FEMINISM IN GENI JORA BY ABIDAH EL KHALIEQY AND MENONKA H LUMRAH BY AZMAH NORDIN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Biodata

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Introduction

In actuality, the question of women’s emancipation in the literature of Malaysia and Indonesia was first started by men. If in Malaysia it was through Hikayat Faridah Hanum (1925/26) by Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi, in Indonesia it was brought forth by Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana through his work Layar Terkembang (1937). However, the literary scenarios of the two countries, which was dominated by male writers, placed the female characters on the sidelines and they were depicted as being of inferior types. Thus the emergence of women writers, who are said to be more understanding and able to speak about women’s feelings and experiences.

The History of Malaysian and Indonesian Women Novelists

The involvement of women writers in the novel genre in Malaysia began when Rafiah Yussuf wrote the novel Cinta Budiman in 1941. At the same time, A. Kamariah’s novel entitled Dua Pengembara1 emerged. Then, came Jahlelawati in 1948 with her novel Cincin Kahwin and the sister writers of Kamariah and Kalsom Saadon. After that era, there emerged famous names in Malaysian women novel writers such as Adibah Amin, Salmi Manja, Salmah Mohsin, Rokiah Abu Bakar, Fatimah

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Busu, Khadijah Hashim, Zaharah Nawawi and Siti Zainon Ismail. Since the late 80’s, there has been a marked increase in women novelists such as Rosmini Shaari, Sri Diah, Siti Aminah Hj. Yusuf, Aminah Mokhtar, Siti Hawa Hassan and not to be left out, Azmah Nordin.2

In Indonesia, the history of its women novel writers emerged a decade earlier than Malaysia when Selasih, wrote Kalau Ta’Oentoeng3 in 1933. Apart from that, in 1935, there was the discovery of a piece of work by Fatimah H. Delais or Hamidah, a writer who was only 17 years old, whose novel was entitled Kehilangan Mestika. The 40’s and 50’s saw the discovery of women writers such as Arti Purbani, S. Rukiah, Suwarsih Djojopoespito, Waluyati Supangat, Nursiah Dahlan, Matiah Madjiah and NH Dini. The 60’s saw the emergence of NH Dini and from the 70’s onwards she became a very prolific and famous writer. Then came the line-up of Indonesian women writers which included names such as Titie Said, Titis Basino, Marga T, Marianne Kattoppo, and Th Sri Rahayu Prihatmi4. In years after that, the literary world of Indonesia began to be coloured by the presence of women writers who are listed in the Corps of 2000. This Corp is seen to possess vocal novelists such as Ayu Utami and Abidah El Khalieqy. Apart from them, Oka Rusmini, Dewi Sartika and Ani Sekarnengsih are also not left on the sidelines in spurring the female literary world of Indonesia, in the challenging millenial era.

The Question Of Women and Feminism

When women writers first emerged in the two countries, they were more comfortable in discussing issues pertaining to women’s experiences as mothers or homemakers, wives and lovers, who were faced with domestic problems. In the 60’s women novelists were seen to have begun touching upon issues outside the home and to phrase questions which were more multitudinous and challenging. When feminism was first accepted as a cause to be used in works and as a critical theory in the Malay world, the voices of women writers became louder in demanding women’s appropriate place in society and for women to be given their proper rights.

Tori! Moi (in Linda K.) saw Western feminism as “feminism which I see as a political, or indeed revolutionary movement, is subversive and marginal to the dominant order” (1985:182). While Sandra Harding (in Mary

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4 Ibid. pg. 41.
Evans) thought "feminism is a political movement for the emancipation of women" (1994:104). In simple terms, feminism is a form of opposition against patriarchal ideology which has long shackled and strangled the lives of women. For Western feminists, the word 'woman/female' means humans who are constantly oppressed or mistreated by the male power. Thus, feminist discourse covers the entire development of works which dwell upon the unequal male-female status. Feminists are a group which opposes patriarchy, a group which sympathizes and realizes men's inequality towards women. What then is the form of feminism followed by women writers over here?

In the beginning, the elements of feminism were detected in women's works in the Malay world when women novelists strove to balance out the inequalities in the female characters at the hands of male writers. For women, the male writers turned women into silent objects who were powerless, confined and extremely dependent on men in order to carry on living. This perusal of women through the eyes of men is known as 'feminist critique'. Consequently, women novelists changed their perspective by making women their subject; women who are conscious of their identity as women and whose voices ought to be heard.

