

2010

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Recommended Citation

Hashim, Ruzy Suliza and Hamdan, Shahizah Ismail, Facets of women in malay romance fiction, *Kunapipi*, 32(1), 2010.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol32/iss1/8>

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Abstract

In this essay, we analyse four Malay romance novels within the context of the debate on high literature versus popular literature in Malaysia. We also discuss the images and portrayals of Malay women, the chick lit phenomenon and the formulaic romance plot to examine gender relations as well as the role of contemporary Malay romance novels as a potential space to express women's voice and experience.

RUZY SULIZA HASHIM & SHAHIZAH ISMAIL HAMDAN

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, we analyse four Malay romance novels within the context of the debate on high literature versus popular literature in Malaysia. We also discuss the images and portrayals of Malay women, the chick lit phenomenon and the formulaic romance plot to examine gender relations as well as the role of contemporary Malay romance novels as a potential space to express women's voice and experience.

The number of Malay novels written by women in the Malay literary scene has steadily risen although it has not matched the output of male writers. One disturbing indication of women's lack of literary output is the absence of a female recipient of the National Laureate Award since its inception in 1981. All ten recipients have been men, although there is quite a number of women writers such as Salmi Manja, Khatijah Hashim, Zaharah Nawawi, Fatimah Busu and Azmah Nordin who have produced memorable serious novels.

In recent times, however, popular novels, identified primarily by glossy covers, have been gracing bookstores, big and small. In fact, they outnumber literary Malay novels. Mainstream writers label this kind of writing as *novel picisan* — poor quality writings or mass market 'schlock' which have very little literary merit. These novels equate to women's dime novels which thrived in the United States of America from 1870 to 1920. The term 'dime novels' arose from the affordable price of the works and the audience they targeted which consisted of mainly the working class. Malay popular fiction has many labels — dime fiction, pulp fiction, popular fiction — because of its appeal to the masses, especially women. While there has been an absence of scholarly research in this area, newspaper reports and information of book sales show that these books are amongst the bestsellers. In one newspaper report dated 29 September 2010, a writer of popular novels, Fauziah Ashari, sold 150,000 copies of her second novel *Ombak Rindu (Waves of Melancholy)* which is being made into a movie. She says:

I like to convey messages to my readers... If I write with flowery language, my books will only appeal to certain quarters and I do not want that. So I write in a style that will appeal to a big crowd. I am using a language that the masses will understand. In my novels, I am always conveying the truth about life and motivating my readers to lead a better and more truthful life. (Bisme online)

Fauziah articulates the sentiments of many writers of the same genre. Their stories of love and relationships revolve around characters many readers recognise and with whom they can empathise. The easy language and story lines with their many turning points and climactic moments provide a diversion from the gravity of some of the more serious, literary novels. These literary texts are mainly reserved for schools and tertiary syllabi where every word and metaphor is considered in detail. But these literary works have a small reading audience. The bookstores in Malaysia such as Kinokuniya and Borders provide a larger section for Malay popular fiction because they are the kinds of books that sell. Furthermore, the reprinting of these popular novels shows their attractiveness. Ironically, the emergence of this genre is breathing life into a sagging book industry.

Malaysia's neighbour, Indonesia, has a bigger market for its popular fiction industry. According to Rachel Donadio, this fiction (known as *sastra wangi* — fragrant literature) 'has been gaining popularity since the fall of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998' (Donadio 2). But Rachel Donadio is quick to point out that *sastra wangi* is not 'chick lit per se', although it is 'quite frank in its treatment of sex and politics' (2). Chick lit, the Malaysian variety, does not exist within the same breath as American chick lit. Sexual liberation or experimentation, such as one might see in American chick lit novels, does not appear in the Malaysian corpus. The Islamic environment does not allow for a sexual relationship without marriage, and therefore portrayals of such relationships, when they do happen, merely serve to demonstrate the consequences of such transgressions.

Nevertheless, it is useful here to compare the new writing tradition in Malaysia to American chick lit or as some well-known writers such as Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing term it, 'chickerati'. Chick lit, as defined by Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young, can be understood to be a 'form of women's fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience, and narrative style' (3). It took off in the mid-1990s after the appearance of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and television shows such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, for example, sold at an amazing rate, topping bestseller lists. In America, the chick lit phenomenon has been called a 'commercial tsunami' (Zernike online) as it would seem that chick lit has overtaken the sales of literary novels.

