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## Politically Incorrect Literature? A Feminist Critique of the Sexual Discourse of the Modern Malay Novel

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### ABSTRAK

*Makalah ini meletakkan kerangka perbincangannya dalam sfera sosiolinguistik mengenai perdebatan antara pemahaman preskriptif dan deskriptif tentang bahasa, justeru menjukstaposisikan praktis “verbal hygiene” seperti “political correctness” dengan pelbagai definisi tentang apa itu sastera. Bahasa yang dikaji di sini ialah bahasa novel Melayu moden, terutamanya apabila menangani tema seks dan seksualiti. Kritikan feminis terhadap bahasa novel Melayu moden dari sudut praktis “verbal hygiene” mendedahkan ketidakhirauan penulis kreatif Melayu tentang isu “political correctness”. Ini dapat dilihat daripada cara wanita, seks dan seksualiti ditangani dalam novel-novel Melayu moden. Makalah ini mencadangkan bahawa pembacaan feminis terhadap novel Melayu moden dapat memberi sumbangan kepada perbincangan tentang apa itu sastera dalam konteks Melayu Islam.*

*Kata kunci: “Political Correctness”, Kesusasteraan Melayu, Wacana Seksual, Kesusasteraan Islam*

### ABSTRACT

*This article frames its discussion within the sociolinguistic sphere of prescriptive versus descriptive debates on language, juxtaposing the verbal hygiene practice of political correctness with definitions of what is literature. The language under scrutiny here is the language of the modern Malay novel, particularly pertaining to its treatment of sex and sexuality. A feminist critique of the language of the modern Malay novel in relation to verbal hygiene practices reveals a predictable disregard of political correctness in the way that women and their sex and sexuality are represented. It is proposed that a feminist reading of the modern Malay novel can contribute to the discussion of what is literature within Malay Muslim contexts.*

*Key words: Political correctness, Malay literature, Sexual Discourse, Islamic literature*

## INTRODUCTION

In order to problematize how use of language is at the center of the discussion on explicit sexuality in the modern Malay novel, I will depart from Orwell's (1945) point that the decay of language marks the decay of civilization and explicate the role of language in debates on political correctness as presented by Deborah Cameron (1995b).

The relationship between language and civilization has been discussed at length by George Orwell in his essay *Politics and the English Language* (1945). Orwell argues that the decay of a civilization and the decay of its language are related, and that furthermore, the decay of a language can be traced to political and economic influences. Whilst it is clear that modern Malay literature has evidently been influenced by the political and economic climate of the country, I propose that the explicit sexual discourse found in the works of Malay authors such as Shahnnon Ahmad is not only politically incorrect, but needs to be interrogated for its potential conflict with definitions and ethics of Malay literature which carries the burden of being located within the larger Islamic literature.

## POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND LANGUAGE USE

How does the issue of political correctness fit into a discussion of what is literature? As a form of verbal hygiene, political correctness is a unique instance in sociolinguistics whereby prescriptivism triumphs over descriptivism. In other words, it is an example of society shaping language, instead of language shaping society.

Before we look at how this can be applied to a discussion on definitions of literature, this paper will begin with a critique of chapter four of Cameron's (1995) book *Verbal Hygiene*, titled "Civility and its Discontents: Language and 'Political Correctness'". In the chapter, Cameron unpacks the term "political correctness" rigorously and explores the idea that "political correctness" is seen as a worrying manifestation of the 1990s *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the age). In doing so, she not only questions where the information or examples of "political correctness" are coming from, but also connects them to language use and raises the more important question of "why the illiberalism, extremism and general absurdity of radical projects should so frequently be evoked through stories about their verbal hygiene practices" (Cameron 1995: 118). In other words, why so much dispute over "mere words"? What she is suggesting here is that although it is obvious that the "political correctness" debate is more than only about language, the conflicting views about language itself is a worthy area of investigation for understanding how language works and how it ought to work. Arguments about definitions of Malay (Islamic) literature, when juxtaposed

against the bigger question of 'what is literature', can also be seen to contribute to the prescriptive versus descriptive debates on language. Is Malay literature by nature didactic and therefore prescriptive? If so, does it not limit what Malay literature is?

