

Blogs of Their Own: A Story of Two Malaysian Women Bloggers

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Abstract

Over the last few years, with the introduction of easy-to-use and integrated services such as Windows Live Spaces, blogging has moved into the mainstream in Malaysia, with women making up 64% of bloggers. Blogging has become popular because it provides an outlet for netizens who find blogosphere a liberating place, so unlike Malaysian traditional print which is censored and licensed. This article is an analysis of two blogs written by Malaysian women that show them negotiating in contradictory ways the line between the private and public dimensions of their lives. The idea that the “personal is political” and the importance of experience still retain an important place in feminist contemporary thought. I argue that many seemingly “trivial and personal” issues have produced a politics formed from the bloggers’ personal experiences and reflections.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf once observed that for a woman to write, she must have money and a room of her own. In asserting that a woman needs a room of her own to write, Woolf addresses both a historical and a contemporary question regarding women’s art and their social status. She sees the question of women and their fiction in three different but related ways: women and what they are like; women and the fiction they write; and women and what is written about them. The questions that Woolf raised in 1928 at a women’s college in England is still valid today in Malaysia. However, I am going to change the scenario somewhat, and change the context to writings produced by women in cyberspace. In today’s situation, a woman perhaps no longer needs a room of her own but an internet-linked computer which allows her anonymity, freedom, and an audience more far reaching than printed books can hope to attain. Whether one is in Besut or Zurich, if one has access to the internet, one may express one’s opinion, generate topics, present information, and facilitate new perspectives.

The web has become a powerful medium of communication, and rightly enough, Malaysian women have embraced this new tool, not the pen, but the keyboard as a means to be heard and to share their thoughts, lives, experiences in an engaging way. The weblog is a medium that allows for one's personal voice to be heard – as O'Brien (2004) says "one writer expressing his thoughts to the world in his own unique style" (xii). Historically, women writers have always welcomed the personal, engaging way – in the same mode as autobiographies, diaries, and journals, blogs have become another mode of expressing and narrating the self. This paper, however, looks at two blogs which are confessional and diary-like. Personal in nature, I will show in the course of my discussion, that there is little distinction between the private and the public.

Blogs, born sometime after the World Wide Web came online in 1991, came into existence as a mode of sharing information. Early blogs had three primary features: they were chronically organized, contained links to other areas of interest on the web, and provided commentary on the links. One of the more interesting things about entries are that they show readers the time of writing – at all hours of the day – sometimes as reasonable as 8 am, but there are many also that indicated some bloggers work late into the night – 11. 30 pm or into the early hours of the morning – 3 am. Readers may leave public comments. Some bloggers entertain anonymity, others require readers to leave some kind of identification. Through RSS (Rich Site Summary) feeds, readers can subscribe to favourite blogs and have new entries delivered by email. These features connect bloggers to their readers in an intimate and private way because they allow both parties to be connected at all time, any time.

Part of the set-up process includes deciding on the level of privacy. Bloggers can choose whether to use a screen name to conceal their identities and whether readers can post comments. While many bloggers use pseudonyms, others openly use their real names. Cyberspace is a place where one can assume any personality, any gender. As one blogger has claimed "we don't actually know that Bloggers are the gender they claim they are." (bethquick.com, March 12, 2006). In one case, "there was a libertarian blogger ... who caused a scandal because she seemed like a hot chick writing witty banter while occasionally making references to a kinky lifestyle. She was enormously popular, until it was discovered that she was a middle-aged man who used the sex appeal of his alter ego to drive traffic his way (bethquick.com, March 12, 2006). This case shows the fluidity and

ambiguity of one's identity. It also shows that lying through one's teeth is made so much easier in cyberspace.

The issue of taking on pseudonyms is a difficult one. To show one's integrity and credibility, especially if one is blogging as a citizen journalist, one would normally identify himself or herself to others, or make the identity known through some means. Rantings by MM for example is easily indentifiable as Marina Mahathir despite her pseudonym, especially because she includes pictures of herself and submits entries that relate her to her father, the previous Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohamed. In many cases, where the entries reveal personal thoughts and feelings, bloggers are more inclined to stay anonymous. In cyberspace, revealing one's identity is a personal choice.

