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Malay Women's Responses to a Changing World: A Feminist Postcolonial Reading of Ellina binti Abdul Majid's *Perhaps in Paradise*

LES RÉPONSES DES FEMMES MALAISIENNES À UN MONDE EN MUTATION:

UNE LECTURE FÉMINISTE POST-COLONIALE DE *PEUT-ÊTRE AU PARADIS D'ELLINA BINTI ABDUL MAJID*

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Abstract: Malay women play multiple roles not only in the family but they are also very much connected to their surroundings. One of the dynamics in their surroundings includes political decisions which would inevitably leave marks on the Malay women themselves. Based on such a premise, this paper aims to investigate how the female characters in the novel *Perhaps in Paradise* respond to the socio-political changes occurring in their milieu. The novel is chosen since it represents the lives of privileged middle class Malay women beginning in the late 1960s who undergo various changes as a result of what happened in Malaysia at that time. This novel which is penned by Ellina binti Abdul Majid is studied by engaging the feminist postcolonial theory. The analysis uncovers that the female characters' lives in the novel are governed by the hegemonic practices of tradition and religion. Despite the changes which usurp their lives particularly in terms of westernisation and consumerism, they cannot escape

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from the identity which labels them as Malay. At times the characters are subordinated when they succumb to such practices. On the other hand, in certain cases when they retaliate and choose to look to the west for liberation, they could actually be marginalised in their own society. At other times, the cultures of east and west can be negotiated to provide meaningful lives to the characters.

Keywords: Feminist; Postcolonial theory; Changing world; Sexuality, Sexual rights

Résumé: Les femmes malaisiennes jouent de multiple rôles non seulement au sein de la famille, mais elles sont également très liées à leur environnement. L'une des dynamiques de leur environnement est la décision politique qui laisse inévitablement des marques sur elles-mêmes. Sur la base de cette prémisse, le présent article vise à étudier comment les personnages féminins dans le roman *Peut-être au Paradis* font face aux changements socio-politiques survenus dans leur milieu. Le roman a été choisi car il représente la vie des femmes malaisiennes de la classe moyenne privilégiée à la fin des années 1960, qui ont vu des changements divers à la suite de ce qui s'est passé en Malaisie à cette époque. Ce roman écrit par Ellina binti Abdul Majid a été étudié en introduisant la théorie du féminisme post-colonial. Cette analyse révèle que la vie des personnages féminins dans le roman est régie par les pratiques hégémoniques de la tradition et de la religion. En dépit de ces changements qui usurpent leur vie, notamment en terme de l'occidentalisation et du consumérisme, elles ne peuvent pas s'échapper à leur identité malaisienne. Parfois, les personnages sont subalternes quand elles succombent à de telles pratiques. D'autre part, dans certains cas, quand elles choisissent de riposter et de regarder l'ouest pour la libération, elles pourraient être marginalisées dans leur propre société. À d'autres moments, les cultures de l'est et de l'ouest peuvent être négociées pour donner une vie significative à ces personnages.

Mots-Clés: féministe; post-colonial; monde en mutation; sexualité, droits sexuels

1. INTRODUCTION

“Women, passive, long-suffering, complicit, have been colonised subjects for centuries” (Lim, 1994: p. 39). This proposition by Shirley Geok-lin Lim provides the basis to why women's experiences should be highlighted. In fact, various issues in relation to women have been studied since the 19th century so that more women are given agency about their subjugated positions. The colonisation of women by the patriarchal beliefs governing the societies results in their inability to act and speak in the way they truly desire. Women's voices are silenced and they are denied existence, consequently, they are marginalised. Hence, women's experiences should be explained to set the agenda for liberating them from this oppressive silence.

Feminism, being the social and political agenda for championing the rights of women, used to speak for all women (Lim, 1994). As knowledge evolves, women of colour have increasingly queried this assumption. This query has something to do with the conception that every woman's experience is different and unique to her surrounding situations.

Malaysian women are included in the group of women of colour due to their geographical and historical backgrounds. These women form a part of the Malaysian society which is highly heterogeneous. The heterogeneity of the Malaysian society is caused by the diverse backgrounds, origins and also because of the different levels of education and skills (Azizah, 1984). Littrup (2000: p.82) quoted Adibah Amin who supports the contention on the heterogeneity of the Malaysian society

generally and the Malaysian women especially by writing that "...we don't want to be the same, but to be equal". This stand is also championed by Karim (1992), who writes that a complexity of structures of social differentiation in different cultures suggests that the position of women cannot be argued from a universal theory. This contention explains that the complexities of the socialisation of women in different cultures make their experiences not homogeneous. This heterogeneous nature of women's experiences needs to be explained in their own terms and situations.