Literature can be seen as a form of resistance to such practices of verbal hygiene, that of prescribing what should or should not be used in our language. Cameron perceives that the so-called "politically correct" are known for their insistence on replacing usage which they deem insulting and objectionable to various "minorities". Well-known examples are high school girls becoming "women", mankind becoming "humanity", disabled people becoming "physically challenged" and black people in the United States becoming "African-Americans". This "war of words" has been going on for more than forty years or so, starting with feminists introducing new pronouns and titles such as "Ms. A, chairperson of B" (cited in Cameron 1995: 18) followed by other embattled groups such as ethnic and sexual minorities, older people, and people with disabilities opening or re-opening similar fronts.

What Cameron further questions and then answers is why is there such resistance to this linguistic change. She also criticizes what she calls "simplistic statements by linguists" to explain this phenomenon. This includes Crystal's (1984) assertion that the "feminist campaign against sexist language was among the most successful instances of prescriptivism in living memory" (cited in Cameron 1995: 18) and Cheshire (1984) putting the success of non-sexist language down to "natural linguistic evolution in the face of social change."

Alternatively, Cameron argues that this kind of linguistic change should be of great interest to linguists due to the fact that although at one level anti-sexist and anti-racist verbal hygiene practices are obviously about non-linguistic matters of political belief or allegiance, they are also about the nature of language itself and about people's conceptualisations of language. According to Cameron, this unfortunately

tends to go undiscussed because of the over-simple assumption that 'language reflects society', and that movements for linguistic change are common-sensically represented as merely parasitic on movements for social change; at the same time they are felt to be a superfluous embarrassment to those movements, since any social change will 'naturally' produce linguistic change. (1995: 118)

Here, again Cameron questions why so many people so deeply resent campaigns against sexist, racist, ageist and ableist language and suggests that objections to linguistic reform are rooted in the general illusion that language (English in this case) can be neutral, that a term like "chairman" is neutral. An even more fundamental illusion according to Cameron is that speakers have total control over the meaning of their own discourse – that when we speak, we engage in individual acts of will whose outcome, ideally, is to communicate our own unique intentions. Yet another cherished illusion highlighted by

Cameron (1995:120) is that “although my utterances express my own unique intentions, the linguistic code through which those intentions were ‘put’ into words is unproblematically shared by other speakers of my language”. Thus, again, “this implies that someone who fails to recognise what I ‘really mean’, or who imputes to me intentions I do not in fact have, is not only in error but in breach of universally accepted rules” (ibid.).

These illusions are closely linked to the idea of language as a unifying thread in society, that ultimately there is a common language, a neutral and universal language and the emergence of so-called “political correctness” may, observes Cameron, be a challenge to this. “It pushes to the limit established beliefs about what a language is, or ideally should be and therefore it causes considerable anxiety” (Cameron 1995:120).

Thus, it is clear that the new politically motivated verbal hygiene practices assumes that language is not just a medium of ideas but a shaper of ideas; that it is always and inevitably political; and that the ‘truth’ someone speaks may be relative to the power they hold. And to Cameron, it is this set of assumptions, rather than the mere intention to substitute one set of terms for another, that makes the question of “politically correct” language so explosive.

#### DEFINITIONS OF MALAY LITERATURE

It is clear that the issue of political correctness is more than simply a matter of changing unacceptable terms to those more acceptable to society. In this paper, I choose to consider Malay literature in the light of verbal hygiene practices, such as one that is raised by the issue of political correctness. This leads to an examination of sexuality as represented in Malay literature as a potential area that resists definitions of political correctness and verbal hygiene practices.

It is therefore pertinent, at this juncture, to explore the confusion demonstrated by Malay authors as they struggle to assert an Islamic identity in their writings, particularly exemplified by the works of one of its more prominent national laureates, Shahnun Ahmad. This confusion can be seen in the tendency towards discomfiting descriptions of sexuality and sexual behaviour in the discourse of modern Malay literature, paradoxically while Islamic values is simultaneously being promoted. I argue that such explicit sexual expressions and sexist language can be defined as being politically incorrect in view of the premise that Malay/Islamic literature emphasizes “beautiful language and beneficial content”<sup>2</sup>. Ungku Maimunah (2003:54-55) explains that:

[i]n general *sastera* (“literature”) is used to connote language that is beautiful and content that is good or beneficial (*bahasa yang indah dan isi yang bermanfaat*). Notwithstanding the two aspects singled out, the emphasis on language, in particular beautiful language, seems to dominate Malay understanding of literature. Beautiful language is seen as an integral component whose presence gives validity to a text’s claim to literariness.

