

Umami's Obedience in Marriage: A Critical Study of Shanon *Ahmad's Umami & Abang Syekhul*

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Abstract. Malay literature can be a way by which Malay social issues are examined if indeed one subscribes to the *Art for the Society* movement as advocated by the Association of Malay Writers. Shanon Ahmad's novel, *Umami & Abang Syekhul* (1992) is a relevant work with which one can contextualise the controversy that the Obedient Wives Club (*Kelab Isteri Taat* a.k.a Kelab Taat Suami) generated upon its establishment in Rawang, Selangor on 4th June 2011. (The setting up of a Singapore branch of *Kelab Isteri Taat* followed in July 2011) The club's proclamation that social ills such as prostitution and divorce could be resolved with a wife keeping her husband happy through obedient submission in the bedroom came across as suspiciously provocative. A reflective interpretation to the claim is possible with Shanon's novel, which explores polygamous issues through the eyes of Umami. As the third wife, Umami's efforts in appeasing Syekhul's insatiable sexual desires, address the conundrum of obedience in a Malay marriage. The complex emotions underlying Umami's marital subjugation, mental conflicts and cooperative collaboration with Syekhul's other wives illustrate that an obedient wife is in a constant battle with contradictory intrapersonal feelings despite a resignation to her own fate. This analysis offers a cultural-literary perspective of marital obedience in the interest of utilising literature as an empowering tool towards the betterment of the society.

Keywords and phrases: modern Malay literature, marital obedience, novel as social cognition, Shanon Ahmad

Introduction

This discussion begins with a short summary of the plot found in the novel and this will be followed by a review of select local and foreign contemporary Modern Malay Literature scholars' current analyses on Shanon's novel. This scrutiny reveals that the emotional suppression of an obedient spouse, as narrated in *Umami & Abang¹ Syekhul*, is an aspect not highlighted in the literary analyses. Exploring the emotional complex of Umami as an obedient wife living in an Islamic polygamous household generates insights on what being "obedient" actually entails, with marital obedience being a slippery yet laudable concept in a Malay marriages.

Framing the emotional tribulations of an obedient female spouse in a cultural-literary discourse augments an area excluded from the *Obedient Wives Club's* (OWC) rhetoric. In campaigning for the full submission of wives' for the enhancement of their husbands' sexual experience, the OWC subscribes to a structural view of marriage that is biased towards the carnal desires of the male spouse. This structural fallacy in the OWC's viewpoint became more pronounced with the publication of *Islamic Sex* in October 2011 suggesting that joint sexual activities of more than two persons was a means through which a higher satisfaction in one's marriage could be attained (Sew, 2011a). This discussion is an investigation of Umami's emotional states while playing the role of an obedient wife. We make it clear that it is every married couple's own decision whether or not to be "obedient". Nonetheless, the emotional well-being in playing an obedient spouse should not be ignored, not least because the concept of marital obedience is a sensitive component and yet important in maintaining a harmonious marriage.

The Plot

A brief summary here is especially relevant for readers who either do not read Malay novels, or are unaware of Shahnnon's novel's place in the Malay literary world. The ideational sketch provides the cognitive foundation on which the appreciation and understanding of subsequent discussions and diagrammatic interpretation are based. As a follow-up, readers finding the anecdotal introduction appealing may construct their own opinions on obedient marital relationships.

Shahnnon Ahmad, who received the Malaysian National Literary Award in 1982, portrays Umami as the third wife of Abang Syeikhul in *Umami & Abang Syeikhul*. In the first chapter, Umami is portrayed as a blissful young wife, smiling in her sleep whilst imagining that she was in a position of superiority as the preferred woman in Syeikhul's life. As the youngest wife of Syeikhul, Umami is confident that she is capable of banishing the lusty beast within her husband, so enabling Syeikhul to focus on his missionary work. In her musing, she credits his first and the second wives, Jawaher and Siti Hawa, for teaching her about the various techniques preferred by Syeikhul.