Proponents of chick lit, such as Alana Albertson, Chris Bailey and Lori McDonald label the writings as 'hippest romance sub-genre' (<http://chicklitwriters.com/our-purpose/>). The Chick Lit Writers group, another website promoting chick lit, is a cyber place where a chick-lit writer or fan can mingle with other authors and fans who argue that their unique sub-genre does not play by the traditional romance rules (<http://chicklitwriters.com/our-purpose/our-history/>). The moderator further claims that: '[w]e share a common goal: to make the romance writing world aware that chick lit is not a flash in the pan, a fading trend, but a hip, hot, happening genre that is here to stay' (<http://chicklitwriters.com/our-purpose/>). The plots of chick lit novels focus on a young woman who finds the love of her life but she does not always follow the conventionalities of romance.

These women are usually hip and stylish, in their twenties or thirties, live in urban settings, and fall in and out of love repeatedly. The books usually feature an irreverent tone and frank sexual themes. Chick-lit heroines are more flirtatious and sexually more experimental than Mills-and-Boons-type women who are shown to be more clear-headed, and do not engage in multiple relationships.

A venerated novelist like Doris Lessing has shown disdain for what she calls ‘chickerati’, saying that it would have been better if [female novelists] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them, and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight’ (qtd in Ferris and Young 2). But Ferris and Young claim that chick lit reflects the lives of young men and women and appeals to readers who want to see their own lives in all the messy detail, reflected in fiction today (3). The typical chick lit protagonist is not perfect but flawed, eliciting readers’ compassion and identification. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humour that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe they are fallible, and very much like the young women readers who share the same priorities. As Amelia Hill observes that ‘the greatest publishing phenomenon to sweep America ... features a new heroine, the young woman who is seriously overweight — and doesn’t care... This new genre is proof that women are finally learning to love each other and themselves — warts and all. Chick lit is finally holding a real mirror up to its readers, and they can’t get enough of it’ (online). ‘The heroines of these books can be rude, shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly all of the above — but we love them anyway!’ (chicklit.us). The women of the Malay variety of chick lit however are not always as unconcerned about their looks and certainly not as transgressive although these novels have more sexual content than the conventional literary books published locally.

Despite the appeal to the masses, these works remain unacknowledged by mainstream literary criticism in Malaysia because they are not considered worthy of entry in a reputable canon. Yet, we argue that these books can be read as part of the hidden history of women’s reading in Malaysia due to their popularity amongst women readers. The sales and reprinting of these novels further show their popularity and appeal to the general public. By exploring these novels, we are able to show the reading preferences of women readers and the kinds of characters they identify with which confirm their inclinations towards stereotypical depictions and neat closures of gender relationships.

THE ROMANCE CONTINUUM

This essay focuses on two varieties of romance fiction, exemplified by the novels *Aroma Hati* (Aroma of the Heart) written by Zahura Zakry and *Kirana* by Sarimah Bardon, which are considered to be ‘serious’ because they are produced by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, and *Pesona Kasih Riana* (Memorable Love of Riana) by Zurilawati Ku Zaifah and *Sekeping Gambar Sehelai Nota*, (A Photo, a Note) by Cathoilda Sibin, which are truly ‘popular’ because they are produced in big numbers by Creative Enterprise and Tintarona Publications respectively.

Although all four novels fall within the genre of romance, each of the publishing houses which circulates the novels has a significant place in the Malaysian publication landscape. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (The Institute of Language and Literature) is a government agency which is responsible for forming policies and matters regarding the Malay language and literature. It has a publishing arm that produces dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other books including literary works. Because of its role and importance, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka is the body that determines the National Laureate as well as other literary awards such as the coveted SEAWrite Award.¹ Fiction published by the institute is regarded as highly literary. It is only in recent years that Dewan Bahasa has bent its rigid principles and begun to publish novels that many consider to be within the ‘popular’ or ‘romance’ genre. Some critics see this flexibility as betraying the principles upon which Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka was instituted. Mohd Affandi Hassan claims that ‘the biggest contribution of these popular “laureates” is to diminish literariness and deaden the mind of its audience, to proliferate works that are of little value, and to privilege trivialities of life’ (online [our trans]). There are many who share his belief that the rise and popularity of popular fiction will give birth to generations of escapist readers. They fear that popular discourse will lull readers into worldly gratification which is against Islamic principles.