This understanding of what is literature within Malay contexts helps to define Malay literature and continues to be used as a measurement of what should and should not be accepted within the Malay literary canon. Ungku Maimunah (2003:55) points to the emphasis on language, and not content, in the Malay understanding of literature as in *Kamus Dewan*, which defines literature as “language used in books, not colloquial or bazaar language” [*bahasa dalam kitab-kitab (bukan bahasa basahan)*]. This definition, she argues, “not only emphasizes language and its employment but also distinguishes language that is not beautiful as ‘not literature’” (ibid.).

*Kamus Dewan* however is clear that aesthetics refers to language or beautiful language, and is significantly silent on the question of content. With regard to content, whilst concession for its presence is made, the elaboration is at best general and is content with the insistence that it should be “beneficial”. However, of more importance is the glaring absence of a demand for a particular kind of content in a work before it can be designated as literature. (Ungku Maimunah 2003:58)

The explicit references to sexual acts and sexuality in the modern Malay novel may thus be perceived as transgressing the definition of literature above by the use of language that disturbs the sensibilities of the Malay Muslim reader and which displays ambivalence in its moral content. Interestingly, it is Shahnnon Ahmad himself, criticized for his works which have been claimed to border pornography, who postulates that “[*k*]esusasteraan yang hak adalah kesusasteraan yang berakhlak” – a legitimate literature is a moral literature (Shahnnon Ahmad, cited in Aveling 2000:163), and who is the first critic of Malay literature who is responsible for the location of Malay literature within the larger Islamic literature and has since created continuous polemics on the matter, both through his critical and creative works.

## SEXUALITY AND MALAY IDENTITY

Public concerns over the increasing preoccupation of the population, particularly in Malay society, with sex, can be seen to escalate with an increasing awareness of the way that sex is used especially to sell the news. The popular women’s magazine *Jelita* in its August 2004 issue addresses the issue of detailed reports on sex related cases in the Malaysian media. News reports on high profile sex crimes such as the murder of Noritta Samsudin are sensationalised stories highly newsworthy in media practice. Norhaizan Ahmad (*Jelita* August 2004:76) questions the need for the description of every little detail of the case including the sexual act itself, without apology and without consideration of its effect on the mind of society. By such detailed and explicit description of the internal and external physical condition of the individual “mengulas secara terperinci dan terang-terangan mengenai keadaan fizikal dalaman dan luaran individu”,

Norhaizan argues that through such reporting, the media has indirectly become a legal source of pornographic material.

Malay sexuality has often been assumed to be kept under wraps and talked about in “hushed tones” (Tope 2004). In exploring the connection between Malay sexuality and identity, Tope (2004) finds that:

... there is relative silence on the invisible aspects such as sexuality. To begin with, sexuality has a confidential, secret nature that keeps it invisible. This invisibility is usually personal in nature. In traditional Malay societies, it is a topic generally avoided, elided, or often dismissed as a non-issue. Regarded as a taboo subject, or a necessary evil at best, sexuality seems to be regarded as a discomfiting, discomfiting, do-we-have-to-talk-about-it topic meant for hushed whispers or instant dismissals.

Tope further observes that this silence has influenced literature written by Malay writers (her research is limited to creative works in English) to the effect that,

[t]here seems to be among Malay writers a hesitation, refusal or inability to express the sexual self. I can only conjecture explanations for the silence. Perhaps it is because of Islamic sanctions against the use of the human body for aesthetic purposes. Or perhaps Malay traditions impose strict cultural control on the sexual self. Whatever the reason, Malay sexuality may be invisible not only in the personal sense but also in the ethnic sense. The reticence creates a hushed air around this identity site, implying the hidden, buried nature of the Malay sexual self.