Content is not standardized, allowing for various idiosyncracies and styles to actualize themselves. In a recent study, Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) found evidence of three basic types of weblogs: the content of filters is external to the blogger (links to world events, online happenings, etc.), while the content of personal journals is internal (the blogger's thoughts and internal workings), and k(nowledge)-logs are repositories of information and observations with a typically technological focus (Herring et al, "Into the Blogosphere", 2007). There are blogs dedicated to issues and causes. People blog about themselves, their professions, their hobbies, their families. According to O'Brien (2004), blogs do the following:

Blogs respond more quickly to breaking news than print media and usually provide commentary faster than radio or television.

Bloggers collect and combine information and perspectives from many sources, including other blogs, resulting in a "meta-view" of current events.

Bloggers act as news editors for their readers by linking to relevant news items and screening out the rest.

Blogs are interactive and interconnected. Blogs are a medium for dialogues between bloggers and readers, and readers with other readers, and bloggers with other bloggers and their readers. (3-4)

As Tang (2006) correctly observes, "the fact that blogs can be updated instantaneously made them exceedingly popular in times of crisis when people trawl

the Internet for every scrap of news and information” (1). In Malaysia, strict laws have been put in place which limit free speech especially relating these issues: disaffection against any Ruler or Government; bringing into hatred or contempt or excite disaffection against the administration of justice; raising discontent or disaffection among subjects,; promoting feelings of ill will and hostility between races or classes of the population; and questioning the right and status of “sensitive issues” (Tang: 5)

Should anyone be seen to bring instability to the government, the ISA is used to detain those without trial. The laws for licensing of newspapers also do not make it easy for local media to publish news which may bring the government into disrepute. Malaysia regulates its traditional media to maintain stability in a multicultural nation where issues pertaining to race and religion must be handled delicately and judiciously.

In the context of media licence and opportunity to publish, the web then becomes a space for writers to bend or stretch the laws governing free speech. The sprouting of blogs authored by Malaysians shows that they have found cyberspace a place to congregate and offer their views about anything and everything not tolerated in licensed printed media. More recently, two bloggers have been put on trial for allowing seditious responses of readers in their blogs. The pending legal cases have not dampened the spirit of Malaysian bloggers, however, and they have begun to form a cyberspace union urging free speech.

The existing laws make writing critically about certain issues difficult. For women writers, the opportunity to write and publish is more tenuous. Mainstream print media, for example, shows more male writers being given the space to express their views – women writers resort to women’s magazines where “soft” topics are discussed. Publishing is also an expensive business, and in a country where photocopying is rampant and profits from book sales are rare (except perhaps from examination-oriented books), women do not get the opportunity to be published. Hence, for many women writers, the scenario of being doubly oppressed is very real.

Feminist Lens

While the bloggers do not profess themselves to be feminists, I am reading their production from the lens of feminist theory. Central to the action of women bloggers is

the notion that “the personal is political”. Drawn out from the idea women and men inhabit two different spaces – women the domestic, hence private/ personal domain, and men the public, therefore the political domain. The second wave feminism, however, changed the maxim that the personal is political (Hollows, 2000). Women realised that individual female problems that they have suffered alone and in silence were actually problems that women collectively also experienced. Their biological make-up and social construction due to their biological differences attributed to their perception that women naturally belonged to the private realm and their oppression seemed natural, even desirable. But with the rise of second wave feminism, women began, as Hollows (2000 : 5) argues, “To recognise common problems and experiences, and they used these insights to challenge existing ways of understanding the world which did not fit with their experience of it.” Therefore, problems which women thought were confined to individuals, privately experienced and agonised over, or too trivial to be shared, developed into collective lived reality of women. By exposing and sharing their experiences, women are able to validate their contentment and discontentment.

