Women’s self-narratives, in the form of autobiographies and memoirs, are not common in Malaysia. As Hilary Tham (1996, preface), a former Malaysian who made America her home, once said of her own memoir-writing that “the idea of writing my memoirs goes against the grain of my upbringing. Though I had breached the taboo with my poems, prose feels like a greater violation.” The conservative view that genre of this kind should present “factual” events of the past, allowing the public a view within the private space, is likened to a violation of family history. Writing about the self/selves is an active process of recollecting and recording, and that what it reveals deserves to be remembered, not forgotten. This paper describes the memoirs of two women whose works collectively relocate female desire and creativity, resignifying sources for the formation of identity and values. I shall explore the implications of poetic patterns evident in these texts: strategies of self-inscription, explorations of memory, caught moments of “experienced truth”. Rather than providing a closure to these women’s existence, their narratives offer readers rich new possibilities for the ways Malaysian women may want to live their lives.

Women’s personal narratives, from feminist critical practice, have become texts in wide-ranging critical and theoretical debate on the status of self, the nature of self-representation, of identity and values. As Laura Marcus (1994: 1) highlights, the popularity of the genre among feminist writers and theorists came about due to its exposure
of "processes of exclusion and marginalisation in the construction of literary canons." The significance of this genre means that women's other forms of writings such as diaries, letters, and journals are now considered as women's texts. By widening the scope of female corpus, issues pertaining to women can be understood and analysed from multiple perspectives.

Perhaps it is necessary here to make a distinction between autobiographies and memoirs. Strictly speaking, an autobiography is the evocation of a life as a totality (Marcus, 1994:3); in other words, a record of a life's accomplishment. A memoir is an intimate account of personal experience, rich in colour, devoid of deeds and fame. Since theories on autobiography have been more heavily discussed than memoirs, I have appropriated some of the issues of autobiographical writing because I view both modes as self-narratives. Phillippe Lejeune (1989) has written of the "autobiographical pact" which is the unspoken compact that binds readers and writers of autobiographical discourse. Autobiographies and memoirs are a form of personal writing which is referential (that is, imbued with history), mainly retrospective and in which the author, the narrator and the protagonist are identical. For both the autobiography and memoirs, the multiple network of relations through which "I" must compose a "self" where the text defines the social status of women and the more elusive text of individual women in which language, desire, and situation play their games seemed irreconcilable. To the untrained eye, autobiography and memoir present as untroubled a reflection of identity as the surface of a mirror can provide. The corresponding assumption has been that autobiography is a transparency through which we perceive the life, unmediated and undistorted. The question remains: how have women articulated their own experience, shaped their own texts artistically, met their own reflections in the problematic mirror of autobiography? What do the readings reveal? The women analysed in this paper are framed by the conditions of their femininity, social class, marital status, and religion. The criticisms they defend themselves against when inventoried amounts to a profile of respective cultural femininity – an exploration of self-inscription and subjectivity. The "I" asserted that she "writes her own life" for her own sake, out of the need to differentiate the self from others, only to show that its constitution and individuation predicated reference and relatedness to others. As Marcus (1994, 273) emphasizes, "recounting one's own life almost inevitably entails writing the life of an other or others." Hence, while the writer herself may want to open up her private life, the lives of others whom she comes into contact in her memory will also face public scrutiny.

Feminist theorists have looked at women's personal narratives in terms of duality, of confrontation and exclusivities: male vs female;
heterosexual vs homosexual, independence vs the constraints of family; passive acquiescence to society's dictates versus revolt and militant activism. The works examined here show the wide diversity of routes of which women, in vastly different circumstances, have asserted their place as active subjects challenging the oppressive representation and actions of powerful hierarchies, not only in regard to their individual situation but in terms of a social group. Khatijah Sidek and Shamsiah Fakeh are Malay radical politicians whose presence in Malaysian history seems to have been a blighted one. This paper examines the many lines these women have devised to speak of themselves for themselves and for their readers, going beyond the constraints of traditional boundaries. For these two women, the journey each takes to discover herself in a way directs us toward some destination she has envisioned for us as we traverse the narrative of self, from the world of memory back to the real world we live in.