But as chick lit books take the world by storm (in Malaysia amongst readers who are proficient in English as well as in America), the influence they have on local writers is phenomenal. Publishing houses such as Creative Enterprise, Tintaron Publications and Alaf 21 are amongst competing production houses which churn out romance novels by the thousands on a monthly basis. The easy availability of these books with their glossy covers and heart-rending blurbs has been crucial to the penetration of a large section of the Malaysian audience. Although no studies have been carried out on the influence of chick lit on Malaysian writers, the sudden increase of romance fiction soon after the popularity of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* implies the effect of the chick lit genre in Malaysia. Malaysian readers who are not proficient in English and not able to read chick lit novels which are best sellers in many Malaysian bookstores turn to Malay romance as a substitute.

POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture is usually associated with ordinary people, who have little regard for exalted culture such as haute couture, fine dining or fine classical music. The pervasiveness of the mass media, of which we are all avid consumers, diminishes the idea that popular culture is separate from high culture or the culture of educated elites who show disdain for popular culture. High culture is often distinctly associated with exoticism, particularly in terms of language, art, dance, music, and cuisine. But popular culture in Malaysia shows irreverence for anything exotic. Instead, it privileges the ordinary and deconstructs the meaning of culture itself. Although high and popular culture are understood as a binary opposition in the sense that the former is associated with class and finesse and

the latter is connected to tastelessness and indiscretions in Malaysia, the impact of popular culture on everything we do has been overwhelming. In the context of the Institute of Malay Language and Literature, for example, it has had to bring on board some of the more popular albeit less literary materials in a bid to stay afloat in a market where popular novels are doing great business. Indeed, it is now generally accepted that culture is a substratum of identity from which no member of society is immune. Within the global context as well, universities are offering programmes in popular culture which shows a rejection of elitist values, and an acceptance of blurring of genres and class. In the process, culture has acquired a much broader meaning within academic discourses, for it is understood to encompass all social and political institutions and practices, together with associated belief systems, rendering them the proper subject of scrutiny and critique.

What is the nature of the popular messages ‘consumed’ by the readers of romance fiction? In the case of chick lit, the novels affirm flawed women, acknowledging their insecurities and offering lessons in negotiating relationships. They show that women, no matter how successful or liberating, crave for a fairy tale relationship. Reactions to chick lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women’s struggles in patriarchal culture and to offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the realities of young and impressionable women grappling with modern life and its demands. Is the Malay variety of chick lit advancing the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences and featuring empowered, professional women? Or does it repeat the same patriarchal narrative romance and performance of femininity that feminists once rejected?

IMAGES OF MALAY WOMEN

Previous studies of women in Malaysia show that Malay women are marginalised, weak and easily manipulated. For example, Ismail Sarbini highlights women in *Sejarah Melayu* as being ‘accorded a low status; they are repeatedly forced to accommodate men’s sexual pleasures, are used in exchanges between men as gifts of appreciation, become souvenirs of political bargaining, and are also targets of malicious rumours’ (1990 44). Sharifah Zaleha and Rashila Ramli (1998) concur with this observation; their own work classifies women as village dwellers, court dwellers, and supernatural hags. Women’s identity, they argue, is determined by their sex and work (5). Their representations show them to be the weaker sex and easily manipulated. Ruzy Suliza Hashim’s (2003) study on women of the court unveils women as key players in court politics although they occupy only a peripheral place in the chronicles. By scrutinizing the women’s (muted) presence in a number of historical chronicles produced between the 16th and 18th centuries, Ruzy reveals how the women court dwellers actually generate male prestige and power, political hierarchy, social identity, and legitimacy.

While it is unsurprising that ancient Malay women were oppressed and subjugated, surely modern Malay women have moved on? Siti Hawa Salleh's 1992 study on women in modern Malay literature shows that writers privilege women who possess beauty, loyalty and faithfulness, and are determined to protect the family and family honour. She gives two reasons for this continuity of the images of women: the persistence of adat laws and the requirements of Islam. Siti Hawa argues that like the Muslim tenets, Malay adat requires women to be subservient and self-sacrificing. Rosnah Baharuddin's research on female discourse, published in 2003, reveals a similar pattern — women who fulfil the traditional roles are privileged over those who deviate from them. It is expected that Malay women will put their own happiness aside in deference to the wants and needs of their husbands and parents.