In reality, it cannot be denied that feminism is at times carried out in an unconscious manner and is not often understood by some women novelists. Nonetheless, the spirit of feminism seeps into the female characters of these novelists. With this, there comes the description of the portrayal of women characters which ought to be the role models for generations to come. Women's works ought to contain a combination of wisdom, emotional strength, the whys and wherefores and also their visions. Apart from that, women ought not put aside their femininity in dealing with gender-related and sexuality problems. Women ought to be portrayed to be typically patient, determined, indefatigable, responsible, dedicated, spirited and bent on living out their ever challenging lives. It would not be overstating to say that Malay feminists strive to eradicate discrimination of their rights within and outside literary works. This form of perusal is called gynocritics, that is to say to give attention to women as writers. Therefore, this is the form of study used to disclose the two mentioned texts in order to take a look at the form of feminism brought forth by the two writers and how they overcome problems faced by their archetypal women.

The Writer's Background

Azmah Nordin who was born in Kulim, Kedah and settled in Sabah is

5 For example Zaharah Nawawi. See Zaharah Nawawi in Dewan Sastera, January 2004, pg. 20.
among the prominent and prolific\textsuperscript{6} of women writers in Malaysia. This writer intensely champions women in her works. She often appears with experimental styles through her stimulating story telling and is also successful in exploiting knowledge in raising societal issues which are in step with the world of globalization.\textsuperscript{7} Based on those variants, Azmah Nordin is categorized in the list of Malaysia's new generation of writers.\textsuperscript{8}

Azmah Nordin first began to get involved in the world of creative writing\textsuperscript{9} when she started to attend workshops held by the Sabah branch of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka around the late 80's. Her participation in the workshops along with continued encouragement from advisers,\textsuperscript{10} bore fruit when her novel entitled \textit{Kukui} was published in 1988. The debut of her maiden novel brought on a momentum in her to write, especially after her novel received a consolation price in a novel-writing contest in 1989. Azmah Nordin could be referred to as a competitive writer.\textsuperscript{11} This is because her works often win awards in short story-writing or novel-writing competitions.

If Azmah began her writing with novels, Abidah El Khalieqy is more known as a female poet in Indonesia. Abidah began to known as a novelist after her first novel entitled \textit{Wanita Berkalung Sorban} was published in 2001. Compared to Azmah who only completed her MCE,\textsuperscript{12} Abidah El Khalieqy, who was from a class of santri\textsuperscript{13} from Menturo, Jombang, East Java Indonesia, received her education from Madrasah Ibtidayah and for 6 years from Pesantren Putri PERSIS. While attending Pesantren, Abidah who was at that time in her teens, began writing short stories. She completed her tertiary education in Perdana Perdata in the Faculty of Syari'ah IAIN, Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta. Her poems and short stories are collectively published in anthologies such as \textit{Sangkakala}.

\textsuperscript{6} Within a short span of time from 1988 to 2004 (17 years), Azmah Nordin had produced 10 adult novels, two short-story anthologies which are \textit{Singkowoton} and \textit{Wizurai}, 13 teenage novels and 16 children stories.

\textsuperscript{7} Her works are filled with the exploitations in the working world which are often faced by women. For example, as executives in computer companies, telecommunications and medicine.

\textsuperscript{8} Apart from names like Faisal Tehrani, Zaen Kasturi, Mawar Shafie, Nisah Harun and S.M. Zakir.

\textsuperscript{9} Prior to this she wrote independent features.

\textsuperscript{10} Advisors such as Ismail Abbas, the late Othman Puteh, Hamzah Hamdani and Hamdan Yahya.

\textsuperscript{11} Her novels had won the Sabah Literary Awards are \textit{Dukanya Abadi} (1989/90), \textit{Dari Dalam Cermin} (1992/93) \textit{Syumul} (1998/1999 Sabah Literary Award and Premiere Literary Award); while her short stories like 'Apabila Bumi Terbelah Dua' won the 1997 Sabah Literary Award, 'Buht the 1998 Sabah Literary Award and 'Ayeesa' the 2002/2003 Sabah Literary Award.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Malaysian Certificate Education}. The same level as SPM but is in the English medium.

\textsuperscript{13} Islamic scholars.