Women bloggers clearly embrace the notion that the personal is political. Most women bloggers will write about the home front, showing the intricate link that their private/domestic space is also their public/political space. In line with collective bloggers’ resistance to mainstream media, women bloggers also exhibit work that blurs genres, combining personal stories, fiction, and journalism. The result of their writing is something which is raw, honest and startling. As Wood (2001) shows, women’s talk is different from men’s talk. Typically, men speak in a linear manner in which they move sequentially through major points in a story to get to the climax. Their talk tends to be straightforward without embellishments of details. Women’s talk, however, tends to have more details and is mostly non-linear. Whereas a man is likely to provide rather bare information about what happened, a woman is more likely to embed the information within a larger context of the people involved another things going on. As Wood (2001: 132) explains, “Women include details not because all the specifics are important in themselves but because recounting them shows involvement and allows a conversational partner to be more fully a part of the situation being described”. Women bloggers whose writings tend towards self-writing and self-reflection in the form of vignettes of life exemplify this manner of women’s talk.

Women Bloggers

A study conducted by Perseus Development Corp found that women bloggers created 56 percent of surveyed blogs (Trimbath, 2004). The Microsoft MSN survey indicated that 64 percent of Malaysian bloggers are women aged below 25 (<http://www.microsoft.com/malaysia/press/archive2006>, retrieved 16 September 2007). Choosing which blog to read is like picking a book off a shelf. There are thousands of bloggers out there, some writing from Malaysia, quite a number are writing from outside of Malaysia. If one goes to either Malaysian Bloggers Directory or Project Petaling Street Directory, one is spoilt for choice of what to read. I have chosen to discuss two bloggers, Ma and Brood and The Datin's Diaries. Both bloggers choose to be anonymous because their entries focus on personal ruminations, and there are many occasions when the things they reveal not only divulge details about themselves but also people close to them (husbands, mothers, friends, even enemies). By focusing on a single mother and a socialite, I hope to unveil the different realities of modern Malay women who have voices of their own.

MA & Brood is an interesting blog of a single mother's trials and tribulations. Written in a mix of English and Malay, her style is warm and unpretentious. Her use of English, Malay and code switching from one language to the other demonstrates her camaraderie with her audience. It is as though Ma is talking to old friends, not mere acquaintances on the net. Her profile is written like this: The trials, tribulations, laughter and tears of MA and her Brood - single mother of two teenagers and a Jedi, who is re-discovering a life worth living through the eyes of her children. Currently undergoing her second childhood alongside her kids' first. Don't wish it were easier; wish you were better. Don't wish for less problems; wish for more skills. Don't wish for less challenges; wish for more wisdom" (<http://mabrood.blogspot.com>).

Ma writes the joys and laughter of her home life – a single working mother and how she copes with three children. Her entries are long and meander into a gossipy mode. In "Live with a Smile (Even When Your Washing Machine Conked Out on You)," Ma goes on at length how all her home appliances "decided to die" on her:

Tong sampah conked. Cases of too many little feet pressing the pedal too hard, too many times. Makan ice cream lah, makan coklat lah, makan biskut lah ... Rice cooker konked again. Probably some wire short-circuited somewhere due to someone tak lap the pot kering-kering before switched (sic) it on.” My washing machine ‘shock” absorber patah. No wonder, instead of a smooth and silent spin, it went gedegang gedegang GEDEGUNG”. Ma then goes on to describe how she takes on these problems – buying a new dustbin, surveying models of washing machines, buying cooked rice from restaurants, sending bundles of clothes to the launderette. Amidst her domestic woes, she also narrates teaching her teenage daughter about independence. Ma ruminates, “One of the pains of parenting is how much rein you pull in and how much slack you cut out? As much as I know I HAD to let go one of these days, the initial anxiety is killing me. ... It’s sooner or later, I have to let her go and be independent, anyway. Might as well, guide her along the way and what to expect and how to identify and walk away from potential dangers.” Ma ends her entry with this expression, “Ah well, that is life. Nak tak nak, redah ajerlah with a smile.” (March 30, 2007, 9.13 am).