A memoir, as the term represents, focuses on the memory at the moment, memory in the past and the reality that it supposedly represents. Perhaps we fondly hope that reality and truth might actually be the same things. From the perspective of New Historicism, we know that they cannot be the same things. The processes of writing memoirs and autobiographies approximate those of a modern historian. History, as is memoirs, emphasizes on events that accumulate to tell a story. Memoirists share the same conventions in their writing: they select and arrange events; characterize actors, choose the first person point of view; select the tone of voice; and decide what kind of audience who will read it. Historians are supposed to view events from an objective perspective but as Hayden White convincingly argues, this is a difficult feat. With this caveat in mind, the memoirs chosen in this paper show how these women memoirists remember their history. The women memoirists provide a diverse, mostly uncomfortable occasions for the excluded who constitute themselves as subjects of history. Khatijah's and Shamsiah's memoirs are radical in their content. They provide an insight into the lives of committed politicians whose gender and political beliefs suffered tremendous blows. Their memoirs also subvert the notion that conventional norms of Malay women are modest and ladylike, incapable of engaging in militant action. For Khatijah Sidek, the first head of the women's wing of UMNO who demanded equal rights for its members, her mark as a politician is unknown to many young Malaysians. Shamsiah Fakeh, another radical Malay female politician who lived in exile for many years before returning to Malaysia, uses the occasion of the memoir to tell us her side of the story. Being on the other side of politics, her life tells us another kind of Malaysian history, the one that does not appear in history books. Though coloured by their idiosyncracies and respective ideologies, the two memoirists use the
mode of self-narratives to assert their presence despite the cultural discourses that suppressed female subjectivity.

For both memoirists, if memory has provided the raw material, their fires of imagination have acted as the refinery. They embraced the autobiographical “I,” refusing to be silenced, unwritten, and unread. The Malay worldview is circumscribed by the importance of “saving face” as prescribed in the Malay adage “Menconteng arang ke muka” (literally translated as rubbing charcoal on one’s face”). Saving one’s face is crucial to safeguard one’s honour (maruah). Every Malay child is educated to understand the importance of “face,” and the way in which one is always careful to “give face” and “save face.” It is part of the social imperative: the obligation to help one another keep intact the appearance of dignity; of self, of family, of clan and race. We have an unspoken contract with each other to keep doors tightly closed on family skeletons. Hence, the idea of revealing intimate details of personal experience will undoubtedly transgress the notion of saving face. Khatijah Sidek’s memoirs, written in simple Malay, in the mode of oral literature, reveals her strong commitment to Malay politics. Shamsiah Fakeh’s memoirs are an attempt to set the records straight. Seen by Malaysians as a Communist collaborator, her exile to China and the stories prior to her exile are coloured by hearsays and untruths. As Shamsiah herself says: “Of course the news and writings published in the newspapers and magazines attracted the attention of many and debated by them. Only time, history, and the telling of my own story will disclose to what extent the news and stories about me was accurate” (Memoir Shamsiah Fakeh, 12). We can surmise that by writing their stories, by revealing the “I”, the two women bring to dialogue detailed, personal and intimate experience, although the telling of their stories bring to bear also their indiscretions, shameful mistakes. These women are courageous enough to tell others about an imperfect life well lived.

Each memoir brings with it a varied and complex repertoire of subjectivities that influenced each writer’s negotiation of the autobiographical “I”. Each woman confronted a complex nexus of issues revolving around the relationship of embodiment to subjectivity. Telling the stories call for a great courage, and a willingness to make herself vulnerable to the high standard of truth each one feels compelled to bring to the telling of the “I” story. Amongst the common issues each memoirist highlights in their memoirs are vulnerability of the female gender, identity, and female agency.