Azmah Nordin and Abidah El Khalieqy received diverging educational experiences and had different predispositions in choosing genres. Nevertheless, they were listed as the new generation of writers and of the Corps of 2000, who had chosen not to go out to work. They became full-time housewives and brought up their children. This opportunity was used by both to become established writers. Their free time was used to attend workshops held by literary bodies in their respective countries. Azmah frequented writing workshops held by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, while Abidah represented Indonesia in the ASEAN Writer's Conference/Poetry Workshop in Manila and had attended the workshop held by MASTERA in 1997.

**The Backgrounds of Menongkah Lumrah and Geni Jora**

Menongkah Lumrah had won the Sabah Literary Award and the Premiere Literary Award in 1996/97. Long before that, *Menongkah Lumrah*, under its original name “Khorikul Adah”, had won first place in the Adult Novel-Writing Competition in 1992 held by the Sabah branch of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. This novel had also been chosen by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur as one of the novels to represent the 21st century. On the other hand, *Geni Jora* had attained the second place in a novel-writing competition held by the Dewan Kesenian Jakarta in Indonesia in 2003.

Thematically speaking, *Menongkah Lumrah* and *Geni Jora* both carry the same issue but in different ways. *Menongkah Lumrah* carries the issue of (Dayang) Zakiyyah’s struggles in her profession and her home. This display is the writers’ efforts in elevating the value of women and their new image in facing a challenging job world. Zakiyyah, the protagonist as portrayed by Azmah Nordin, is not meant to have a smooth ride to the post of chairman in a previously male-monopolized firm and goes through a barb-filled journey. The writer’s agenda is to show that it is possible for women to attain a creditable level without the element of illicit affairs with their employers. In order to prove this, Zakiyyah is faced the thrashings of the business world which is said to be full of spite, treachery, greed, self-importance, power and back-stabbings among its fraternity. Zakiyyah’s bitter experiences are further spiced with household problems which almost breaks her will to forge ahead.

On the other hand, *Geni Jora* carries the issue of a woman’s, Kejora’s, dream and that is to place women in their proper place in society especially in the eyes of men. Hence, *Geni Jora* focuses on the
narration of Kejora’s life experiences which are engulfed in a patriarchal world from when she was young until she reaches adulthood.

In accordance with the stance taken by *Menongkah Lumrah* and *Geni Jora* which were written by women, obviously would have women protagonists as the theme is on them, will undoubtedly inject feminist spirits into the archetypal women. The two novels bear feminism on the base of championing the rights and in the interest of women and in opposing patriarchy. This is the common ground between the two texts. However, the presented form of feminism differ, whereby the difference in the social backgrounds of the women characters obviously reflect the writers’ own experiences.

Through flashbacks, monologues and hallucinations, Azmah Nordin is more comfortable with the background and the atmosphere of Sabah, Malaysia. Nonetheless she portrays Zakiyyah as often summoning up memories of when Zakiyyah was abroad, namely around Amsterdam. On the other hand, Abidah El Khalieqy takes the conventional technique of having Indonesia as the background of her novel, namely around Yogyakarta and successfully manipulates scenes from the Middle East, Spain and Morocco; that is, of cities such as Damascus, Tangiers, Casablanca, Medina and so forth. The choice of and in elevating the Muslim world, may have been purposely done in order to portray an Islamic spirit in the struggles of her female character.

Even though the story-telling of the two writers are quite different, nevertheless they are both comfortable in choosing plots which are not in chronological order. They both choose to utilize the reverse narrative, in going against the dominant strategy in order to strengthen their opposition towards the narration in works by men. Apart from that, it is also meant for their female characters to view their mothers’ experiences as a motivation for themselves. This is because, according to Virginia Woolf in her book “A Room of One’s Own”, ‘we think back through our mothers if we are women’.