The lengthy example given above is indicative of the kinds of writings we get from Ma’s blogs. Big and small events are mixed – in this case, tales about her washing machine, rice cooker, and dustbin show how domestic everyday trivial things combine to add chaos to a homemaker/working woman’s life. Just as important, a mother, while tackling the more trivial things in the kitchen also battles with larger problems, in this case – teaching her daughter how to use her freedom responsibly, and sensitise her to lurking dangers. I am reminded here of the play *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell, a story of a woman trapped within the four walls of her kitchen and identifies herself with the things found in her kitchen – her apron, bottles of jam, quilt-making paraphernalia. Much as Ma is a professional woman who does many presentations in her job, travels frequently, she is also very much tied down to her primary role as the domestic manager.

She also extends a hand or shows her social obligations during times of need. She says:

In time like this – food supplies would be scarce. Electricity would be cut off to avoid electrocution. As a child, I have seen how families huddled together in school rooms as makeshifts sleeping areas. How can we sleep at night in our warm comfortable beds, in air-conditioned rooms when some of these people especially young children are sleeping on the cold hard floor with bare necessities?

How can we help our fellow brothers and sisters in times like this? (*MA & Brood*, 12/24/2006 10 pm)

Ma then provided a blow-by-blow detail of what she managed to find from her house and emphasized to her readers that the used clothes must be in good condition and wearable: “So please – if you have anything to give, make sure it is in good condition – fit for a dignified human being. Hari ini hari mereka, who knows nasib kita di kemudian hari? How would we feel if we were given rags to wear? It’s a no brainer thing, kan? *MA & Brood*, 12/24/2006 10 pm).

By providing links to other sites that are also helping out with donations for flood victims and addresses where one can send clothes, food and other items, Ma is using her tech-savviness not only to share with us her responsibilities, problems, and joys as a mother but she is also appropriating it for social purposes. In another instance, she pleads with her audience to help a three-year-old who needs money for an eye surgery. Ma says:

The Ministry of Health of our own Boleh-land backed out from their funding because it seemed his case does not merit for such aid. Read Dr Bubbles for more information on this.

On the same note – I just wished that our Boleh-land power rangers would spend more time discussing life essentials such as this little boy’s need to save his remaining eye. Instead of making fools out of themselves over and over again in Parliament.

Please help Adik Shazwan in whatever way you can. (12/17/2006. 11 am)

In the entry above, Ma criticizes local politicians who capitalize on the term “Malaysian Boleh” (Malaysia Can) and yet are unwilling to help in cases they consider trivial. Yet, Ma shows us the urgency of helping the little boy. Ironically, it is not the politician who “boleh” but the feisty Ma who has neither cables nor strings to pull, but just good old social conscience and mothering instincts.

In another entry, Ma has “a bone to pick.” A male Senator in the parliament alleged that “the decline in moral values among the young was the result of modern mothers failing in their responsibility. He said women were so caught up with completing with men to establish their careers that they neglected their responsibility in the home. “All of them want to work and leave the care of their children to Indonesian maids. The children grow up speaking the Indonesian language and when the maids return to Indonesia the children feel lonely and seek activities outside the home to feed their loneliness. “I feel that mothers should stay and look after the children to overcome this problem,” he said.

Ma is totally shocked at the senator’s comment. As a single mother who works to support her children, she feels condemned by the criticism. She argues that she exemplifies a mother who works “her ass off trying to make ends meet, to ensure my kids have such as decent home, a good life and one clown-joker come up with such a stupid statement”. She then found out that the Senator was non-executive director to several companies and came up with a suggestion “how about giving away your allowances as non-executive directors to, say maybe 3-4 single mothers so that they DON’T have to work? (12/13/2006 12.44 pm).

Ma’s comments highlight the blurring of lines between the private and public domains. At times, she reveals her one thought, problems, fears and insecurities as a single mother trying to bring up her three children in a city which itself presents a multitude of complexities. These private feelings are then extended to the public domain as she tries to make sense of her own position in the larger context, and sharing her thoughts with other netizens. At other times, she responds to a public event and

pleas for understanding from other bloggers, even politicians because the public incident has triggered a private reaction. This mixing of private and public endears her to the public as seen from the responses she receives from readers who feel that she has reached out to others, despite the idiosyncrasies of her private self.