The research of Roziah Omar and Azizah Hamzah (2003) shows an ironic contrast between a woman's professional space and her domestic space: women's participation in education and in the workforce has increased tremendously, but instead of becoming 'emancipated subjects' educated, urban, married Malay women reworked their strategies. They pursued the Islamic way of life with a certain amount of adjustment and accommodation. These women maintained adat and Islamic discourses that view the man as the head of the household, and assert that it is the duty of the husband to provide the welfare of the wife and the family. In turn, the woman is expected to cherish her duty as the obedient wife, her main duty being to bear her husband's children, look after the family and maintain her modesty, carefully guarding her sexuality and faithfulness. In sum, their research shows that an educated, urban, married Malay woman still holds strongly to her role as the dutiful wife and mother despite the fact that she is educated, financially independent and holds an important position in the public domain. (117) Their research shows that Malay women still adhere to traditional role models and expectations. Omar's interviews with professional women reveal that these women forget their professional identities the moment they reach the driveway. Once home, they take on the wife and mother identity wholeheartedly.

Fuziah Kartini and Faridah Ibrahim (1998), in their analysis of women in 1950s Malay films show two opposing representations of women — as poison (*racun*) and as antidote (*penawar*). Women as poison are typically shown as sexualised and materialistic. They are contrasted with women who are antidotes — sweet-tempered, virginal and patient, loving, supportive and sacrificing. In her 2006 study of Malaysian films, Khoo Gaik Cheng argues that:

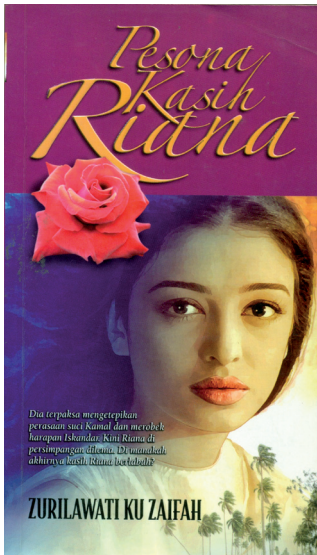
In this schema, there is a certain asexuality that is ascribed to the traditional positive female stereotype — the *penawar*. The fresh-faced actor Deanna Yusoff best exemplifies this image when she appears as the heroine in Shuhaimi Baba's films, *Selubung* and *Ringgit Kasorrga*. She is attractive and innocent compared to Tiara Jacqueline's character, Meera, a model/high-class prostitute. In *Ringgit Kasorrga*, both women vie for one man, and unsurprisingly, it is the prostitute, Meera, who dies, since sexualized women are punished for their moral and sexual transgressions in classical narratives. (114)

The didacticism of these films is overt, serving to show that while women can engage in transgressive behaviours they will not escape punishment, thus reminding the audience of the Malay-Muslim principles governing every deed.

The four novels we have chosen to examine show successful Malay women trying to juggle their professional lives with their personal relationships. Having looked at the scholarly work available on the images of Malay women in the tradition of ‘high’ literature, we will go on to compare the images of women in contemporary ‘high’ literature to the Malay variety of chick lit, with its promising illustrations of hip Malay women, to see whether Malay women have moved on from the fates suffered by their less modern sisters.

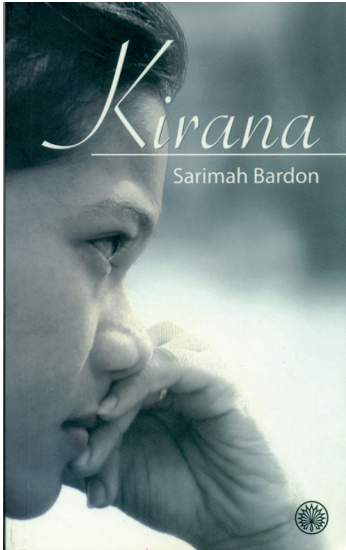
PACKAGING

Book covers are important to the marketing of popular romance fiction in Malaysia: they are often brightly coloured and feature such images of chicness as trendy clothes and accessories. The characters in the novels drive fast and fancy cars, live in penthouses, eat gourmet food, and are global players. The covers portray an image of the sexy, desirable hip young protagonist with whom the reader is meant to identify. An illustration of a woman which takes up the whole page illuminates the focus on a female main character and is suggestive of a plot that makes her desires and motivations the focus of her story. The blurb of each cover highlights the main conflict of the protagonist — will she get the love of her life? A typical blurb claims: ‘I love him so much. He is the only one I want in my life’ (She had to set aside Kamal’s pure love and devastate Iskandar’s hopes. Now Riana is at a crossroad. Where does her love finally reside?)’ (blurb of *Pesona Kasih Riana* [our trans.]).