In the second chapter, Umami remembers her experience as a newlywed and Jawaher's advice on enduring Syeikhul's desires and bedroom antics. Furthermore, she recalls Syeikhul's instructions that being discreet should remain the norm in her public conduct although she should have no qualms about behaving shamelessly with Syeikhul in the privacy of her bedroom. Umami seems content in replaying her husband's words that there was nothing dirty between

husband and wife in her mind. However, her glee of believing that she was truly the beloved wife begins to wane when Syeikhul spends extra nights with Siti Hawa more frequently. Thereafter, imagining and loathing what takes place in Siti Hawa's bedroom becomes Umami's lonely nocturnal preoccupation.

In the third chapter, Umami becomes even more restless as her turn with her husband is denied once again. She begins to show signs of madness by throwing herself on to the mattress in the darkness of her abode, kicking the air and fighting the hallucination of two ghostly figures, resembling her husband and Siti Hawa, hugging each other. The lonely nights, haunted with illusionary images coupling and laughing, repeatedly erodes the Umami's sanity. Although each wife in a polygamous Islamic family is supposed to be accorded her turn with her husband equally, the husband may request that one wife forgoes her turn, thus letting him spend the night with another wife of his choice and fancy.

In the fifth chapter, the three wives meet for a lunch at Jawaher's place during which the absent-minded husband checks out the person he would spend the night with. After several turns of questioning, Umami hastily points out that the person was Jawaher. At the end of the afternoon meal, however, a suspicious whisper from Jawaher to Syeikhul becomes her sacrificial offer for Syeikhul to share the night with Umami.

In the seventh chapter, Umami waits impatiently for her husband who continues to preach to a group of followers at home. The thought of tearing the curtain that shields herself from the audience and chasing away the crowd continually plays in Umami's mind. However, the eventual experience was dismaying, lukewarm and fell far short of what she had come to expect of Syeikhul.

Umami's bewilderment was met with Syeikhul's intention to take a fourth wife, which was later made known to the entire household in the eighth chapter. Interestingly, all the wives give their blessings to him and he subsequently cries incessantly as a gesture of appreciation. Each of the three wives agree to the concession of either two or three nights, thus letting Syeikhul spend more time with the incoming fourth wife – one deemed necessary for Syeikhul to sustain his missionary work.

Previous treatment of Umami

Current scholarly debates on *Umami & Abang Syeikhul* examine zoom in on the creative and/or erotic approach that Shanon deploys in tackling the genre of Islamic literature. The reviews from local and foreign scholars indicate that Shanon's work attracts an academic following among literary scholars. In his reading, Harry Aveling provides a summary of the novel before relating it to the

banned Darul Arqam, a self-styled business empire that started as a religious study group led by Ustaz Ashaari:

The plot is almost entirely based on a description of Umami's waiting her "turn" to spend the night with her husband, Abang Syeikhul (Ashaari² was commonly known as Syeikhul Arqam, the Leader of Darul Arqam). We are given in considerable detail her endless sexual fantasies about her past nights with him, and her intense frustration at the continual postponement of her union with him. From being his fourth [sic] wife at the end of the novel ... (Aveling 2000, 212).

Aveling concludes that Umami might have achieved significant spirituality from her divorce with Syeikhul if the goal of Islamic piety is regarded as the ultimate reason. Similar to Aveling's line of thought, a peculiar reasoning was circulated among Kedah Muslim men for the upholding of polygamy, which later become a popular practice of Al-Arqam. Feminist anthropologists find it perplexing that some Malay women would share their husband for the chance to enter heaven:

... stories of women going straight to heaven, if they allowed their husbands to marry another were rampant at the peak of the now banned Al-Arqam movement in Malaysia, in the late 1980s and early 1990s and speaks a lot about the psychological dependency of women on spiritual (*pahla*) returns in this modern age when most good things are measured in terms of economic wealth (Karim 2002, 113).