One of the ways to look at the various women's experiences in Malaysia is by focusing on their portrayal in the literary world. Even though Zawiah (2003) contends that literature is a construction of 'reality' purported by the writer, it is a 'reality' that is created based on the social phenomenon taken from real life. Hence, literature is never innocent. This lack of innocence means that a piece of literary writing always brings some hidden messages which are closely related to the lives of the community depicted in it.

Women's experiences are undoubtedly coloured by their associations with the world at large. As in the case of Malaysia, the experiences are affected by a world that is changing partly due to British colonisation. British influence is obvious in many aspects of Malaysian lives. The most obvious one remains the country's development which is modelled after the English monarchy and democracy (Shaharuddin, 1988).

The book *Perhaps in Paradise* discusses the experiences of a highly positioned Malayan civil servant's family in the late sixties. As noted by Abdul Rahman (1999) who quotes Nordin Selat's study in 1976, the highly positioned Malaysian civil servants of that era have actually formed a newly emerging middle class group. In the Malaysian novels written in English, this type of characters is seldom highlighted.

The novel mainly illustrates the growing up life of the protagonist, Kina who has the privilege of pursuing her secondary education at a boarding school in the United Kingdom. At the time the story is set, this scenario is rare among the Malays and actually only common to the Malay aristocratic circle. Besides Kina, the book also discusses Rose and Min's experiences (Kina's sisters) and Mama's experiences (the mother of the girls). This paper endeavours to examine how the female characters in the novel respond to the changing world as a result of the socio-political transformations that occur in Malaysia in the sixties.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

For the purpose of this paper, only four female characters are studied. They include Kina (the protagonist), Rose (the eldest sister), Mama (the mother), and Min (the second sister). All these characters are of Malay ethnicity.

The examples extracted to support the argument are mainly the characters' actions, speeches, decisions and thoughts. The author's employment of literary devices and imagery are also taken as the evidence to support the discussion.

Perhaps in Paradise requires a feminist approach because the female characters are the ones who shape the novel. It is also a postcolonial novel not only because it is written in the postcolonial era but the plot and settings are largely affected by postcolonial issues. It discusses, among other things, the formation of female identities and how it is linked to the changing identity of the nation. Thus, the adoption of the feminist postcolonial theory is deemed appropriate for its analysis.

2.1 Feminist Postcolonial Theory

Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1989) acknowledge the striking parallel between both postcolonialism and

feminism. Issues like suppression, subordination, identity, silence, voice and representation are identifiable in both theories. Ultimately, the feminist postcolonial theory is a body of knowledge that is engaged in a two-fold project – to racialise mainstream feminist theory and to insert feminist concerns into conceptualisations of colonialism and postcolonialism (Lewis and Mills, 2003). In so doing, the proponents of this theory attempt to change the oppressive power relations encoded in the name of race, nation and empire, as well as those of gender, class and sexuality (ibid).

Spivak (2000) has cogently stated that the colonised subjects are akin to subalterns, the class of people who are not empowered and do not possess any wealth. This lack of empowerment and possession marginalise the subalterns because they are submerged in the dominant discourse of powerful people who hold the reign of power and have possessions. Thus, Spivak concludes that if the subalterns as males have no history and cannot speak, the subalterns as females are even more deeply in shadow. Therefore, Spivak (2000) is highly sceptical about the possibility of the female subalterns ever being able to have any voice at all making her concludes that the female subalterns are actually a muted group. Boehmer (1995) echoes this thought when she posits that women in colonial and postcolonial settings are doubly and even triply marginalised. This is because the women do not only experience marginalisation by the colonial masters; they also have to face subordination due to the patriarchal construct of the society.

In the same vein, the female characters in the novel have to face not only their positions as postcolonial subjects. They are also women who are bound by the Malay culture and traditions which are much influenced by the teachings and practices of Islam (Nor Faridah, 2002). Therefore, these multiple monolithic elements prevailing in their lives could silence their experiences. As such, it is imperative that the characters' experiences are acknowledged to provide them with a voice, to break the muteness.

On a different note, the earlier feminist concerns have always been Eurocentric and focus on the experiences of white, middle class women (Ang, 2003). The generalisations made by the white feminists on women's experiences result in the universalisation of feminist concerns. The universalisation programme further marginalises the Blacks and coloured women because their voices are not heard. Furthermore, when the white feminists attempt to theorise the lives of the third world women, these women are not well consulted and their experiences are not properly explained (Mohanty, 1988). Therefore, as Weedon (2002) observes, the third world women have often been the silenced objects of Western analysis. Realising such a treatment, third world women are making their voices heard and are beginning to change the face of feminism in the West (ibid).