Contrary to Tope’s observation, scholars of Malay literature have asserted that far from being taboo, sexuality has unassumingly become an important ingredient in modern Malay literature, thus allowing modern Malay literature to become a space for the explicit expression of sexuality, revealing a tendency to cater for the prurience of the Malay reader. On this, Mohd Zariat Abdul Rani (2004: v), posits “manifestations of sex act as additional ingredients to spice up the text”.

## ISLAM AND MODERN MALAY LITERATURE

As a country geographically rooted firmly in the East, Malaysia finds itself still shaky in trying to define itself as a modern progressive nation, while retaining its Eastern identity, led by a government that operates within the framework of an “Islamic government”. Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, meaning that its rituals are observed during state official functions. Within the majority Malay Muslim community in Malaysia, fears have arisen about the dilution of identity and consequently the loss of spirituality as Malays face the onslaught of rapid modernization. The process of modernization has resulted in a dichotomous position for the Malays as they struggle for a balance in their spiritual (good) and material (evil) self.

This dilemma can be seen in the Malay Muslims' tendency to Islamise practices they deem as non-Islamic or secular. Modern Malay literature can be seen to have undergone, or rather, is still undergoing, this process of Islamization whereby it locates itself within the bigger pool of modern Islamic literature. Mohd. Affandi Hassan (1992:3), however, cautions against such a superficial Islamization of Malay literature, arguing that such superficial or artificial treatment may produce writers labelled as Islamic who produce works that are anti-Islamic or which have even inadvertently secularised Islam.

Modern Malay literature exists within the context of modern-day Malaysia, an Islamic but multicultural country. Whilst labelling itself as an Islamic multicultural nation is not unproblematic in itself, Malaysia also struggles as a nation balancing its Islamic identity with the rapid material and social developments brought about by its pursuit of a "developed nation" status by the year 2020.

#### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN MALAY LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Malay political correctness and language use have not been an issue that has received much attention from language scholars. While the issue of the derogatory term '*keling*' in reference to the Indians in Malaysia, and which was included in the *Kamus Dewan* became an issue a couple of years ago, leading to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka being accused of promoting racist discourse, not much have been talked about it in relation to sexist language or sexuality. The opinion that the Malay language is not sexist is often explained away using the fact that the third person pronoun '*dia*' in Malay does not indicate sex, leading to the simplistic conclusion that Malay language does not contain prejudicial elements or gender bias.

I would propose here that political correctness in the Malay language should be a concern, especially when Malay language use itself reflects the Malays' insensitivity towards language use that can be seen as insulting or offensive. Thus, politically incorrect occurrences in Malay would be dependent on the contexts of use and generally not embedded within the system.

It is the stand of this paper that sexually explicit language in modern Malay literature can be read as a form of political incorrectness. The use of overtly sexual language in modern Malay novels reveals a preoccupation with sex and sexuality within Malay society. As a literature that claims to continue in the tradition of Islamic literature, Malay literature that uses explicit language in its depiction of sex and sexuality reflects a confused identity paradoxically opposed to Islamic practice and Islamic literary traditions.

Perhaps more importantly for a feminist reading, apart from the overt sexual overtones, the language of the Malay novel is generally found to be

overwhelmingly sexist, leading to the work being read as doubly politically incorrect.

Sexism in Malay literature is apparent particularly in the dehumanisation of women characters and their bodies. For example, the female body in the modern Malay novel has been described as food to be eaten, land that needs to be farmed and even a flower from which honey needs to be extracted/ sucked, or which blossoms and then wilts from [Yahya Samah, *Kelkatu* 53] *atau yang “kembang” dan juga “layu”* [Yahya Samah, *Kelkatu* 85]). The use of phrases such as “young meat” from (“*daging muda*” [Yahya Samah, Pecah Berderai 4]), “the bone, skin and meat of a woman”, “country chicken” which has “delicious meat” from “*tulang, kulit dan daging seorang wanita*”, “*ayam kampung yang “dagingnya sedap”* [Yahya Samah, *Kelkatu* 93] and “victim” (‘mangsa’) to refer to women and women’s bodies reduces women to things to be used by men, passive and not in control of their fate. This contrasts with the words and phrases used to refer to men such as “bug” (*kumbang*), “animal” (*binatang*), “dog” (*anjing*) and “hungry crocodile” (*buaya lapar*), while semantically reflecting the predatory nature of men, also show men as animals which are “alive” compared to the “dead meat” of the women. It is obvious that linguistically, the woman has been treated as an object to be used, always being assigned to the position of “patient” to whom something is done, and not that of an agent.