The Datin diaries is the title of a weblog written by a “Datin” who provides “a secret peek at a public life”. Datins are a community of women perceived as having a good life by virtue of having prosperous husbands. Not any man can get a Datukship since it is a title awarded by the king of the country or the sultan of a state. A datukship is conferred to a recipient who is deemed to have contributed to the state or country, and in most cases in Malaysia, a Datuk is almost always a businessman. In Malaysian literature, the portrayal of this higher echelon of people (Datuks, Tan Sris) highlights a luxurious way of life, sometimes so decadent to expose their weaknesses and depravity. In Karim Raslan’s stories of Datuks and Datins such as “Neighbours” for example, Datin Sarina is seen as a loud woman who dresses up garishly and is devoid of any intelligence:

Datin Sarina prided herself on being well-informed. She was always the first to call her friends, sometimes even her enemies, with the latest bit of news. News, mind you, not gossip. ... Sarina was forty-five years old, romantic by disposition, shortish and a little too plump to be good-looking. As if to compensate for her stoutness, she liked to think she was voluptuous. She wore the loudest colours possible, shocking reds, turquoises and vermilion and tottered around on four-inch heels. She wore make-up at all times, serious jewellery for at least eight hours a day and exercised sparingly. (“Neighbours” : 119-120).

Such depiction of a Datin is silently perceived as legitimate because the woman is often a lady of leisure and pleasure with lots of money to spend and time to kill.

The Datin of *The Datin’s Diaries* lives a luxurious life – she goes for exotic holidays with her husband, is chauffeur-driven in a S-class Mercedes, waited on by her cook and maid, is not worried about money and how much she spends. She also describes other Datins who are equally wealthy and live similar lives:

His daughter, N, is a perfect example of a Datin in the making. Since she was a young teen her mother taught her how to do the high-tea circuit, and sit up straight at dinners with parents. She's always well turned out and never on time. ... That's not so bad. I know this other Datin who got plastic surgery just because her daughter's getting married in a year. And since her daughter was no willowy beauty, the poor girl's been made to quit her job and devote the next year to going to gym and undergoing slimming treatments. (Tuesday, April 27, 2004)

The Datin exposes the shallowness of the lives of people around her, but in the end, their lives reflect her own emptiness. She sees through the façade of others and is sensitive too of her own indulgence and weaknesses. She confides her long evenings waiting for her husband's return from work:

In his own twisted way, I guess Datuk does love me. So I thought, why not? Why not just take the fruit from the plate, instead of reaching for the one in the tree?

And it's turned out OK. He's there, for the things that count. For Hari Raya and weddings, funerals and anniversaries. Birthdays, sometimes. ... Some day maybe I'll drag Datuk away to some exotic location. Spend a week with him on some secluded resort. Just him, myself and the sea.

But I know that day will come only when I have enough courage. When I'm brave enough to face the fact that maybe, maybe we don't have anything in common.

In the meantime, we just live each other from a distance. And that suits fine. (April 2004, 7.20 pm)

This entry shows the loneliness of the Datin, seen here as a victim of a farcical marriage. Marriage is a partnership and the line of communication should always be open. Instead, the Datin seeks solace and confesses her problems to everyone and no one in

particular. Her private revelations lead to various responses - some empathise with the Datin's predicament, but there are also others who find the luxurious and decadent life led by the Datin a charade. Muslim cyber surfers scorn at the woman's lack of religious faith; there are also others who come to her defense.

The blog indeed reveals a little behind what goes on in the lives of rich people, and the insights show us an astute woman who now appropriates the voyeuristic inclinations of the cyber community into a peek of her secret life. As one response says succinctly:

I at once enjoy reading this blog, and feel slightly embarrassed in enjoying it. You see, I'm unsure why I like this blog.

Is it because the author is amazingly good at what she does? Or is there a part of me, deep inside, a part of me that I often deny, that enjoys seeing a part of the world I've had glimpses to whenever I visit my some of my family friends and acquaintances? A world that only glimpsed, never experienced?

Is it an honest appreciation of craft, or the thrill of voyeurism? I've felt feelings associated with both when I read this blog. I don't know which is the "real" emotion, or if either or neither of those feelings are real.

