. Moreover, the original draft of the Terengganu law which provided that a woman who reports rape would be charged for qazaf (slanderous accusation) and flogged eighty lashes if she was unable to prove the rape (through four Muslim male eyewitnesses) caused such an outrage that the PAS government was forced to amend the law to allow for circumstantial evidence. All these new laws and amendments to existing laws reflect the misogynistic bent of those in religious authority, be they in Government or in PAS (Anwar 5).

Badran discovered that in 1980s men and women of the Middle East made more statements about equality and justice to women based on religious texts (2004, p.1). Egypt was a pioneer in articulating feminist thinking and in organising collective feminist activisms and the pioneering secular feminisms in
Egypt and other Arab countries have always had space for religion (Badran 2004, p.1). In the late 19th century, while modernization was taking place in Egypt, the question which arose was how an individual can be a Muslim and modern at the same time. Mohammad Abdu (in Badran, 2004, p.1) answered this question mentioning about “the spirit of Islam, how it encouraged the pursuit of knowledge, enquiry and scholarship for all believers”. However, in some societies, Muslim men took this up but the women were kept at home. The founding Egyptian feminist discourse was anchored simultaneously in the discourse of Islamic reform and that of secular nationalism and as a result, secular feminism made Islamic arguments in demanding women's rights to education, work, political rights along with secular nationalist, humanitarian rights, and democratic arguments (Badran, 2002, p.3).

The feminist discourse which serves to fight for Muslim women’s rights in their private and public lives is Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in totality of their existence (Badran, 2004, p.1). In Islamic feminism, it “rejects the idea that Muslim women have to abandon Islam to secure their rights” and firmly holds that the different roles of men and women within the family “do not make women morally, spiritually or intellectually inferior to men” (Murphy 2). Islamic feminism, although practiced and articulated within an Islamic paradigm, has adopted ideas from secular feminism. For instance, as pointed out by Badran, the women-sensitive interpretation of the Qur'an by Wadud is a combination of classical Islamic methodologies with new social science tools and secular discourses of rights and justice and at the same time maintaining the foundation of Islamic thought (2002, p.4). With this methodology of interpreting the Qur'an on the basis of Islamic knowledge, Muslim women can challenge the misogynistic bent of men or religious authorities in the quest for women’s rights and equality. In Iran, for instance, Islamic feminist discourse draws upon secular discourses and methodologies to strengthen and extend its claims (Badran 2004, p.3).
Darvishpour (1) questions the possibility of analyzing women’s situation in Islamic countries with Western feminist eyes. There are ongoing debates about the relationship between feminism and Islam. Many secular-feminist intellectuals have adopted a liberal feminist discourse where Islam is seen as a threat to women’s individual human rights and feminist goals of putting gender-based discriminations to an end (“Conceptions of Islam” 1). Equally, others have focused on the emergence of an “Islamic feminism”, and its effectiveness in furthering gender justice within the framework of the Islamic tradition (“Conceptions of Islam” 1). Murphy asserted that the contradicting dominant views of both feminists that are one secular and the other faith-based seem irreconcilable (1). On the contrary, Badran pointed out that there are no conflicts between Islamic feminism and radical or socialist feminism as “feminism is an idea where women stand for dignity, honour and equality despite their ethnic or national or other differences” (2004, p.3).

It is unrealistic to view all women or all Muslims as a homogenous group, ignoring the historical differences between them. The Western understanding of Muslim women remains unduly influenced by evidence from a single region (Offenhauer 4). The struggle for equality and justice for Muslim women must therefore be placed within the context of women living in Muslim societies undergoing change and turmoil, where Islam is increasingly shaping and redefining our lives (Anwar 1). As suggested out by Badran, “feminism is plant that only grows in its own soil” (2002, p.1), Islamic feminism can be an alternative view of feminism that can facilitate women’s emancipations in the Islamic societies.