Hence, the feminist postcolonial theory is an intervention seen necessary to provide voice and agency to the women in postcolonial sites so that they can challenge their subjugation. This challenge to the hegemony of patriarchy and colonisation is imperative so that the society is also made aware of the multiple marginalisation these women have been facing. Such awareness will help the women to be better organised in fighting for the improvement in their lives.

2.1.1 Sexuality and Sexual Rights

One of the main issues in the feminist postcolonial theory is the ownership of one's sexuality and female body (Lewis and Mills, 2003). This particular concern will be guiding the discussion on the female characters.

This thematic part of the theory deals with sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights of women. Since the early days of feminism, the control or reproduction and protection of sexual rights have been the primary concerns of the European and North American feminism (Lewis and Mills, 2003). However, the crusade which claims to speak on behalf of all women could only result in the inability to see the structural differences of race, ethnicity and class between women (Davis, 2003).

As an illustration, Lewis and Mills (2003) reported that the issue of female circumcision/female genital mutilation (FC/FGM) is generally seen by many western scholars as barbaric and abusive to women. However, the same issue could be regarded as traditional and often religious by the people who

practice it in their lives (ibid).

A further example is the issue of veil in the Muslim community. As illustrated by Fanon (2000), the veiled women in Algeria are seen by the French colonisers as the core of an enigma. Thus, to destroy the structure of the Algerian society, the veiled women must first be conquered; the French must go and find them behind the veil where they hid themselves and also in the houses where they were kept hidden by the men (ibid). According to Fanon (2000), the French saw the veil as a huge threat because the veils seem to place the women's bodies out of the reach of the Western gaze and desire. Due to the failure of the west to understand the significance of veils to the Muslim communities, various misconceptions such as the women are hidden, oppressed and have no relationships with others except those in the family are formed (Graham-Brown, 2003). Interestingly, the veil could also be an issue of contention between Muslim females themselves. Therefore, issues which are bound by culture and religion like this should be explained to educate the west about the concerns in the lives of third world women.

As stressed by Mohanty (1988), white feminists often regard the third world women as domestic, traditional and backward. This misconception arises particularly because the west does not understand the dynamics in the eastern society. For example, the patriarchal construct of the Malay society dictates that men would traditionally enjoy the prerogatives in religion and property (Ong, 2003). However, these privileges do not mean that the Malay women are hidden and passive. In fact, the Malay women are neither confined to the household nor totally dependent on men for economic survival (Ong, 2003). The east coast women in Peninsular Malaysia for instance, are known to be actively involved as traders (Ismail, 1997). Furthermore, the married women customarily hold the purse strings and play important roles in maintaining kin and neighbourly relations (Ong, 2003).

Thus, by addressing the issues of sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights based on the postcolonial women's differences and diversities, these women are not represented merely as victims of marginalisation. The specific practices and customs in the eastern society would help explain the women's actions with regard to their sexuality and sexual matters.

Malaysia in the novel is a country that is undergoing a multitude of changes particularly in the socio-political arena. Decisions made based on the politics of the day influence the social structure of the society. These changes affect the female characters whose actions and decisions are premeditated by their surrounding environment. For instance, the pre-colonial Malay women were mostly not educated in the western sense because the society at that time did not see the importance of women being educated in such a way. It was common for the girls to be married off, stayed at home, and raised children (Heraty et al., 1995). The changes in the government's policy in the post-independence era have opened doors to Malay women to better themselves through education. When the women are educated, many are seeing their roles beyond the family domain (Khalijah, 1994). Being educated and are able to function effectively in the public arena make the women more autonomous in issues concerning their sexuality. For instance, being independent financially enables them to decide whether they want to delay getting married or not. This results in relaxing the control of men's ownership over their females.