In this paper, I propose that the use of sexually explicit language in modern Malay literature amounts to a form of political incorrectness. Such use reveals Malay society’s preoccupation with sexuality that has become more overt or explicit, especially in Malay creative writing and also in the media. This proposition is supported by an analysis of the language of three novels by Shahnnon Ahmad, namely *Tok Guru*, *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul* and *TIVI*.

## THE SEXUAL DISCOURSE OF SHAHNON AHMAD

Perhaps, unfortunately for him, Shahnnon Ahmad’s most well known (and presumably most widely read) novel is his notorious *Shit* (1999). Written to express his disgust at the political scenario in Malaysia, Shahnnon wrote to shock and successfully did so. The use of such openly taboo language in a creative work written by a national laureate helped sell the book; the Malaysian public was certainly fascinated, despite at the same time being repelled by it. The novel’s title, *Shit @ pukimak* created a furore and shocked the sensibility of a nation undergoing what was seen as possibly the biggest political upheaval that Malaysia had ever experienced.

This paper looks at Shahnnon’s works that have clearly juxtaposed religiosity with sexuality, namely *Tok Guru*, *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul* and *TIVI*. A feminist reading reveals a categorization of women and their sex and sexuality through



consistent dehumanisation of the woman's body and the sexual act itself. Shahnnon's works illustrate the trend in Malay literature in dealing with morality whereby

[t]he *wakil rakyat* ("parliamentarians/state councillors/people's representatives") were particularly targeted for their indulgence in illicit sex while religious leaders were depicted as hypocrites who used religion to further their own interests, namely their polygamous inclinations. In short, all figures of authority were similarly cast as negligent of their duty, selfish and corrupt, and held directly responsible for the plight of the poor Malay masses. (Ungku Maimunah 2003:17)

Two main labels in the categorization in Shahnnon's works are the categorization of women as soil that needs to be planted with seeds or land that needs to be farmed, and also as garments for men to wear. In *Tok Guru*, Shahnnon depicts the Malays' desire to be close to God and to strengthen their piety. The novel is told from the first-person perspective of the members of a family who seek the guidance of a pious person, Tok Guru, in practising their religion. As the story progresses, it is clear that the brand of religiosity taught by Tok Guru is one that centres on sex and sexuality through the abuse of the privilege of polygamy amongst men. In the novel, to have more than one wife is the measurement of religiosity, the more wives you have (maximum four), the more religious you are. And for women, their ultimate test of religiosity is in their involvement in helping their husbands find new wives. Early in the novel, as they adjust to a more religious lifestyle under the guidance of Tok Guru, Mami (the wife) is pressured with the task of finding Nana (the husband) a new wife. The categorization of women's sexuality begins with Mami's question to Nana, "*Nana nak cari yang jandakah atau anak dara?*" (p. 39). Nana answers her by referring to what Tok Guru said, that,

*isteri itu macam ladang. Dia mesti subur. Tanahnya tanah baik, bukan tanah gersang kering kontang. Kalau tanah tak baik, Nana nak tanam benih macam mana. Benih saja baik, tapi tak tumbuh kerana tanah tak baik.* (p. 39)

The metaphor of the wife as soil in which seeds are planted continues throughout the novel, alongside the metaphor of husband and wife as garments for each other to wear.

*Suami isteri ini macam pakaianlah. Suami pakaian isteri, isteri pakaian suami. Kalau pakaian tentulah yang cantik-cantik, berwarna dan dibuat dari benang-benang yang halus dan baik. Pakaian juga mesti padan. Suami sebagai pakaian mestilah padan untuk isteri. Begitu juga isteri sebagai pakaian mestilah padan untuk suami. Kalau pakaian tak padan, macam mana nak pakai.* (p. 72)

The second novel I analyse is *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul*, which is clearly similar to *Tok Guru* in representing Shahnnon's perception of the sexual exploits of a religious leader (albeit via the legal contract of marriage), and the excesses and corruption of polygamy as practised by the religious leader. "Strikingly,

both *Tok Guru* and *Ummi dan Abang Syeikhul* are about false religious teachers with overwhelming sexual appetites” (Aveling 2000:41).