The image of women in the Third World generally, and of Muslim women in particular, in the West, is portrayed as submissive, oppressed, and backward. Terry (in Clyne 22) in her study of images of the Middle East in contemporary fiction recognized, much of this information is shaped by negative stereotypes of Arabs and Islam, ignorance of the achievements of Islamic culture and a belief in the inevitable conflict between Islamic and western values. Moreover, studies
about gender and Muslim communities in other regions are highly influenced by research on the Arab world, despite the fact that Arab Muslims constitute only about 15 percent of the world population of Muslims (Offenhauer 19) resulting in overgeneralizations. Another strong association with Muslim women is the Islamic head covering in which through the Western feminist eyes’ is a form of oppression towards Muslim women. As in the study by Irene Donohoue Clyne on the images of the veil when used in western fiction, shows that the airport books she analysed “mostly restricted their covers to stereotypes of the sexually mysterious women… together with the obsession with the veil” (Clyne 29). Contrary to popular belief, the covering of the Muslim woman is not oppression but liberation from the shackles of male scrutiny and the standards of attractiveness (Chopra 1). For women who are forced to wear the veil, it definitely is a form of suppression. However, more educated and independent Muslim women are choosing to wear the veil as a way of asserting their identity as Muslims (Rana 2).

The image of a Muslim woman as veiled, demure and suppressed is a myth that can be traced back through literature and art of Colonial times that helped perpetuate the image of the otherness of the Muslim woman (Rana 2). Clyne, in her study of the use of the image of the veiled Muslim women in popular culture, stated that “the language used on the covers of airport books, as well as in the text, reinforces the stereotype that Islam oppresses women, with the veil as the symbol of their enforced silence” (30) suggesting to non-Muslim readers a combination of “romantic orientalist tales and feminist exposé” (qtd. in Clyne 30). In her research, whatever the purpose of the book, it contributed to the misunderstandings of readers regarding women in Muslim societies triggering “rather a sense of outrage at their treatment and all stereotypes of Islam and Islamic culture are reinforced” (35). Some may argue the differences between literature and real life; nevertheless, as Mikhai puts it “the value of literature in understanding, indeed in bringing about change, regeneration, and transformation within the very fabrics of these societies is not to be underestimated” [1]. Lye argues literature is a representation of reality as “it portrays moral and other experiences in a
compelling, concrete, immediately felt way through its aesthetic devices and powers, yet allows as well for reflection, for a theorizing or reconsideration of the experiences evoked, as we are both 'experiencing' the world evoked and are separated from it” (2).

In practice, there have been many systemic abuses against women in Muslim societies particularly regions in the Middle East. So, there is an urgent need to re-establish women's rights and dismantle the patriarchal rule that has plagued too many Muslim societies. In the past few years, women in Malaysia particularly Muslim women too have strived to gain their equal rights in the society as women and as individuals. For many Muslim women in fast modernising and industrialising Muslim countries like Malaysia, the realities of their lives today have put them in a collision course with patriarchy’s construction of the “ideal” Muslim woman, justified in the name of religion (Anwar 2). They are challenging the values of patriarchal society where power and authority reside exclusively with the husband, father, brother to whom the wife, daughter and sister owe obedience reducing them to being the inferior half of the human race.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Mohanty (qtd. in Darvishpour 2) pointed out that many feminists write about “Muslim women being powerless and oppressed, about their needs and problems” and few attempts to write about Muslim women’s choices, freedom and power of choice. Mohanty suggested that the lives of Muslim women viewed from the western feminist point of view do not give justice to their unique turmoil that they face in their own society. Thus, it is the interest of this study to investigate the portrayal of Muslim women in Malaysia within the framework of Islamic feminism concentrating on what it means to be a Muslim woman in a Muslim society. Moreover, in order to understand Muslim women’s ordeal, Nawal El Saadawi in her book “The Hidden Face of Eve” (1980) emphasizes that her status “must be viewed not through her faith [only] but also through local cultural traditions and her social background” (qtd. in Baharudin 13). Thus, the research
attempted to uncover the Malaysian Muslim women’s struggles and issues by analysing four short stories written by Malaysian Muslim writers that are “Mariah” by Che Husna, “Night of Reckoning” by Adibah Amin, “Sara and the Wedding” by Karim Raslan, and “Perempuan” by Shahnon within the framework of Islamic feminism theory.