The cover of *Pesona Kasih Riana* features an attractive woman with full lips that many Malay women would envy. The image of a blooming rose completes the picture of a young woman on the threshold of her life. Such illustrations of young women at the threshold of success are merely illusive. The heroine may look confident and attractive but within the pages the protagonist loses her self confidence as she changes into a dishevelled character with a victim mentality who is actually very successful in her professional life yet miserable in her personal life.

The covers of the Dewan Bahasa novels, on the other hand, do not portray women in a manner that exhibits the protagonist’s sexuality. *Kirana* shows a picture of quite an ‘ordinary’ woman in terms of personal appearance, devoid of embellishments which would make the novel



look cheap. However, the seriousness of the covers of these ‘high culture’ novels does not equate with a more complex characterisation of the female protagonists. The two women in *Kirana* and *Aroma Hati* are women of substance because they are enterprising women who have succeeded in their business ventures. However, their private lives are beset with misadventures. Alisya in *Aroma Hati*, for example, is unable to balance her professional life as an entrepreneur with her duties as a wife and mother. At the beginning of the narrative, she is shown to be a dutiful wife and mother, but as she becomes more successful, she begins to forget her primary roles. Finally, she seeks divorce but is reconciled with her husband at the end of the story. She is shown to be a short-sighted woman who has excellent

business skills but loses sight of the importance of marital happiness. In *Kirana*, the protagonist also becomes a successful business woman but her private life too is in a shambles. The same kind of tumultuous personal lives that each of the protagonists experiences, whether the novel is deemed popular or serious, shows Malay women to be unable to maintain their work-life balance, and suggests by implication that the attempt to do so is misguided.

PLOT

The most important element of both kinds of romance novel is the formulaic plot — hero and heroine live ‘happily ever after’. The pleasure for the readers is that they can follow the couple through their ups and downs to a final destination where the two profess their true love for each other. Before they reach that finale, though, the woman faces various tribulations (so does the man, but to a lesser degree). Some plots are more adventurous than others, allowing the reader to experience quite dramatic circumstances that increase the uncertainty that the heroine will end up with the man she has fallen in love with. This charting of events also allows the reader to follow more than just the heroine’s romantic life. These novels draw on many aspects of a woman’s life — family, work and friendship. Coincidentally, three out of the four novels analysed for this essay have one thing in common — the female protagonists come from adverse backgrounds. Of the popular novels, the protagonist Riana (from *Pesona Kasih Riana*), is the adopted daughter of a poor but honest woman. Riana is an illegitimate child and her biological mother dies very soon after her birth. *Sekeping Gambar Sehelai Nota* depicts a young woman who suspects that she is adopted and discovers her true identity towards the end of the novel. In both cases, the heroines suffer

unrelenting ill fortune before they succeed and prove to their respective enemies their worth. Both women suffer a similar dilemma — who to choose as their respective husbands? In *Pesona Kasih Riana*, for instance, Riana agrees to a contract marriage (*mutaah* marriage) to obtain RM15000 to pay for her mother's surgery. At the wedding though, once her identity as a poor lavatory cleaner is exposed, she suffers extreme humiliation, while her husband fails to defend her poor background. The marriage takes place but the couple's relationship falls apart. For five years, while Riana struggles to make ends meet and eventually becomes a successful cosmetic producer, her husband Johan's whereabouts is unknown. It is only revealed later that he has gone to Japan and built a successful business there. No effort is made on his part to locate his estranged wife. She dutifully remembers her wedding anniversary and buys a cake each time. Although another man, Iskandar, comes into her life, saves her from being raped, provides her with capital to start her business and waits for five years for her to accept his proposal, in the end she chooses the estranged Johan over Iskandar. She conveniently forgets her humiliation, his absence and his misdemeanours. Readers are positioned to see Riana's perspective and to accept her choice of Johan as the love of her life and the correct choice. This novel fulfils the formulaic 'happy-ending' of romances. Riana sacrifices her love for Iskandar to maintain her role as dutiful wife and is shown to be happy with her reunion with her long lost husband. This plot negates the agency apparently given to the woman; she conforms to the stereotypical image of the suffering woman who is rewarded in the end for her capacity to endure and accept that suffering.