In the novel, a young woman finds that her desire to be close to God through her husband, the leader of a religious commune, means pandering to her husband’s desires in the marital bedroom, be they of a violent and abusive nature. Ummi, the protagonist, discovers her own sexuality and comes to the realisation that the role of a wife is mainly to cater to a husband’s sexual desires, which in turn will make him a better ‘man of God’, enabling him to concentrate on his missionary work better outside of the marital bed.

Ummi is content to serve her husband with her body because this will sooth his *nafsu* and he can become a better missionary; her service will ensure her of a secure position in heaven as his sexual partner there as well (Aveling 2000:212-213).

Ummi’s naivety in accepting her husband’s teachings as she strives to be a pious woman creates the effect of foregrounding her husband’s corruption and abuse of religion. Again, as in *Tok Guru*, the metaphor of the woman as agricultural soil is used by Shahnnon in explaining the sexual act between husband and wife.

*Kata Allah yang difahami oleh Ummi: Isteri awak adalah tempat awak bercucuk tanam. Maka tanamlah dia sebagaimana saja kamu kehendaki. Dan kerjalah amal yang baik untuk diri mu dan bertaqwalah kepada Allah. (Ummi & Abang Syeikhul 1992:7)*

That sex with a religious man tends to be of a violent and abusive nature is repeatedly described in the novel by contrasting Abang Syeikhul’s behaviour inside and outside of the marital bed.

*Kalau di luar bilik Abang Syeikhul memang lembut dan terasa macam pijak semut pun tak mati, pijak rumput pun tak ranap, tetapi bila berada dalam bilik tidur, garang macam singa, buas macam harimau pula. (Ummi & Abang Syeikhul 1992:8)*

Such violent behaviour is depicted as the norm in such a marriage and is crucial for sexual gratification, and is a shadow of the gratification to be enjoyed in paradise in the Hereafter.

*Allah memang Maha adil, kata Kak Siti kerana rahsia kepuasan rumahtangga dan rahsia yang dirasakan oleh suami bersama isteri dan dirasakan oleh isteri bersama suami adalah kepuasan melalui keganasan dan kebuasan inilah. Nikmat yang dirasakan itu adalah juga bayangan syurga. (Ummi & Abang Syeikhul 1992:8)*

The repeated use of such well known metaphors by Shahnnon Ahmad means that for the Malay reader, the sexual scenes become as explicit as if they are described literally, due to the metaphors being habitualized in the discourse.

In *Tivi* (1995), Shahnnon Ahmad admits that he at times crosses the border over to pornography (Siti Rohayah Attan 1997). Different from *Tok Guru* and *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul*, *Tivi* tells the story of an ordinary family living in a rural village whose life is disrupted by modernization through the influence of the eldest daughter of the family, Chah, who works in a factory in a big town,

Sungai Petani, and who buys a television for the family. In *Tivi*, the television set which represents the modernisation of the Malays easily brings about change in the lifestyle of the family, taking them further away from religion and God, leaving them obsessed with sex and sexual activities, and even leading to incestuous acts between the father and the two daughters.

The explicitness in the discourse of *Tivi* can be seen particularly in descriptions of the daughters' bodies as the characters' senses (particularly the father's) become increasingly heightened through much contact with pornographic material on the television, and through the eldest daughter Chah's provocative behaviour.

*Dan kaki seluar ketat itu cuma sampai di bawah lutut sedikit saja. Maka bogellah betis Chah.... Memang nampaklah lurah punggung Chah sebab seluar itu memang ketat sungguh pun. Dan baju Chah pun tak ada lengan. Nampaklah ketiak apabila tangan terangkat. Nampaklah bukit-bukau dan gunung-ganang Chah. Memang nampaklah sebab memang bajunya begitu. (Tivi 1995:25)*

The description becomes more explicit as Mat Isa becomes more aware of her daughter's body.