In a separate study, Mohd Zariat (2008) compared Shanon's *Tok Guru* (1988) with *Umami & Abang Syeikhul* through the lenses of *Pujangga Baru* (PB), or Islamic Literary Criticism. The foundation of PB is based on *taklif*, that is to say, the connection between man and primordial covenant with Islam as its conceptual underpinning. All the novelists, according to PB, have an inclination to set a righteous agenda to disseminate knowledge sanctioned by human nature. As a vehicle of truth, the narrative axis exploits its narrative devices within the narrative space of a novel to guide the readers towards primary knowledge or *adab*. Consequently, PB is in essence part of the school of didactic method. According to Mohd Zariat (2008), the narrative axis of *Umami & Abang Syeikhul* situates Malay polygamy in two kinds of distortion, namely the interpretation and the practice of polygamy, with the novel being perceived as a distortion of polygamy in favour of the perpetrator's lust. Mohd Zariat claims that sexual and erotic references have filled most of the chapters in the plot to such an extent that he disagreed with Harry Aveling's analysis that Umami could ever attain spiritual accomplishment following her divorce from Syeikhul. Alas, moral-based

criticisms shuts the door on experiential reasoning that the human mind is capable of. The feelings leading to the actions of the characters in the plot, which are relevant as a guide to understanding human behaviour, escapes the purist standpoint of PB. It is arguable that the actions of everyday living, either consciously or unconsciously executed, are very much emotionally-based performances (Karim 1990; 2002, Roach 2007, Sew 2009).

In a different analysis, Ooi (2005) compares the plots of *Umami and Abang Syeikhul* and *Tok Guru* and concludes that Umami was exploited by Syeikhul. The delaying of Umami's turn, thus leading to Umami's "insanity", shows that Umami was at her husband's whim and fancy (see below). In detailed descriptions, Ooi illustrates that Syeikhul exploits Umami as an object of pleasure. Falling prey to her husband's manipulation and distortion of the holy verse *Surah Al-Baqarah*, Umami relents and consents to certain inappropriate sexual activities (see also Aveling 2000, 213). Similar to Aveling's position, Ooi believes that Umami's separation from Syeikhul permits her to commit herself to God.

Extending Ooi's analysis, we see Umami's helplessness as a creation of unilateral bilingual trickery. Citing holy phrases from *Al-Quran*, Syeikhul convinces Umami that it was the wife's rightful duty to fulfil her husband's sexual needs. Ooi's analysis, however, renders Umami a lifeless object, thereby ignoring her longing for Syeikhul to consummate the marital union according to her designated slots. The term *exploitation* thus constitutes a unilateral view. Umami's desires as a young wife married to an experienced husband are thrown out of Ooi's analytical window. The thematic dissection of the plot using the "what happened" and "who did what to who" lenses brushes aside Umami's emotional needs which include enjoying holy sexual acts. After all, Umami is told that she makes immense contributions in sustaining Syeikhul's strength by submitting herself to him. Moreover, Umami is made to believe that her submission would bring about a rewarding afterlife.

This husband-oriented intimacy resonates well with many Malay women in the Southeast Asian region. Indeed, the Obedient Wives Club, set up in the regions of East and Southeast Asia, operates by this interpersonal principle (see below). That Malay men are now allowed to apply for a *fasakh* divorce in the New Enactment of Syariah (the Islamic law) in Malaysia is a prime example of a husband-oriented marital relationship in the Malay world. As expounded in Maznah Mohamad (2011), a new form of masculinity is being bestowed upon Malay men with the institutionalising of the rights to polygamy, unconditional custody of children and unilateral divorce in the New Enactment.

Arguably, interpersonal sexual experience, which is part of a satisfying adult life, becomes the (initial) basis to the psyche of (American) women, either

consciously or subconsciously. A notable example came from Eve Ensler who shared her experience from a workshop that invoked a self-realisation of her psyche (2001, 48):

... on our mats, finding our spots, our locus, our reason, and I don't know why, but I started crying ... Maybe it was knowing that I had to give up the fantasy, the enormous life-consuming fantasy that someone or something was going to do this for me—the fantasy that someone was coming to lead my life, to choose direction, to give me orgasms.

Thus far, the common criticism levelled against Shanon's novel indicates that there is a great deal of moral panic. A failure to preach virtuosity explicitly, according to Islamic virtues, often becomes the criterion with which to evaluate Shanon's novel. Unsurprisingly, *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul* is regarded as an unworthy read and is considered to be an appalling representation of a proper Islamic literature.³ In this vein, a reader considered the repeated uses of similes such as lions and tigers as metaphors of the religious leader's sexual aggression as indicators of political incorrectness in modern Malay literature (Washima, 2006). The explicit sexual references in the plot was the main reason behind the criticisms levelled at this novel despite Ummi attaining a higher level of spirituality after the eschewing of sexual fantasies and practices.