As Ong (2003), posits, a traditional Malay family places a woman's sexuality in the hands of the male counterparts like the husband. Thus, having a say in one's marriage status and in family planning challenges the Malay social construct of placing a female's sexuality in the hands of the males. It is noteworthy to study how the female characters in the novel negotiate the ownership of their sexuality and female bodies in response to the socio-political changes in the country.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kina, the protagonist faces the changing world by her ability to claim the ownership of her sexuality and sexual rights. Western education for Kina has empowered her to make the choice to remain single in her adult life. Even though Kina does exhibit some interest in Shukri, the Malaysian student in the UK when

she is in her late teens, gets nothing out of the friendship. Despite pressure from her relatives especially *Mak Tih*, *Abah's* sister, who feels that Kina should be married off and tries to match her with 'all sorts of men' Kina decides to be on her own. In a traditional Malay society, marriage is something almost inevitable in the life of a girl. As commented by *Mak Tih*

We don't believe our girls should be highly educated....Wasting money – 'dah kahwin, beranak, diploma degree semua tak guna! Much better to expose them to as many eligible bachelors as we can; hopefully they can make a good match. (Ellina, 1997:76)

Mak Tih echoes the thought of many traditional mothers in the Malay society. A girl, no matter how highly educated she is, will occupy her main place, that is the kitchen – a common saying in the Malay society. According to the patriarchal construct, this saying signifies that women are expected to behave as women should, that is, they should get married and bear children. A woman's level of education does not change her status as someone who should settle down and become a wife and a mother. However, as the society evolves, more women are being educated and becoming more autonomous because they do not have to be dependent on other people financially. Women are beginning to have more authority and choices in making decisions. With education, they can decide on what to do with their lives.

Kina falls neatly into this category. She decides not to get married because she feels that she is not ready to face the married life. She does not want to risk her life because she is afraid that "The man I love may well prove to be a stranger beside me. Who knows what lies beyond the bedroom door?" (Ellina, 1997:192). Kina's decision to remain single is the direct result of her eldest sister Rose's sad experience who suffers from domestic violence. By having the freedom to decide on her marriage status, she is actually empowered and given the authority over her own sexuality. As a result of the changing world, Kina does not feel pressurised to get married and she is strong enough mentally and financially to uphold her belief. This empowerment helps to liberate her from the shackles of tradition and age old customs.

On a similar note, Rose the eldest sister has also been able to express her sexuality. However, her expression of sexuality and sexual rights has not managed to make Rose her own master. She is still victimised and suffers until the end of her life. Eager to embrace a so-called westernised lifestyle by marrying a much older man at a tender age of sixteen, Rose only finds herself in a situation unimaginable to her as a young bride. Her husband, a worldly divorcee, resorts to beatings and violence to exert his male status. In Rose's desperation, she seeks solace by having extramarital affairs with other men.

Islam prohibits adultery and is severe in its punishment for such an action. A married woman having sexual relationship with a man other than her husband will be stoned to death, according to Islamic teachings. However, such a severe punishment is not meted out in this country since Malaysia has passed its own Islamic legislation which is deemed more suitable to the Malaysian environment and community.

Dube (1997) affirms that the wife's body is owned by the husband upon marriage in the Malay community. By having extramarital affairs, Rose has gone against the Islamic traditions that govern the Malay society. She does it out of desperation because she fails to seek help from her parents. The parents, wanting to preserve the family's good name and honour, have turned away from helping Rose at the time she most needs them. Therefore, in order to cope with the calamitous circumstances she is in, she attracts willing men's attention with her beauty and charm. The men do not become her saviours because she does not confide in them. Instead, they only act as the place where she temporarily finds a release from her pain.

As a character, Rose has managed to muster enough courage to face her problem, in her own way. Being a woman who is privileged enough to obtain education in an urban setting, Rose can be considered a modern young woman. She knows fashion and how to carry herself. Thus, when she finds out that the hegemony of traditions does not allow her voice out her pain for fear of sullyng the family's honour, she is courageous enough to retaliate in her own way. Her urban and western educational backgrounds have given her the strength to confront her problem. In a paradoxical manner, Rose's affairs actually make her regain the control over her sexuality. By conducting the affairs, she does not submit to her husband anymore. When she is with the men, Rose possesses her body; she can do whatever she wants with it. The body belongs neither to the husband nor to the traditions. For some brief moments, she is ironically free from her constrained world. By defying traditions, Rose is not subordinated and she is able to

express her own sexuality.

Rose also has been bold enough to defy tradition when she finds herself pregnant as a result of the affairs she has. Abortion is a taboo in the Malay society. Based on the Islamic teachings, it can only be carried out if the pregnancy poses danger to the mother. She could actually let her husband Abang Ray believe the foetus is his but she does not do so because she is suffering from the latter's beatings. By aborting the foetus, she helps in not bringing another life into her world of sufferings. As contended by Davis (2003), abortion is an act of desperation motivated by the oppressive conditions surrounding the woman. Rose is driven to abortion not only because the baby is not her husband's but because she does not want to pass the foetus as Abang Ray's and thus, lives a lie. Another paradox identifiable here is that Rose committing abortion which is supposed to be disrespectful in the Malay society. However, at the same time she is preserving the family's honour by not claiming the foetus to be her husband's.