By analysing these Muslim women characters as representing a glimpse of reality, the researcher hopes to be able to understand and explore the struggles of Malaysian Muslim women in their private life as well as public life and to find out whether or not they are discriminated and oppressed by the manipulation of religion by men or by the patriarchal social practices inherent in the Muslim society. In all societies, whatever their religion may inform their faith, some cultural basis, even bias, to their religious interpretations and practices is always to be found (Othman 2). Hence, the Malaysian Muslim society setting evident in the short stories forms the basis of interpretations of any evidences of discrimination and oppression faced by Muslim women characters in relation to their representations and roles attributed in the chosen fiction. In other words, the portrayals of the Muslim women characters and the roles they are assigned to in the short stories serve to illuminate the issues and struggles they face as a Muslim woman in the society depicted in the short stories. The research also investigated any evidences of endeavours made by the Muslim women’s characters in reaction to the discriminations and oppressions revealed.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Thus, to further elaborate on the research problem, the research aimed to discuss how women are portrayed in the short stories written by Malaysian Muslim writers. There are four main objectives that initiated the study to be carried out. The foci are:

i. to explore the portrayals of Muslim women characters as depicted in the short stories;
ii. to find out the roles assigned to the Muslim women characters in the short stories;
iii. to investigate whether discrimination and oppression towards the Muslim women characters are evident in the short stories; and
iv. to illustrate any attempts that was made by the Muslim women characters in the short stories to free themselves from patriarchal rules and traditional stereotypes.

1.4 Research Questions

Corresponding to the objectives of the research are the seven research questions:

i. How are the Muslim women characters portrayed?
ii. Are the women characters portrayed more physically than psychologically and socially? (and vice versa)
iii. What roles are the women characters assigned to?
iv. Are any form of discrimination and oppression towards Muslim women characters revealed in the short stories?
v. What are the forms of discrimination and oppression?
vi. Do the Muslim women characters made any attempts to free themselves from patriarchal rules and traditional stereotypes?
vii. If yes, in what way did they attempt to do so?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Most of previous the researches done on the portrayal of Muslim women, which are very few, only concentrate on Arab Muslim women as their subjects. Furthermore, these Muslim women’s lives are viewed from the western feminists’ eyes. Therefore, the completion of this research will hopefully make a contribution in bridging the gap of knowledge in literature concerning the portrayal of Muslim women in Malaysian short stories using the Islamic feminism
theory. Those who are interested are able to gain better insights, understanding and further appreciate the unique struggles of Muslim women particularly in Malaysia viewed from an Islamic feminism perspective.

Moreover, the research also hopes to make a theoretical contribution to the richness of the literary theory. Islamic feminism, historically, arose from the social reform which serves to fight for Muslim women’s rights in their private and public lives. Hence, this research should add to another branch of literary theory which can be used for the analysis of literary works by Muslim authors and literary works concerning gender issues in Muslim societies.

In relation to that, the value of this research lies in its attempt to discover the images and roles of Muslim women in Malaysia as compared to the Western version of the Muslim women mentioned earlier in the chapter. Hence, the research hopes to banish the constructed images of the Muslim women, as viewed by the West branding Third World women in one fine category.

Furthermore, the results of the study will also be useful for readers in understanding the roles and struggles of Muslim women in Malaysia in liberating themselves as individuals and at the same time upholding their faith in Islam. Hopefully, the results of the research will instil a sense appreciation and gratitude among readers and also as an inspiration to keep fighting for women’s rights.

1.6 Operational Definitions of Terms

1.6.1 Malaysian Muslim Society

Islam is the most widely professed religion in Malaysia and the main official religion in the country. About 14 million persons belong to this religion which makes up of 60% if the total population of 23 million (Abdullah and Pedersen 24). Among Malaysian citizens, the Bumiputra population are mainly Muslims. The Malay as defined in Article 160(2) of the Malaysian Constitution is a person who
professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs (Abdullah and Pedersen 89). Abdullah and Pedersen further added that Islam is very influential in the life of a Malay in which it is central to the Malay identity and cultural solidarity (89-90).