The work of 'high' literature, *Kirana*, employs a similar plot. Kirana marries an Indian Muslim man, Suhail, who deserts her on the pretext that he has to return to India to look after his parents, leaving her to fend for herself and her children. He promises to return but years go by and he does not come back. During the twenty years of his absence, Kirana suffers all kinds of emotional trauma and unwanted male attention only to discover that her husband has migrated to England and opened up a number of restaurants there. It is revealed that health problems have encouraged Suhail to believe his wife will reject him; but through the goodwill of a man who happens to see Kirana's photograph at one of her husband's restaurants, Kirana and her husband are brought together again. The years of separation have not lessened her love for him, and she accepts him willingly despite the misery of being abandoned for two decades.

In both novels, the husbands are absent for a very long time. Yet, the women are shown to wait patiently and reject other men's advances — even when these other men are perceived as good — because they privilege loyalty to their husbands above all else. Strict Islamic laws allow for dissolution of a marriage in the event that a husband does not provide *nafkah* (food, money, lodging, sexual intimacy), yet the message of both novels is that women's patience and virtue will be finally rewarded. While Islamic laws provide an avenue for women to dissolve their marriages to absent husbands, Malay authors prefer to show long suffering

wives who remain virtuous throughout their ordeal. While on the one hand this conveniently brings into sharp focus the women's strength as they battle with various obstacles in their lives, on the other hand, this kind of plot resolution does not show the women's capacity to seek the love of other men.

CATEGORIES OF WOMEN

In both varieties of romance novel good characters are often pitted against bad characters to make the chain of events more engaging. It is interesting then to compare the depictions of good and bad women. Both categories of women in the novels are fashion-conscious, beautiful and successful in their own ways. Good women are shown as beautiful and they experience turbulent times before they are rewarded for their patience and virtue. Bad women are characterised as bad homemakers and sexually promiscuous. For example, Sophie, one of Riana's rivals in *Pesona Kasih Riana*, is an alcoholic and a smoker, is lazy and undisciplined:

Mouldy smell permeated the living room. Dirty clothes were strewn on the bed and hung up untidily behind the door. Underwear and bras were left in the pail. They were also mouldy. The kitchen was smelly and messy. Cockroaches ran here and there. Maggots crawled out of dirty dishes in the sink. A foul smell emanated from the pots.
(16–17)

Nida, another one of Riana's rivals, is also shown to be a bad homemaker and obsessed with buying gold. Her husband returns from work looking for food, and is frustrated with his wife's laziness: 'Nordin took off the lid of the rice cooker. It was empty. He opened a tin of biscuit. Also empty. The bread bin was empty. There was not a drop of water in the kettle or the thermos' (15). A bad woman is always equated with being a bad homemaker.

Depraved women do not have a place in either kind of romance novel. They die or get abused. Sophie in *Pesona Kasih Riana* commits suicide, and Nida is abused by her husband until her beautiful nose is broken. Instead of empathising with Nida, the compliant reader is positioned to rejoice in her fate: 'Nordin's hand rose easily to slap Nida's soft face. He shouted as loudly as possible, pushed Nida with all his manly power. He was incensed with anger' (6). The narrative voice guides the reader to understand Nordin's course of action:

Nordin was not totally at fault. Which husband can endure being sworn at day and night? Nothing sweet came out from his wife's lovely mouth. Her foul and vulgar words tested the limits of his patience. His manhood was wounded with his wife's loud voice and uncouth language. (6)

Having caused (apparently justifiable) injury to his wife, Nordin disappears from the story, but despite being abused by her husband, Nida does not take stock of her domestic problems, rather she concentrates on the execution of her plan for Riana's downfall. Although Riana has a community of women from whom she seeks help, they are mostly elderly women who do not provide competition for her success or beauty, whereas young beautiful women like Sophie and Nida are

delineated as rivals in both love relationships and career development. Readers are served the age-old formula of women competing against women for one man.