*Kadang-kadang Mat Isa renung muka dan tubuh badan Chah lama-lama juga sehingga naik lupa bahawa Chah itu anak daranya sendiri. (Tivi 1995:27)*

Tope (2004) explains such depictions (as illustrated by Shahnon's novels) as "clearly show[ing] that Malay female identity is closely linked not only to the maternal or servile, but also to functions of the body that are in the purview of sexuality" and more importantly, that

[a]s prostitutes, midwives, abortionists, victimized wives, favored mistresses, etc., Malay female identity is sexually defined. Also, except for the femme fatale, the women in these portrayals are disempowered, something that Malay women share with other women in communities ruled by patriarchy.

## TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF MALAY ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Whilst the novels analysed in this paper are those by Shahnon Ahmad, it is interesting to note that it was Shahnon who started spotlighting the need for Malay literature to realize its role as Islamic literature. He defines Islamic literature as

literature produced in the name of Allah and for humankind. The two expressions, "in the name of Allah" and "for humankind", are closely interrelated, for when we produce literature in the name of Allah, we believe automatically, without any doubt, that everything which Allah commands of us (through the Quran and the Sunna) is for the well-being and happiness of human beings. As such, we can conclude that Islamic Literature is literature in the name of Allah and for the good of all humankind. (Shahnon Ahmad, cited in Ungku Maimunah 2003:209)

Ungku Maimunah traces Islamic influence on traditional Malay literature and explains that this is not something new, although the 'dakwah' movement of the 1960s and 1970s meant a revival of Islamic awareness in Malay literature.

Literary writings of the early years mapped out a moral order that was unmistakably underpinned by Islam, thereby establishing in the clearest terms possible the Islamic component of Malay identity. Added to this was the geographical boundary of the rural scene which became a pivot of the Malay world and from which it drew its strength, both religious and cultural. In articulating this world, the literature was informed at all times of the need to protect and preserve this world from the onslaught of the "West" and its decadent values. This was the cry of the Malay masses for whom the literary expression was a legitimate platform. (Ungku Maimunah 2003:11)

She explains further the aim of Sastera Islam (Islamic Literature), that

[b]y giving witness to God's oneness and truths as laid down in the Quran and the Traditions, Sastera Islam sought to invite its readers to "return" to Islam and to achieve Allah's grace. With its clear moral orientation it lent support to a literary form which sanctioned the use of literature for social purposes, a tradition inherent in Malay literature which had unstintingly charted the ebb and flow of the country's history. (Ungku Maimunah 2003:21)

This development in modern Malay literature led to

[s]tories which bore the imprint of Sastera Islam ... thus highlighted instances of transgressions such as *syirik* ("attributing divine qualities to other than Allah"), illicit sex, corruption, dereliction of duty and the like, and the consequences of these lapses which included chaos, misfortunes, ignoble ending or such like catastrophes. (Ungku Maimunah 2003:22)

It is thus clear that

[d]efining Sastera Islam in terms of the larger Islamic tradition obviously serves the goal of establishing links with a heritage that has spanned centuries and transcended geographical boundaries. (Ungku Maimunah 2003:203)

Such a definition of Malay literature is not without its problems. Mohd. Affandi Hassan worries over what he sees as

a growing confusion or inability among writers and critics alike to differentiate between elements of Islam in literature (unsure Islam) and the more rigorous and demanding employment of Islamic literature as a formal discipline in creative writing and its attendant literary criticism. This confusion in turn leads to what he sees as the adoption of the trappings of Islam such as the use of terminology associated with Islam, Quranic verses and references to the Traditions, all of which are grafted onto literary works to give them a superficial Islamic identity. They are then passed on or bandied about as sastera Islam or Islamic literature. According to MAH [Mohd. Affandi Hassan], such works are not informed by clearly defined Islamic philosophical framework and do not demonstrate the necessary Islamic worldview and, as such, are a travesty of Islamic literature. (Ungku Maimunah 2003:249)

Shahnon, however, defends his style of writing what he calls Islamic literature, especially in the controversial *Tivi*, as representing society's reality.

*Jangan marahkan saya sekiranya terasa kelucahannya, terasa erotikanya, terasa pornografinya kerana saya hanya mematuhi tuntutan realiti masyarakat dalam berkarya. Saya tidak boleh berbohong. Saya mencuba mengajak pembaca berdepan dengan realiti masyarakat. Kelucahan, erotika dan pornografi itu adalah real, malah sudah pun melampaui batas yang di luar dugaan sekali.* (Shahnon Ahmad, in Mohamed Anwar 2004:51)

In claiming it to be within the genre of Islamic literature, Shahnon asserts that readers who criticizes *Tivi* as pornographic have missed the point.