Vulnerability of Gender

Khatijah Sidek’s memoirs of the vulnerability of her gender comes to light and the ways in which she soldiers on despite setbacks. However, coming from a Minangkabau family, one that practises matrilineality,
Khatijah’s life as a female was not as hard as either Tham’s or Lim’s. A much-loved and wanted child, she enjoys being indulged by her parents. The strength of women must have helped along in her fight for women’s emancipation for throughout her life, beginning from the time she started school, Khatijah has a natural inclination towards excellence in education. During the Japanese occupation where women became victims of rape, Khatijah tells a story of escape from the Japanese: “When I heard it, I cried to my sister: “Let us run, the Japanese are coming!” And we ran away without knowing who was outside the house. It was very dark, and behind our house, there was a pond. I climbed the fence again, and I fell into the pond. My sister did not know I had fallen in the water, as it was so dark. I called out to her: “I have fallen in the pond! Help me, help me!” And my sister cried, “Where? ... I felt it better to die with my sister like that rather than let the Japanese do something to us, for we came from a good family and it would be a great shame.” (49)

More than being vulnerable as a female during the Japanese Occupation, the fact that Khatijah was not married and went places in pursuit of political commitment caused anxiety among family and older members of the community. Finally, she agreed to become the second wife of a medical doctor: Dr. Hamzah came to my house, and told me how slow the progress of women in Malaya was. When I saw his face, I felt pity for him, and he asked me if I could help him in this matter. Then, he asked me to marry him. ... I agreed to marry him, but on one condition: if I were to marry him, he must not forbid me to go wherever I had to go; I had to have my freedom to organize the women of Malaya for independence. He agreed, and we wrote a letter agreeing to that. (84)

But as Khatijah repeatedly stresses in her memoirs, being in a polygamous marriage is not easy. She explains that in Indonesia, she “had fought against polygamy” but in Malaya, she has found out that “women were afraid to take up the monogamy issue for fear that it was too political” (92). There were many occasions when Khatijah was left to her own devices because her husband gave more attention to his first wife with whom he had nine children. In one instance, she was disturbed by the presence of two European men and went out to look for her husband at his first wife’s house. When he came back a few hours later to the house, he asked his friend to send Khatijah and the children back to her house. But instead of sending them home, the friend made improper suggestions. When the man refused to send her back to her house and instead drove her to a cemetery and threatened her about spirits of the dead, Khatijah responded,” If you molest me, I shall kill you, now, with this [baby] bottle.” With her baby in her arms and little daughter at 3 in the morning, she “walked half a mile back to her husband’s house.” (107). The tribulations that Khatijah suffered because
of being the second wife, and the improper treatment of a husband who wanted to practise polygamy became public knowledge.

Shamsiah’s predicament as a woman is more pitiful. Shamsiah was married to four men, but except for the last one, all her husbands did not treat her fairly. The first one abandoned her when she was eight months’ pregnant. Upon discovering his desertion, she walked for four miles back to her parents’ house. Shamsiah’s divorce is an eye-opener:

Yasin had planned his departure carefully. He did not divorce me according to Islamic teachings. How could he divorce a wife who was eight months’ pregnant? How could he leave his wife in such a decrepit situation? Where was his humanity? (21)

Her husband’s neglect and subsequent desertion sensitizes Shamsiah to patriarchal victimization of women. Her second marriage to a spy was also very short, with her husband neglecting her in the five months they were together. While the first two marriages were arranged by her parents, the third marriage to Ahmad Boestamam, a Malay nationalist, was politically motivated. Similar to Khatijah, Shamsiah was also a second wife but the main intention of her marriage was to “intensify her political knowledge” (41). A well-known Malay politician, Ishak Haji Muhammad was said to have motivated the union. In an interview in 1991, however, Ishak was reported to have said that Shamsiah married Ahmad Boestamam because she was “the kind that loved getting married.” Although Shamsiah said she was not “hurt” by the label, by telling us the reason behind her marriage, Shamsiah is refuting other versions, untruths, which soil her reputation as someone who was fiercely nationalistic. Shamsiah, however, was on good terms with the first wife, like “siblings” (41). But this marriage too did not last long because of the intrusion of Boestamam’s mother and sister. After an argument, Shamsiah walked out of the marriage. She compares this divorce with the first two failed marriages. While the first two were due to male victimization, the third divorce was initiated to solve the issue of polygamy. She realised that polygamy was a difficult practice. Her failed marriages lead her to this conclusion:

Pendeknya tugas untuk meningkatkan taraf hidup kaum wanita, untuk mencapai hak persamaan antara lelaki dengan wanita, dan untuk membebaskan wanita daripada belenggu penindasan adalah tugas besar dan berat. ... Sebagai pemimpin pergerakan wanita, aku perlu menunjukkan contoh yang baik dan harus berani memperjuangkan nasib kaum wanita dan emansipasi sejati kaum wanita. (45)

The responsibility of upgrading the life of women, to achieve equality between men and women, to free women from patriarchal victimization is extremely heavy, ... As a leader of the women’s movement, I must provide exemplary conduct and be brave in fighting for the cause of women and their emancipation.

What emerges from her memoirs is deep-seated anger at the
differential treatment afforded to men and women and deep rooted conviction of the subjugation of women which she seeks to set right. Shamsiah’s promise to emancipate women from patriarchal victimization brought a fresh motivation. In her commitment, she experienced many hardships. One incident is especially touching. Her fourth marriage to another comrade, Wahi Anuwar, produced a son. When the son was less than two months old, the group who was living at the edge of a jungle, was attacked by the British army. The couple were separated, Wahi disappeared into the hills while Shamsiah ran towards the foot of the hills. In her haste, she suddenly remembered that she had left her baby in the tent, and ran back to pick him up amidst gun-fighting. She was lost in the forest for three days. Mother and child were exposed to the elements of nature-rain and forest creatures:

I walked continuously for two days without food and mainly drank rain water. It was like the forest was endless. I had hoped to meet up with Wahi Anuwar or other comrades but it was futile. I failed to differentiate day and night in my confusion. After the third night, I became extremely weak and lost hope. I was prepared to die with my little son. I lay him down, fell to the ground beside a big tree, and waited for death. (69)

She was later found by some party members where she discovered that her husband had surrendered to the British. It meant another permanent separation. Worse, she had to give the baby away because it was not safe to carry him around in the jungle where she was evading arrest and continuing with her mission for freedom from colonial government. It was only later that she discovered that the child was murdered by three party members. However, newspaper reports in 1987 reported that she actually killed the child herself in the jungle. One version claimed she smashed the baby on some rocks upon discovering that her husband surrendered to the British. The other version claimed she threw the baby in the river because his cries were dangerous to the group. Shamsiah wants to set the record straight: “The reports and alleged claims were totally untrue. They were terrible accusations and made me confused. That is why I have to explain so that everyone knows the truth and my name can be cleared. ...As a mother who saved her sons’ life amidst bullets of the colonizers and was lost with the small boy for four days in the jungle and a fighter for independence, how could I have killed my own child?” (Memoir Shamsiah Fakeh, 73-75). As a self-confessed militant, Shamsiah wants to undo the image of her as a militant without conscience. While she takes up cause and arms for political beliefs, she is still a woman with maternal instincts intact. The fact that she was fighting for a lost cause, for the institution of Communism, magnifies the view of her as totally deluded and destructive.

The two women survived, albeit varying degrees, the vulnerabilities of their gender. Their stories show heroic struggles against adversity. As
Jackie Stacie (2002, 75) emphasizes in her study, self-narratives offer “stories of transformation in which negative physical affliction becomes a positive source of self-knowledge.” They have faced abandonment, hardship, alienation, poverty, and yet still live to tell their stories of survival. We, too, now share their strengths and wisdom.

Identity

Identity is an important issue for the memoirists. Khatijah and Shamsiah’s identities as fighters for independence and women’s liberation are obvious. The events noted in both their memoirs reveal their deep commitment to politics. For Khatijah, travelling to many parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, being jailed for her political work, being harassed by the British, and having her life dogged by tribulations did not dampen her spirit. At the end of her memoirs, she says: “I know the next few years are going to be hard, maybe even harder than before. I know that I may have to go to jail again, and perhaps for longer than before. I have four children, am not so young, and tire easily, for my body is not as strong as before. But I cannot give up. I must go on.” (162)

For Shamsiah, the way in which her memoirs end, in recapitulating the events prior to her permitted return to Malaysia, she reiterates the hope that the police and army should not have a vendetta against her. Although as a communist she was armed with a pistol and a bomb, she had never killed anyone with her weapon. In fact, she argues that she was the one who was rained with bullets. She was unhappy that people have been saying that she was trigger happy, that she had “special protection against bullets, and that she had the ability to make herself disappear.” (132). To her, all these allegations are baseless, karut. Hence, while she prides herself as a fighter, she wants to set the record straight that she is an ordinary woman, not as evil and armed with magic, as has been perceived by many.