*Menongkah Lumrah* and *Geni Jora*: The Image and Struggles of the Women Characters

Zakiyyah is portrayed as a Sinokadazan and lives with her mother who was abandoned by her husband. Zakiyyah also has a younger sister Dayang Zubaidah. Zakiyyah’s experience as the eldest child of a single parent makes her a child who is loyal, responsible, determined, able, hardworking, proficient and patient in living her life. The mother-child relationship and the relationship amongst siblings in works by women writers are very important in feminism. The camaraderie bond between Zakiyyah and her mother is shown through images or through her mother’s voice which is constantly encouraging and giving the strength in each step that Zakiyyah takes.
Continuous support and a freshly-bolstered spirit path the way for Zakiyyah to work in the Panglima Burhan Computer Company (PBC). The offer to work in a large company means that Zakiyyah accepts the truth and the offer, as that to be a sweeper – the lowest level job level in the company. She carries this responsibility for quite a long time (almost a year) and she puts up with the slander and mistrust from the male workers who feel threatened, personally and professionally, at their employer’s attention on a woman who is nothing more than a sweeper. Azmah Nordin succeeds in placing Zakiyyah as a woman who has the mental and physical fortitude in ignoring the men’s vile slanders (she is said to be arrogant and has been slandered to be having an affair with her employer). Zakiyyah is matured in her thinking and rational in dealing with problems in her work place, which makes her more determined and a person entrusted by her employer.

On the other hand, Kejora has a life background which faithfully practices patriarchy and which feminists are staunchly against. Kejora’s father practices ‘peaceful’ polygamy which means benefitting in having good and loyal wives. Kejora, Lola (her elder sister), Samodra (her elder brother) and her younger sibling Prahara, are the children of the second wife, while ‘mother’ Fatmah does not have any children. Compared to Zakiyyah’s mother who was abandoned by her husband, Kejora’s mother, has her husband’s other wife who is modern in her way of thinking, is portrayed as the archetypal Muslim woman who is loyal and is dutiful towards the daily duties of that of a wife and mother. Kejora’s love for her mother causes her to be ill at ease with her father’s unjust treatment of his wives. ‘Mother’ Fatmah, who is more open-minded, is often brought to the town (on the excuse that she does not have any children) and Kejora’s mother is left to manage the home. Kejora’s unease concerning her mother’s fate is put forth through her words to her mother:

“I am thankful. But I also feel that justice must be upheld.”
“Justice? What justice?”
“Mother, are you only pretending not to see it?”
“My child, you are too remote (from the truth). Enough. I want to rest.
But I know, my mother never rests. All of her time is spent for us, her children, for father and the guests from his organization, for the piddling affairs of our family…” (GJ, pg. 80).

Her mother’s acquiescence and loyalty to traditional practices is considered by Kejora as a life restriction on women. It is typical of her mother to constantly be grateful, not voice a single complain or regret, and to always credit Kejora’s behaviour. This child verily pities her mother who does not have the time to rest. With such import and in accordance to feminist aspirations, which are for women not to be enemies with each other, Kejora often approaches (Mother) Fatmah whom she considers to be open-minded and embodies the modern
woman. (Mother) Fatmah would tell stories of successful women in Arab history like the Queen of Sheba, the Queen of Tadmur and the Queen of Cordoba in order to inspiration to Kejora’s struggles. Even though Kejora is not able to change her mother’s fate a hundred percent, but the experiences of her mother’s restricted life become the starting point for Kejora to change her fate as a woman.

Kejora’s life as told to her friend, Elya Huraibi, is a traitional life which is marked by the male labelling system. As the head of the household, Kejora’s father does not allow his daughters as much freedom compared to his sons, who are free to go to where ever they wish. The restrictions are symbolized with the building of walls surrounding the grounds of the home which Kejora likens to that of a prison.

Very rarely is there communication or friendship between neighbours. All walls separate us from the world surrounding us. Neighbours spy on us and we spy on our neighbours (GJ, pg. 78).

The restricted life further saddens Kejora when it is mocked and becomes the butt of the men’s jokes.

(1) “Isn’t your house like a boarding school? With high walls.” (GJ, pg. 82).

(11) “How do you know that they are good people when they live in a walled cage like this, my dear lady?” (GJ, pg. 85).

The walls built by Kejora’s father, from one point, do not indicate justice but in fact display men’s stupidity and their egoism. This is because Kejora’s father does not allow his daughters to go out of the compound of the house but at the same time allows his male friends freedom to come and go as they please. Indeed, upon his trust in his male friends, the father almost destroys the honour of his daughters. This is because Paman Hassan is said to have almost raped Lola and tries to sexually harass Kejora. Paman Hassan’s actions stresses Lola and she only dares to confide in Kejora.