The negative attitude toward eroticism suggests that high moral fibre is considered to be the main ingredient for a good novel. Contrary to the opinion that highbrow literature should not contain erotic content, Hooker (2000) elucidated that sex is not a taboo subject in Malay fiction. We would argue that the sexual exploitation of the third wife is an attempt to represent the muted group that is, more often than not, ostracised in the society. The novel *Salam Maria*, for example, demonstrates that voyeuristic imagination and dialogue exchanges connotative of sexual activities are often hurled at single Malay women, which only become obvious following critical and serious pondering. Serious readers in Shanon Ahmad's sense (2011) should be able to comb a boring plot with a critical sieve. For example, should Syeikhul's singularly derived interpretations of holy verses be counterchecked?⁴ Also, nothing is said of Syeikhul's contribution in releasing Ummi from the decadent moral practice of indulging in sex following the divorce.

In contrast to the criticism directed at the erotic content, Abdul Rahman Napiah (2010) explicated that the sexual references are generated from Ummi's subconscious and conscious thoughts as a foreground towards a deeper understanding of the novel. Abdul Rahman Napiah notes that the strength of a wife's belief in God following her consent to a divorce is an important subplot in

Shannon's version of Islamic literature, *Penceraian membawa nikmat, kerana cinta yang hendak dicurahkan kepada seseorang yang telah hilang itu akan berkumpul menambah keimanan...* [Divorce brings about fulfilment, because love that was intended for a person who becomes no longer available can be accumulated towards religious attainment, my translation] (Abdul Rahman Napiah 2010, 40).

While it is possible for the newly-single to acquire a transcendental self, becoming single again may also incur the implication of being viewed as sexually available. A researcher shared her experience of female singlehood, which is akin to being readily available for sexual advancement, when she was advised to stay with a Malay family to avoid unfavourable attention (Ong, 1995). The underlying message is that without the policing of men in the Malay village, women could, and would, be perceived as sexually available. The experience of the protagonist Maria Zaitun in *Salam Maria* (Wong 2011a) in being subjected to the sexual fantasies of laymen, sexual propositioning of a businessman, and in facing accusations about partaking in sexually immoral behaviour by other married women, could not make the point any clearer.⁵

Shannon's brilliant telling of so-called leaders' sexual desires and practices compels the readers to examine the conduct of Islamic leaders. Syeikhul's inclination to marry and then divorce his wives after a period of time for the purpose of marrying other, younger, women provides readers with much food for thought. The plot contains many antitheses to the virtues preached in Islam, which are relatable to the current world, especially in Southeast Asia. The mismatch in Syeikhul's action *vis a vis* his preaching is instrumental for generating new syntheses to cross-examine spoken words with actual deeds of the local leaders.

The role of Malay literature as a tool to address social issues harks back to the literary movement of the 50s, better known as ASAS 50. Hooker (2000) explains that ASAS 50 comprises of Malay writers promoting the cause of *art for the society*, in particular the oppressed, by speaking on their behalf. The notion of *rakyat* bears a special significance as the concept refers to Malays who are being oppressed by other Malays (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 2011). It is timely to invoke the constructed experiences in Shannon's novel as an alternative for addressing the practice of Muslim wifely submission to their husbands. As a critique of gender exploitation, the novel is a vehicle of social development for the *rakyat* or the people.

Umami's voice as the narrator constitutes the main narrative strategy in the novel and it is through the eyes and voice of the third wife that the story of affection and disorientation takes shape. This strategy creates an opportunity to examine

the emotional complexity underpinning Ummi's well-being – namely a divided psyche of a confused and crippled persona masquerading as a cooperative wife. This emotional turmoil stems from the pragmatic-cum-competitive self as, among other things, Ummi harbours hopes that Jawaher, the first and oldest wife, would be divorced by Abang Syeikhul:

Terasa benar untuk mengejutkan Abang Syeikhul. Kalau hendak ceraikan Kak Jawaher kerana Kak Jawaher tak mampu lagi memberi sumbangan yang berkesan, katakanlah (p. 65).