*Bagi saya TIVI bukanlah sebuah novelet yang layak dilucahi tetapi sepatutnya sangat layak digeruni. Dalam kegerunan azab Allah itulah tersebatinya unsur tarbiyah, unsur jihad dan sufistik dalam TIVI.* (Shahnon Ahmad, in Mohamed Anwar 2004:52)

It is apparent that Shahnon Ahmad as the proponent of Islamic literature within the Malay literary tradition has paradoxically created ambiguities in the definition of what is literature, more specifically, what is Malay Islamic literature. This state of affairs has led Aveling to conclude that

[i]t may be regretted that the task which Shahnon set himself, the creation of an authentic, moral and non-violent Islamic literature based on a recognition of all persons as the servants of God, remains as yet unfulfilled in Shahnon's writing. (Aveling 2000:217)

This state of affairs certainly does not augur well for the state of modern Malay literature, since it appears to still be grappling with its identity, and still trying to prove its worth within the tradition of Islamic literature.

## CONCLUSION

A close reading of the above novels reveals the objectification of women whereby women are reduced to being body, thus still confirming a Western bias in the representation of Malay sexuality. Malay female sexuality is sensationalised and becomes the centre around which the narration of Malay sexuality revolves. In *Tivi*, it is done through Chah, who brings home a television set for her family and subsequently creates an atmosphere fraught with sexual tension, both through the vicarious television experience and also through her infectious wanton behaviour. In *Tok Guru* and *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul*, Shahnon places the pious woman at the centre, struggling to come to terms with her sexual desires even as she seeks God's pleasure.

Tope (2004) argues that there is a "strong moral component attached to Malay female sexuality. Sexuality, especially female sexuality, seems to be a nemesis of morality" and that such literary works "open the window slightly into

that space of sexuality which defines ethnicity". It is not surprising then that sex and sexuality tend to be foregrounded in modern Malay literature albeit within "[t]he acceptable notion of sex in Malay culture [which] is that it must be conjugal, procreative and heterosexual" (Tope 2004).

There is a strong interconnection between sexual/textual politics and creative writing. The interconnection can be seen in the explicit sexual themes addressed in the modern Malay novel and in the use of sexist discourse particularly in reference to women.

While my framing of sexual and sexist discourse in Malay novels as a form of political incorrectness means that the definition of Malay literature is limited or narrowed, the justification for the use of politically correct language can be seen from the belief that its use fulfils the demands for politeness, accuracy and justice in Malay Islamic literature. These three aspects of politically correct language better suit the definition of Malay Islamic literature to be expressive of "beautiful language and beneficial content".

A familiar criticism of political correctness is that it is actually only a form of euphemism going against the norm of plain language, and which "tells it like it is" or "calls a spade a spade". Orwell (cited in Cameron) feels that this euphemism has a calming effect on the listener/reader "by wrapping unpleasant truths in a soft cloud of 'verbal cotton-wool'". Cameron, however, asserts that just because an expression is more polite than other expressions, does not necessarily make it a euphemism. Cameron compares politeness and euphemism, and differentiates the two; politeness shows awareness and sensitivity to others' feelings, while euphemism is avoidance of use of a word or an idea which if expressed openly is taboo.

The definition of political correctness in this paper has been expanded to include writings that use explicit sexual discourse. The use of such explicit sexual discourse is found to be in opposition to the ethics and politeness of the tradition of Malay Islamic literature and gives rise to the question about which literary tradition modern Malay novelists follow. At the same time, such sexual discourse reveals a sexist approach to representation and categorization of women particularly apparent in the dehumanization of women characters.

The application of political incorrectness to the use of sexual and sexist discourse in the modern Malay novel has opened up a space for a discussion of what is appropriate and what is not in discourses on sex and sexuality within Malay Islamic contexts. This discussion is important in order for Malay Muslim writers to resist uncontrolled sexual liberation and also the habitualization of sexually explicit discourse in Malay literature. Resistance this habitualization process can be seen as a positive move towards critical language awareness of literary texts via a defamiliarization of the term "political correctness" itself.

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