Lola’s anger and fear are further burdened by her grandmother’s actions which represent the women of the older generation that bow to the patriarchal system. The grandmother character becomes the ‘guard’ to all of her granddaughters’ behaviour. She often proves to be the obstacle to the protest for freedom as displayed by Kejora and Lola. Grandmother would threaten to report their actions to their father who is considered to hold the ultimate power in the home.

“Listen here, my children! Now your obstinacy has overreached its boundaries. I know you have made it all up. The mangolin is only made up, a phantom from your wild imagination. Beware my children! If your father knows about this, you will have to face his wrath ...” (GJ, pg. 73).

Her grandmother also often reminds Kejora to guard her female modesty and not to ever try to compete against the male. When Kejora quarrels with her younger brother, her grandmother moralizes:
“the girl ought to give in. If women do not want to give in, this world would be scattered like broken glass. Because no man would want to give in. Men always want to win and gain victory. That is why women must be prepared to lose.” (GJ, pg. 61).

Even though Kejora proves her capabilities as a daughter who is capable of beating her younger brother in studies, her grandmother absolutely refuses to acknowledge her achievement. This is because, according her grandmother:

“No matter how badly he does in school, as a male, in reality, his ranking is still first. It is the opposite for you. No matter what your ranking is, you are a female and will remain a female” (GJ, pg. 62).

Kejora’s existence in a religious boarding school also restricts her life and freedom. The regulations in the religious boarding school also limit the life of a teenager. The outcome is that girls, who attend religious boarding schools, feel alienated from society, do not mix around and finally, are wild and beyond control. Such symptoms worsen when it is said that there are parents who send their daughters to religious boarding schools solely because, as parents, they are unable to control their daughters. Kejora sees this as inappropriate and unjust, particularly for the growth of the female students and the society in general.

The backgrounds of the two women cause the base of their struggle to also differ. For Zakiyyah, living with her mother allows her freedom and gives her strength. Apart from understanding the needs of another woman, her mother often tells Zakiyyah not to feel daunted when faced with humans by the name of men. When she was a teenager, Zakiyyah was once covered in ink by a boy. Her mother scolded Zakiyyah for not being able to do anything:

“The boy should not have gotten away with his actions! You should have beaten him up,” pointed her mother ...
“We’ll summon his parents!” said her mother while clasping a machette, in her kitchen. “I mean, his father, we’ll summon his father. He did not teach his son to be civilized and decent.” (ML, pg. 65).

Zakiyyah’s mother acts as a defender and is a person to whom Zakiyyah could turn to when she is faced with problems at the work place or at home. Hence, her mother would say the following:

(I) “Endeavour and continue to endeavour. Prove to the man who is your employer that you are not easily made the fool. Do not want to be made the fool. Them, men, they are all the same! Gaining from our weakness.” (ML, pg. 33).

(II) “Remember this. I am always with you, Always!” (ML, pg. 127).

As a woman with the status of an abandoned wife, it is Zakiyyah’s mother’s responsibility to be the defender and the protector of her daughters. Hence, Zakiyyah’s early marriage is a great blow to her mother. Her mother’s grief worsened when Zakiyyah plans to stop
working and become a full-time housewife.

(I) “Zakiyyah, don’t you realise? How many women’s dreams have been dashed after getting married?” Her mother continues, almost in tears. “Oh why, why must you wreck everything? Why must you give in to a man?” (ML, pg. 153).

(II) “Your career hasn’t even taken off. Humph! ... And before anything, you already want to stop, want to be a weak housewife – to be easily trampled on by Rafaei in the future ...” (ML, pg. 76).

Zakiyyah’s mother has her own reasons for acting in such a way. Her grudge and heartache towards her ex-husband who had left her without any means of financial or spiritual support had eaten away at her heart as that of a convert. Her rights as a wife and the rights of her two daughters had been denied by her husband (their father). The grief felt by Zakiyyah’s mother worsens when Zakiyyah accepts to become the fourth wife of Kamarul Arafat who is very old and is Zakiyyah’s father-in-law.

The creativity shown by the two writers in portraying their main female characters are greatly favoured by feminists. Their works portray women who are clever, who do not leave everything to fate and who are constantly struggling for the well-being of women. The backgrounds and experiences of the two protagonists’ mothers greatly affect the protagonists’ behaviour. The restrictions, injustice, discrimination along with the negative male perception, provide them with an impact to become opponents of injustice. Hence, in what form do the writers highlight the two characters’ rebellion?