As Muslims, Malays follow a wide range of rituals and activities based on their belief in Allah. They are adhered to the five Pillars of Islam which includes showing one’s omission to One God, praying 5 times a day, fasting for 30 days a year by not consuming food and drinks from sunrise to sunset, giving tithes and aims to the poor, and performing the annual pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime (Abdullah and Pedersen 104). The Syariah laws define all aspects of the life of a Muslim.

1.6.2 Portrayal of Women

Basically, women are depicted in terms of their physical appearance, psychological attributes, gender roles and the gender stereotypes imposed upon them. Consequently, these inaccurate portrayals of women, it leads to women’s unfair discrimination and oppression. In this section are the operational definitions which were used for the purpose of achieving the research objectives.

1.6.2.1 Definition of Physical Attributes

The physical attribute or trait is defined as the outward appearance of the character or “what the character looks like, how he/she dresses, how he/she moves” (“Character Analysis” 1). In Tritt’s article “Character Trait Chart and Personality Components”, she outlines an exhaustive list of physical attributes that are the character’s name, date of birth or age, address, race or ethnic background or nationality, height, weight and body build, hair, eyes, peculiar physical traits, health, voice, mannerisms, and type of clothes or shoes or accessories the character wears are among some of them (1-2). In this research, the Muslim women characters are analyzed based on how they are physically portrayed and
the physical traits attributed to them are inferred in the context of which it appears in the short story.

1.6.2.2 Definition of Psychological Attributes

Psychological attributes are words that describe personality traits such as shy, trustworthy, laconic, phlegmatic, kind, conscientious, anxious, etcetera (“Introduction to Personality Traits” 1). These words describe the emotional and mental state of an individual and these traits are what make individuals psychologically different from each other. The unique combination of personality traits we possess makes us individuals (“What are psychological traits?” 1). In this research, the Muslim women characters are analyzed based on how they are psychologically portrayed and the psychological traits attributed to them are inferred in the context of which it appears in the short story.

1.6.2.3 Definition of Gender Roles

In the article “Gender and Society”, “gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow” (Mead 1). Pretorius asserted that “gender relations structure the roles of men and women, shape the ideas, knowledge, values, cultures, attitudes, and structure of society and in social life itself” (1) which then influences the relationships between men and women. In this research, the roles that the Muslim women characters occupy in the short story were investigated. Through the roles they are attributed to, provides a clue to the gender social construction of the Muslim society.

1.6.2.4 Definition of Traditional Stereotypes

“Stereotypes are generalizations, or assumptions that people make about the characteristics of all members of a group based on an image (often wrong) about what people in that group are like” (“Inaccurate and Overly Hostile Stereotypes”
1). Stereotypes are developed when there is lack of the information needed to make fair judgments about people or situations. According to Grobman, in the absence of the "total picture", stereotypes allow "filling in the blanks" which often leads the society innocently creating and perpetuating stereotypes (2). The stereotype generally has only an implicit and unchanging narration such as in the role of women in fiction (Crawford 11). Crawford further explains in his example of women characters that may appear diverse but are all part of an implicit narrative. This narrative has a beginning and middle (birth, childhood, marriage, family life) but very little end (old age, dying). Hence, traditional stereotypes are inaccurate socially constructed generalizations that perpetuate and remain unchallenged. For the purpose of the research, traditional stereotypes that are looked out for are those of which women are traditionally attached to. For instance, the traditional women’s stereotypes are merely being daughters, to being wives, and eventually mothers.

1.6.2.5 Definition of Gender Discrimination and Oppression

Discrimination is bias treatment towards particular group of peoples due to judgment based prejudice and stereotypes” (Grobman 2). In the article “At the Crossroads of Gender and Racial Discrimination”, apart from racial discrimination, gender is also a factor contributing to inequality. Gender discrimination is the unequal treatment of a person based solely on that person's sex (“Gender Discrimination” 1) which consequently imposes inequalities towards women such as lower pay for work of equal value, high illiteracy rates, and poor access to health and care (“Gender and Racial Discrimination” 1). According to a recent report by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), women fall short in main indicators that measure progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment (“Gender and Racial Discrimination” 1).

Gender oppression is the individual acts of abuse and violence, patterns of power and control, systems of abuse and violence perpetrated against women and