Really feel like waking up Abang Syeikhul. If he wants to divorce sister Jawaher because sister Jawaher could not offer effective contribution, do say so (p. 65, Author's translation).

Ummi's egoistic self is dented by a series of disappointments which begins with Syeikhul spending successive nights with Siti Hawa, the older second wife. Ummi's sanity was affected, not least because the recurrent denial of her turns to spend the night delivered heavy blows on Ummi's pride:

... dan Ummi cuba mengusirkan wajah-wajah itu jauh-jauh dengan pancutan ludahnya ... Wajah yang dijerkah menjadi bertambah galak ... terus mendekati Ummi dengan ejekan ... Ummi cuba mencapai wajah-wajah dengan tangannya yang panjang tetapi malam itu tangan Ummi tiba-tiba terasa begitu kontot dan pendek ... Ummi cuba mengangkat kedua belah kakinya yang terasa masih bertenaga ... Segala tenaga tiba-tiba terlucut dari jasad Ummi dan ... tubuh lain yang dikenali ... itu sebagai tubuh hak punya Kak Siti. Malam itu sebenarnya bukan hak Ummi (p. 35).

... and Ummi tried to chase the imaginary faces far away with a spray of spit...The faces that she yelled at became more active ... closing in to tease Ummi ... Ummi tried to grab the faces with her long hands but that night her hands suddenly became stout and short ...Ummi raised her both legs, which were still strong ... All the energy suddenly dissipated from Ummi's body and one of the recognisable figures ...was that of sister Siti. That night was actually not for Ummi to own (p. 35, Author's translation).

A close reading of Shahnon's novel shows that the silent yet intense sufferings of the weaker sex/gender within the patriarchal system. The narrative captures the soft yet damaging impact of oppression which is capable of penetrating deeply into the sanity of the victims' mind. Morality, or the lack of it, in the plot is a

thought-provoking theme which encourages the readers to question the leaders' exploitation of their hegemony.

Why was Umami abandoned by Syeikhul even after maintaining a role similar to that of a comfort woman and meeting his sexual demands? To question the conclusions drawn by some of the critics further, we ask why abstinence from sex after divorce is good for Umami but not for Syeikhul? Syeikhul worked well after a sexually satisfying night whereas Umami could only possibly be pious if she stuck with a sexless regime. That celibacy was laudable for females but detrimental to males was never investigated.

Reading Umami across knowledge zones

Two main opposing camps on Shanon's novel are identifiable in the literature review. The first camp condemns the novel as an unworthy work because a novel filled with references to sexual hallucinations and imageries of nudity is worthless. In the second camp, however, Umami is redeemed by her pledge to a sexless solitary life and therefore towards religious piety. In both views, the actions and thoughts of Umami are placed on the scale of morality. In contrast, true to the spirit of art for the society, we relate Umami's marital ordeal to the enigma of obedience that plagues Malay society. It is a blessing in disguise that the motion of Shanon's work runs in the opposite direction to the expectation of so-called religious literature because the opportunity to unravel the subplot emerges when Shanon's inserts the flip of moral values in the storyline.

By examining the characters' motives, an informed view on exploitation could be constructed. Three subsections, namely Umami as social critique; emotion as the worldview of interactivity; and emotions of obedience are presented before the concluding remarks. The subdivisions in this analysis mirror a continuum of social malice with emotion as the underlying basis of (dis)content. While at the macro level, emotion transforms one's worldview towards an issue that at the micro level emotion affects one's desire for a person or a thing. The focus narrows into the emotional complex of subjugation in Malay marriages at the end of the discussion.

Reading across the knowledge zones is deployed to pluralise our understanding without subscribing to a hegemonic grand narrative, be it western or vernacular (cf. Wong 2011b, Wang 2011). The epistemological grounds of this technique stem from reflecting critically on local socio-cultural issues. Such approach eliminates the delimitation of reading a novel from the confines of gazing the plot within a single cultural-theoretical logic to analyse related new ideas surrounding the local society. The collaborative farming projects in Winarto (2011) and the cultural-semiotic analyses of Malay veil in Nagata (1995) exemplify fine

examples of reading across the knowledge zones that apply *simultaneous, coeval, interconnected and dependent processes* (cf. Goh 2011, 248).