The feminism as vociferated by the two female characters in the novels is ‘Equal Partnership’. It is a concept championed by women writers so that women and men could work together, could combine their energies, could complement each other and could be given equal rights as members of the society. If Zakiyyah is shown to have feminist tendencies only when she reaches adulthood, Kejora is portrayed to have begun her rebellion against injustice since childhood. Kejora and her elder sister protest their lack of freedom by staying up all night. They are also depicted to climb trees within the compound of their home in order to look at the goings-on outside and also to peep at their neighbours’ activities. These actions symbolize women’s desire to gain knowledge and beauty which exist outside the realm of traditional women who are imprisoned. The victory brought on by Kejora’s protests is worded as such:

*Behold Grandmother! You have failed to curb me. Your guard is just a false guard. It is proven that my world extends further than the compound of your house. My sky is wider than the roof of your house. My view is broader than the rusty grills of your windows. From the top of my climb, I can see everything that you have tried to cover and everything that you have tried to hide is now ajar. What is mine is my infinite sight while what is yours is*
nothing more than a row of dead coconut shells. You are narrow-minded always (GJ, pg. 77).

The same is when Kejora is at the religious boarding school. Staying up all hours of the night and viewing the stars become an entertaining activity when the boredom and restrictions of the day could not be shed.

Stagnating in a mental block along with Sonya’s devilry, from the boredom of boarding life, from various youthful desires which are inhibited by all sorts of boundaries and regulations, I take to the sky along with the night and the stars (GJ, pg. 44).

For Zakiyyah, her mother’s experiences, Zakiyyah’s spirits which are constantly up-lifted, Zakiyyah’s experiences with an adulterous husband who is egoistical, Zakiyyah’s witnessing her younger sister being beaten by Zakiyyah’s husband, and the betrayal and scorn by her workmates, all of which strengthens her determination to fight a system which she sees as being totally unjust.

”Humph! They are all the same! Men!” Zakiyyah said in her heart. Her feelings immediately became volatile. As a hotheaded woman, hungering for social justice, bored with the preconceived mentality of a large portion of men who act like her father and Rafaei; why must I be scared in facing them, even though I am alone? Should I? (ML, pg. 154).

Zakiyyah’s determination gives her the physical strength to go against men who are cruel towards women. The moment Zakiyyah witnesses her younger sister being beaten by Kamarul Arafat, Zakiyyah is depicted as ...

a matured mountain goat which has ... a pair of strong horns – the monied wolf was butted till he was flung right across the office. Was straight away KO’d (not only did he faint but immediately lost his physical and inner strength) (ML, pg. 232).

The love between men and women as married couples and lovers becomes the climax in the rebellion against injustice in these two novels. The love which is said to have the ability to end the labelling by men and male dominance. Kejora is uncompromising with her lover’s/fiance’s, Zakky’s, attitude (the typical Arab male) who is portrayed as a playboy, a wine drinker and takes every opportunity to kiss Kejora. As a shy independent woman, Kejora wishes for Zakky to respect her rights as a woman and the need for her to have her own secrets. Kejora’s patience towards Zakky’s attitude peaks when Zakky is depicted as trying to make plans to meet with her elder sister Lola (tries two-time Kejora). Her vexation at her fiance’s betrayal swells into a grudge in the bosom of a woman who has long been imprisoned and bound by patriarchal injustice. Kejora gives in to the burning grudge by not only upbraiding and boycotting Zakky, but by also turning the tables on Zakky and two-timing him. The unfaithfulness (which was only thought
of) by Zakky is requited with a planned unfaithfulness by Kejora. For the sake of giving in to her anger, jealousy and grudge, along with claiming her equal rights and status to a man named Zakky, Kejora is shown to be willing to romance another, even to the point to kissing Asaav Muscovich, Zakky’s friend.

Kejora’s action is a great blow to Zakky and the jealousy in him. His male ego is challenged and he makes an effort to understand Kejora’s attitude, and constantly seeks her forgiveness. In a modern and challenging world, the word ‘sorry’ does not mean anything any more for Kejora. To forgive only brings sorrow. What women need to do is:

if you are poked in the nose, you poke back that person’s nose. If you are punched, you punch back with the same strength. How Zakky sliced my heart, I slice his heart till it bleeds and is filled with jealousy. Then he knows the feeling ... Perhaps it would be a lesson.(GJ, pg. 215)

The end which justifies the means which is held by Kejora raises the question of the wisdom of the female character in kissing a man who is not married to her. Kejora’s choice of tool in her revenge is also considered extreme and that is choosing a Jew (or be it a Muslim).