Female Agency

Khatijah and Shamsiah show extraordinary female agency. Most Malay novels portray women submissive and muted but these Malay women’s memoirs expose exceptions to the norms. Ironically both women have now been muted but the stories they tell delineate them as bold, assertive, resourceful, and fully committed to improve the lot of women. Khatijah suffers all types of hardships, harassment, political rivalry, but her spirit of survival did not dissipate. She gave birth to her first baby in jail, but at all times she kept her spirits up by telling herself that she “was suffering for the sake of the people, for the other women I wanted to help.” (93). Because she has adopted Malaya as her home, she could not go back to Indonesia although her mother begged her to do
so. She argues that her “struggle for liberation was not yet completed.” (99). While Malaysian history books recognise Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s first Prime Minister as father of independence, Bapa Merdeka, it is only when I read this alternative history book that I came to know that Khatijah was “Ibu Merdeka.” (124) “The children called me Ibu Merdeka, The Mother of Merdeka, because of the song. ...I advised every mother to teach their children that before they went to school in the morning, they should at first go to their mother to say: Mother, I am going to school. Merdeka! ... Sometimes even Tunku Abdul Rahman was afraid when I gave a speech and shouted “merdeka”. He used to pluck me by the sleeve, and whispered: Che Khatijah, don’t be too fiery with the word merdeka.” (124). It is this indomitable spirit that is rare in Malaysian works but her self-narrative reveal to Malay women the conviction of her beliefs.

Shamsiah’s memoirs highlight the predicament of following an alternative ideology. Stigmatised as a communist, a dreaded word in the Malaysian context, she exposes the trials and tribulations being hunted like an animal. Resilient, untiring, and determined, the life she has charted for her life is a path less followed by people, especially a Malay woman.

By writing the stories of their lives, the memoirists show the extent of their self agency. I am reminded of the words of Nawal el Saadawi who emphasizes that “Words should not seek to please, to hide the wounds in our bodies, or the shameful moments in our lives. They may hurt, give us pain, but they can also provoke us to question what we have accepted for thousands of years. (Nawal El Saadawi Walking Through Fire). The stories of these women open old wounds, show themselves or their family members at their best or worst moments, but their stories provide us with lessons that we may learn.

Final Remarks

The memoirs illuminate the ways in which the memoirists revisit painful or significant moments in their lives which involve a degree of difficulty and struggle in their grasping of the self and how they communicate it. Writing from some geographical and temporal distance from the events they describe in their memoirs, the “I” is the self who writes, the self who was and the self who is. These women who have written their lives, particularly if those lives record the personal and political struggles of the marginalized, show their need to be remembered, acknowledged and reconstructed. The very nature of writing the self revises and questions the pre-existing narratives of each memoirist, resisting and reformulating what is already known. Hence, the memoirs exist as an alternative site of self-definition and affirmation, all attempts to shatter patriarchal silences.
As we read the self narratives of the four women, we are witness to lives and identities still in the making, in the active process of retranslating the past. Writing their memoirs is a mode of healthy self-awareness which could heal some of the wounds of their past. Evidence is also abound of the memoirists engaging in personal criticism as the road towards self-hood. I read these women’s self narratives as the discourse of a detailed, rich, textured, female self. By catching the self in pieces, fragments, refractions, each memoirist inhabits a textual/sexual space between the covers of her book in a way deliberately prevents inscription into anything like traditional selfhood. In responding to the personal narratives left us by these women, we will wish to question some historical constructions of subjectivity and to identify with others, revisiting and revising our own life-stories in the process.

Reference