In *Aroma Hati*, the bad woman is Myra, the protagonist's business partner who schemes to break up her friend's marriage and ruin her business. Single and aggressive, she is not interested in being married and having children. She focuses her whole energy on her work and getting rich. While others can see through Myra's conniving ways, Alisya, the protagonist seems unaware of them:

Myra tried many ways to cause trouble for Alisya... Myra was meticulous in executing her plan for Myra's downfall. She knew Alisya was feeling the strain of marriage. She would grab the opportunity to usurp power. (111 [our trans.])

As expected, Myra fails in her plan to bring down Alisya. She becomes mentally unstable, stabs her friend, and is caught by police. This depiction of this bad, conniving woman conforms to another familiar stereotype: good women are rewarded; bad women are punished.

FEMALE BEAUTY

Beauty seems to be the yardstick of heroines. As mentioned earlier, the illustrations already show women of beauty, but the pages within the covers emphasise the extent of their magnificence. Zurin Adrina of *Sekeping Gambar Sehelai Nota* exemplifies such beauty: 'Zurin Adrina was indeed fortunate to have been blessed with beauty. She became more beautiful as she grew to be a young woman. With her oval-shaped face, sharp nose, slightly brown hair, fair skin, almond-shaped eyes and blessed with long legs, she was the centre of attraction wherever she went' (5). The hero 'was besotted' (7) by her beauty. The same marker of beauty applies to Riana 'Riana's face was smooth and soft as white silk. Her gaze was luminous like the stars. Her smile struck at one's heart. Her lips were red like rose petals, sweet and moist as the morning dew enveloped the flower' (6).

The references to white silk, the stars, a rose as well as the morning dew are used to emphasise the natural beauty of the protagonist. Interestingly, in *Kirana*, the middle-aged heroine maintains her beauty with natural ingredients such as local vegetables (*ulam*), bee pollen and royal jelly. Even after having four children, she manages to look younger than her age. This fascination and obsession with female beauty can be traced to Malay classical literature. These women's beauty parallels the beauty of nature. For example, the loveliness of a woman's face is likened to a full moon, or the sweetness of her appearance is contrasted to the nectar of honey. These images of female beauty harmonise with the magnificence of nature. Hence, women who use artificial sources not drawn from Mother Nature are often depicted as having evil intentions.

Ironically, women in Malay chick lit, especially those in the category of bad women, embrace these ideals but resort to the unnatural assistance of cosmetic surgery to satisfy a patriarchal male's prescribed concept of beauty. Sophie, for example, reconstructs her face and other parts of the body to look beautiful. Myra

in *Aroma Hati* injects her face with Vitamin C and consumes all kinds of synthetic tablets to ensure her youthful looks. By making a stark contrast of the ways these women manage beauty, the authors of romance novels, of popular and high variety, clearly differentiate between the good and bad woman. Good women are equated with Mother Nature; bad women are associated with all things synthetic.

CONCLUSION

Much as we would like to dismiss popular novels because of the ways they present women, men and relationships, these writings present the limits and shifts in social discourse, in that they appear to be similar to the romance novels designated as ‘high’ culture. Both popular fiction and high culture romance novels offer insights into what can and cannot be fantasised about and publicly acknowledged. When a group of writers and readers share a common narrative interest, they are saying something significant about the Malay world.

The texts chosen here focus on a theme that expresses something significant about gender relations in the Malaysian context. Both the Malay popular novel and those deemed to be ‘serious’ can be just as traditional as older works in their portrayals of women’s concerns, attitudes, ambitions and desires. Perhaps this is to be expected. They are, after all, produced by and within the same male-dominated culture. Nevertheless, these novels provide some new space for women’s voices, communities, and experiences as sexual beings. They are not radical visions by any means, but they are a step beyond earlier ‘women’s texts’, which have been more tightly bound by traditional ideas of what women should be and how women should behave. While romance novels suggest possibilities for women outside the role of the female companion, wife and mother, they tend to ultimately reaffirm traditional images of Malay women. Technically, women may be educated and successful in their chosen professions, but they must remain true to Malay feminine ideals. There is no room for transgression from adat practices.

NOTES

- ¹ S.E.A. Write (South East Asian Writers Awards) was established in 1979 to honour leading poets and writers in the 10 countries that make up the ASEAN region. The countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The aims of the award are: to recognise the creativity of writers from countries of the ASEAN region; to create a wider awareness and understanding of literary wealth amongst the ten ASEAN countries; to honour and promote the literary talents of the ASEAN creative writers; and to bring together the many talents of ASEAN writers. (<http://www.seawrite.com/English%20Site/Background-E.html>).

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