Justice for women as championed by Kejora, as in the work of Abidah El Khalieqy, is too fiery, agressive and bold to the point of it losing its Islamic and Eastern qualities. This shows that the feminism championed has strayed from the original struggles of Muslim women as highlighted by the writer. Abidah’s form of the struggle is too harsh and it mimics Western feminist cause. From one point of view, the prominence of the Kejora character, who is portrayed as being ‘not too pretty’ but is quickly vocal, shows how impressive women can be in stimulating the male ego and at the same time is capable of lowering male standards. From another point of view, Kejora’s character has not only strayed but is also seen as foolish because she is willing to victimize herself merely to avenge an uncontrollable desire for revenge and to lower the status of women itself.

In turn, for Azmah Nordin, seeking revenge is not an option in attaining her vision in the struggle against injustice. Even though Zakiyyah is portrayed to have great dreams of opposing male dominance in her work place, she steadfastly agrees that “behind a successful man is a woman” and vice versa. As a woman who is wise, Zakiyyah does not allow herself to be carried away by her problems. Her rivals’, in the PBC firm, slander and vile accusations do not give Zakiyyah the choice of seeking revenge, even though her home breaks up due to their slander. The vile accusations are instead turned into a catalyst for her to strive harder. Zakiyyah’s husband’s infidelity (the emphasis here is on husband and not as a mere fiance), does not in the least bring about any feelings of grudge which can only destroy hers. In Azmah’s hands, Zakiyyah conforms to the instrument of fate. Despite being a person with great
inner strength, who is wise and determined, Zakiyyah is resigned to her husband two-timing her. She is also patient towards Rafaei who does not respect and value her as a wife. Zakiyyah’s agony is intensified when Rafaei divorces and denies her custody of her two children.

Zakiyyah’s faith in women’s struggle in accordance to Eastern culture and custom makes her patient with her husband’s behaviour. This patience is what gives strength to this portrayal of a typical woman. Zakiyyah’s struggle shows the concept of ‘to give in does not mean to lose out’. Patience, which is regarded as indifference, is in actual fact a very painful form of punishment for a man. Hence, the man by the name of Rafaei loses out to Zakiyyah’s patience. He is depicted to frequently beg Zakiyyah to return to him, more so when he finds out that she is not in the wrong. This is what separates the struggles of Azmah Nordin from those of Abidah El Khalieqy and also the difference between Azmah and the Western feminist cause.

For some radical Western feminists, women do not need men in their lives. As mentioned earlier, the male-female struggle which exists in both novels revolves around the question of partnership. Hence, the wish of gynocritics is to see men pay attention and give their support to women. Men are expected to become aware that women like Zakiyyah and Kejora need men who are understanding and responsible as stated in the following clip:

“... God created Eve from Adam’s rib, a man. So that she is always beside him – shoulder to shoulder; not behind him ... or at the tip of his finger ... like a fingernail which can be clipped when not in need any more ... or at the sole of his foot ... to be trampled upon as he wishes, is it not?” (ML, pg. 238).

As a writer who has the complete power to portray her characters, Azmah Nordin is not bias against men. Even though many of her male characters are evil, the writer is steady in giving credit to men through the typical male character of Panglima Burhan who is good, supportive and just to women. Same too for Panglima Muhlis, who is depicted to be the typical man and who has the qualities sought after by women like Zakiyyah which is that of one who is religious and is aware of his strength as a man. Zakiyyah’s mother too, releases her long-held grudge against men when she meets Haji Abdullah whom she sees as a responsible man and is a protector of women in their hour of need. Azmah also proves that not all women are perfect for example, Zakiyyah’s sister whose mind is clouded by money and her husband’s adoration, the same with Zakiyyah’s mother-in-law who is jealous of her son’s, Rafaei’s, love for Zakiyyah.

This also goes for Kejora’s attitude when she finally realises that not all men are evil like Paman Hassan and Paman Khalil who take advantage of weak young girls. Not all males are like Prahara who belittles women’s efforts and not all females are like her grandmother.
who is too old for new ideas. The only thing is that, as a woman she has
to continue with her struggle to free women from *the dumps of defeat,*
*oppression, weakness, stupidity, powerlessness* (GJ, pg. 214).