The education Rose has received as a result of the changing world has made her aware of the step she has to take in order to face her unwanted pregnancy. By aborting the foetus, Rose has total control over her body. She has the say whether she wants to bring the baby into the world or not. By challenging the traditions, ironically, Rose has regained her sexuality and her body as a woman and is empowered to express such sexuality to relieve her pain. Nevertheless, despite claiming ownership to her sexuality and body, Rose dies in the end and she is depicted as a woman who is very unhappy. Hence, the freedom she has in expressing her sexuality is only temporary and superficial because in the context of a Malay-Muslim society, the adultery and abortion she has committed are not tolerable under any circumstances.

Another character that has also been empowered to express her sexuality as an effect of the education she receives is Min, the second sister. In the epilogue, it is revealed to the reader that Min has actually migrated to the US, and marries twice. The first time she marries a man who has converted to Islam and takes the name Abdul Malik Abdullah. Being a Muslim does not stop Malik from attending mass on Christmas Eve out of habit. Not comfortable with Malik's practice, Min asks for a divorce. The confidence she gains in standing her ground by not accepting Malik's Christian practice and asking for a divorce is a result of her well formed Malay identity. Furthermore, the education she receives as a result of the changing world has also enabled her to see that Malik is trying to compromise her belief as a Muslim. Hence, in order not to be compromised, Min feels she should obtain the divorce. Her bravery in facing such an ordeal in order to save her identity as a Muslim has given Min the strength to express her own sexuality. She is empowered to act when she is wronged and hence, she has obtained full control of her body and her sexuality.

Conversely, Mama who is the mother of the three girls does not seem to be empowered in her sexuality. In the family first and foremost, Mama plays the role of a wife. As a wife, Mama ensures that she is beside Abah whenever she is needed. For example Mama accompanies Abah to the numerous dinner functions he is invited to. In fact, the old adage "behind every successful man there must be a woman" seems to hold true in Mama's situation. The problem here is the impression that Mama is only 'behind' the man. Indeed Abah is the person who matters here. He is the person who holds the important post at the Ministry. When Mama goes along with Abah to the dinner parties, she exists only as an extension to him. She attends the parties because Abah is there. Her appearance at the functions is defined by Abah's appearance.

Even after the painful experience of Aunty Norah's death (Mama's sister), Mama does not have the heart to say no to Abah when she is required to accompany him to such functions. As noted by Kina, "...it was with a supreme effort that she ensured she was suitably attired and powdered to accompany Abah to his ubiquitous dinner functions" (Ellina, 1997:67).

The signifier 'supreme' that is employed by the author stresses the extreme reluctance of Mama's action in dressing up for the parties. However, Mama is too bound by her duty as a wife. Mama feels she does not want to upset Abah by not going with him to the dinner functions and thus forces herself to do so. Unfortunately, in doing so, Mama is only strengthening the status quo. By trying to be an obedient wife, she is submitting her body to Abah. Therefore, Mama is reinforcing the patriarchal construct in the society particularly the tradition and religion by acknowledging Abah's role as a husband. As a

consequence of her action, Mama has not been able to express the rights to her own body. She is always known as Abah's wife especially at those functions she attends, not as her own person. Mama has compromised her sexuality and right to her body in her role and attempts at being a good, dutiful wife.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of Ellina binti Abdul Majid's novel *Perhaps in Paradise* point to the fact that a changing world or in the context of Malaysia, the socio-political changes may affect the female characters' lives in diversifying ways. Tracing the argument put forth by the feminist postcolonial theory, one of the effects may be manifested through the ownership of one's body and sexuality.

Changes in terms of policies on education have the uppermost effects on the lives of the characters. All three sisters, Rose, Min and Kina have been empowered to express their sexuality and ownership of their female bodies due to their exposure to education, especially the western education. However, Rose is still victimised in the end as a domestic violence sufferer possibly because she is the least educated compared to the other two sisters who manage to study until the tertiary level. Furthermore, she is also subjugated since her family ignores her plea for help due to the monolithic practice of tradition and religion. Mama is also subordinated in her role as a wife who follows her husband regardless of her own needs possibly because of her level of education as well. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the Malay community, Mama is an exemplary wife - selfless and subservient.

The female characters in the novel react accordingly to the changing world mostly based on their levels of education. In cases like Rose and Mama, the hegemony of tradition and religion affects them more than the education itself. Hence, in the construction of their identities as Malay women and postcolonial entities, a changing world is a force that cannot be ignored.

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