There is a feeling of sadness that permeates this blog. Perhaps not your sadness, but in some sense, a sense of tragedy – perhaps not epic tragedy, but the small miseries of life.

(T-boy; May 19, 2004; 4. 53 pm)

This response by T-boy puts into sharp focus the indistinct lines between private and public realms. The Datin exposes her private life to public scrutiny, eventually being forced to expose more than she desires. What started as a shrewd, but possibly naïve, campaign strategy ends up with readers making judgments of the conduct of the Datin and her tribulations. This destabilization of the private and public can be attributed to our continual surrender of information: as people relinquish control over increasing amounts of personal information, they expect increasing access to information in return. In other words, in a society in which one is invited to take a peek into the private lives of others, this techno-culture has brought about a delight in voyeurism.

The popularity of the diary has led to the televised series of a soap drama entitled *The Datin's Diaries* on a local television network. The Datin herself said:

I came back to the blog today to find a rather intriguing comment left behind presumably a young woman, asking me what it would cost to turn my story into fodder for a TV or movie. I am, undeniably, flattered by the offer. ...But I will have to respectfully decline. Not because I don't think you'll do a good job because I have no faith that my story would survive our system intact. The chances of Malaysia at large following a story like mine to hit any silver screen, 17-inch or otherwise, I believe is still small. If we cannot even deal with the idea of a poorly practicing Malay Muslim woman in cyberspace, how can we deal with her on TV or in the movies?
(January 11, 2006; 8. 41 pm)

The Datin stopped blogging in February 2006. The Datin series came on air a few months after that. What happens in the negotiation between the blogger and producer remains untold. While remaining anonymous, the Datin herself has become a celebrity, although the televised series do not do justice to the blogger herself, often showing her as a victim without agency. By converting reality into fiction, the show can be seen as a representative anecdote for a significant cultural trend in the new millennium with the weakening boundary between the public and the private and the expansion of celebrity culture. The Malay community is shown to be obsessed with making regular people into celebrities. The marriages of female television personalities to older men of status have become commonplace. The public demands that these private unions be regarded as a public spectacle, and in most cases, the public gets what it wants. The dramatization of *The Datin's Diaries* is an extension of public voyeurism. It shows that the Datin has managed to capture the imagination of the Malaysian nation that it sees fit to turn her stories into celluloid.

Implications

The two women analysed here are very articulate in their blogs. They are in their best face, using their best words. In most instances, these women do not get a chance to express themselves as courageously in face-to-face relationships. The bloggers analysed

in this paper perhaps cannot be generalized as representative of all women bloggers. But research has shown that “blogs make it really easy to express yourself” (<http://www.womenenews.org>; 2/5/2007). As the content shows, Ma shows that the process of mothering cultivates maternal thinking which is marked by attentiveness to another and personal involvement with another’s health, happiness, and development. She enters in debates with the big boys out there in an effort to secure unique legal rights for women because of their sex. For instance, she argues that single mothers must get welfare support so that their children get enough attention. The Datin’s ruminations of herself and other people help figure out who she is, what she desires, and who she cares about. Despite all the trappings of wealth, her life is also fraught with worries of the common people. The blog has become her method of getting her voice heard and understood. Being out of the shadows, empowered by the computer, Internet connection and getting the cyber community as her audience is perhaps a way of taking charge of one’s agency.

The blogs highlight the sense of energy, optimism and empowerment which participation in cyberspace culture has produced. Being able to engage in this activity, the women reveal their multiple identities – as a wife, mother, socialite, social netizen. Their blogs act as a medium to persuade others to incorporate women’s values and viewpoints into public structures in order to enhance the quality of politics, professional activity, and cultural life in general. In the final analysis, blogging is liberating. It is a good way to diminish isolation. The bloggers represent versions of truths of their private experiences. Raw and honest, their stories provide significant ways their private lives can be shared and understood by the public. For women out there, it makes us realise that there is one planet, and whether you live in Zurich or Besut, women’s experiences can be so similar despite cultural, social, and religious differences.

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