These two women writers also agree upon education being the
most effective weapon in order to achieve their goals in their struggle.
Education and knowledge are the talismans which can save women
from any problem. So as to prove that women have the same meaning
and importance as men, Kejora strives to be a daughter who succeeds
not only in education but also in commanding religious knowledge.
This conviction bears fruit when she succeeds to continue her studies
abroad.

Zakiyyah’s tenacity in studying in night classes and through
 correspondence courses, moves Panglima Borhan to send her overseas.
Her wisdom as a woman is shown not only through her receiving a
degree but also through her buying PBC stocks while she is abroad.
Hence, when she returns from overseas, Zakiyyah already has her own
stocks which places her to be on a par with the male workers who, prior
to this, were arrogant and questioned her capabilities.

“... God is just. Her acumen in business is equivalent to that of a man. She
is confident of that. She will definitely prove to the businessmen that she is
not easily played as the fool. No, as long as there is a desire to rise against
injustice...” (ML, pg. 33).

Zakiyyah succeeds because she possesses wisdom. So too for
Kejora and Lola, who in the end becomes a lawyer. Women who do
not use their wisdom will be carried away by idiocy and will easily be
ignored by men. This is what happens to Dayang Zubaidah, Sonya and
Kejora’s friends who are not serious in attaining knowledge.

The protagonists in the two novels under discussion, rebel against
patriarchal norms which put pressure on them. Nevertheless, each woman
takes a different approach in releasing themselves from pressure. Through
Azmah Nordin, Zakiyyah takes the patient route which staunchly holds
on to traditional Malay practice and religion even though she is said to
be lacking in religious guidance. While Kejora, through the hands of
Abidah El Khalieqy, chooses a route which is close to that of Western
feminists. She is shown to wreak revenge on infidelity. In truth, Abidah
is seen as being too forceful in her drive for feminism which makes the
portrayal of her female character unrestrained and inconsistent.

For Indonesian women writers, the problems of gender and sexuality
are nothing new and need not be hidden. Since the time of of N.H. Dini’s
novels, who was not awkward in putting forth issues of deception, up to
the time when the literary world of the Malay Archipelago was rocked by
the boldness of Ayu Utami in her *Saman and Larang,* Indonesian women
writers are unlikely to change and indeed, they are more aggressive in
their efforts in championing the rights of women. This matter is closely
related to the cultural conditions in Indonesia which can accept bold portrayals as such. According to Maman S. Mahayana,\(^\text{15}\) expositions of what is considered as taboo issues by Malaysian society, has become the norm for Indonesian society. They are able to accept them with open hearts as literature mirrors its society. What is written in works is what is experienced by the society, which possess various ethnicities and religious beliefs, along with the complexities of social, political and the country’s economical problems.

However, in Malaysia things are different. The society here still cannot accept things which are considered taboo. That is why writers such as Azmah Nordin are reticent/scared\(^\text{16}\) to aggressively and boldly express the issues of gender and sexuality. In whatever form the portrayal takes, the women writers of the two countries have succeeded in writing with an awareness of the specialities which they have. These novelists have also shown women’s success in enlightening men on the importance of cooperation and combining efforts.

**Conclusion**

Even though there are only a handful of Malaysian and Indonesian women writers, nonetheless their presence in the world of literature has made a large impact. They are able to analyse women’s problems in a just and impartial way. As women, they know for themselves the bitterness faced by domestic women and are able to steep themselves in the volatile feelings of their gender. The mission and vision of the struggle of women writers to give rights to the women of the Malay Archipelago are not solely based on women’s egocentricities. Women, as seen by the women writers of South-East Asia, ought to be placed in their rightful places, without any discrimination, without any oppression. This is the actuality which the women writers of this region wish to fight for. However, social developments, politics and society in Indonesia, which is multitudinous and complex, show that Indonesian women writers are bolder, more aggressive and more self-assured.

**Reference**


\(^{15}\) An interview with the literary critic and researcher of Indonesian and Malaysian works, Maman Mahayana on 11th August, 2004 in Palembang, Indonesia.

\(^{16}\) If permitted, she would very much like to openly reveal the problems which exist in the society, uncensored.


(Translated by Nor 'Ashikin Abdullah)