A critical reader could channel the analytical power initiated from the literary appreciation to cross-examine similar predicaments in the real world beyond the fiction zone. While female characters in the androcentric tradition normally ended up living in solitude, a meaningful comparison between Ummi and selected groups in the society is possible. Ummi could be construed as the representative of weaker characters manipulated by dominant actors capable of distorting facts and chastening evil actions. To illustrate the point, the exploit of Ummi, Siti Hawa and Jawaher by Syekhul is comparable to the ordeal plaguing the marriage of a Malay woman named Rosnah in the actual zone.

The comparison evokes a cross-examination on exploitative marital relationships co-occurring in the fiction and the real world. The fictional of Ummi and real husbands of Rosnah played out polygamy in the name of God (*poligami dah takdir Tuhan*). However, contradictory to Ummi, Jawaher and Siti who have all agreed to a fourth wife Rosnah actually acquired a *lafaz cerai*⁶ from her husband to annul the marriage. In both zones, the emotions of Ummi and Rosnah became the key element behind the transformation of the respective events. That the outcomes would turn out very different had Ummi and Rosnah each acted in opposite manner justifies the perspective of emotion as an object of literary study.

Ummi as social critique

Shannon's work is a useful reference with which one can reflect on Malay wifehood; a concept that has seen a new contestation with the launch of Obedient Wives Club (OWC) on 4 June 2011. The spokesperson of OWC made it known that the club preaches sexual submission to Malay wives to ensure that their spouses remain happy in the bedrooms, thereby curing social ills such as prostitution and divorce. Terms such as "good sex worker" and "whore" were used for the roles that wives could play for their husbands (Yoong 2011). Understandably, the mission of OWC generated much controversy in Malaysia with the highly educated women divided according to two opposing camps, namely one for and the other against fulfilling and pleasing the husbands' sexual desires *per se* (Ng 2011). On 18 June 2011, news appeared in *The Straits Times* that plan was underway to set up a branch of OWC in Singapore. The advocators believed that the mission of OWC was misunderstood and stressed that a wife's loyalty to her husband was critical in warranting the well-being of the man (Ng 2011). A similar branch by the name of *Kelab Taat Suami* was also launched on 18 June 2011 in Jakarta claiming a membership of 300 across various Indonesian cities (*Yahoo News!* 2011).

The growing membership, from 800 to 1000 members of OWC Malaysia, puts Malay marital relationship back in the agenda of social development. The movement is considered as an extension of Islamic essentialism, whereby women were to uphold the responsibilities to help men. In turn, women are relegated to the female-private-powerless social role compared to the "male-public-powerful" stratum in the social hierarchy (Karim 2002). More recently, with the publication of *Seks Islam* (Islamic Sex), a sex-guide encouraging joint-sex activities by OWC (Sew 2011a), it can be inferred that Malay women as wives could be coaxed to construe certain activities as common practices in a marital relationship/marriages. This is not dissimilar from Syekhul's corrupting of Umami's understanding on marital relationship.

Against the growing number of obedient wives and co-wives, we heed the advice of Karim (2002) that popular intellectualism, including creative works such as novels, is worth more serious contemplation. As such, this discussion is closing in on the complexities wrapped within Malay identity. *Umami & Abang Syekhul* provides an insight into the minds of unconventional married Malay women, thus enabling a cultural-literary extrapolation towards the psyche of unconventional Malay females. Umami's polygamous relationship with Syekhul was unconventional when compared with conventional Malay marriage relationships does not include polygamy (Maznah Mohamad and Rashidah Shuib 2011). Reading a novel for self-reflection is relevant for personal resolution, not least as the current problems faced by mankind have shifted from the external sphere to the internal realm. Shanon himself is of the opinion that internal conflicts are basic human problems which should be the main concern of perceptive fiction writers (Mohd Yusof Hasan 1995):

Permasalahan manusia sekarang adalah permasalahan dalaman, permasalahan yang berpunca daripada neurosis dan psychosis, permasalahan tidak mengenal akunya sehingga membiar perwatakan outsiders berhijrah masuk ke dalam diri ... ketiadaan weltanschauung yang jelas dan hak (p. 431) ... seorang sasterawan yang tajam sensitivitinya tidak biasa tinggal kaku diam ... Permasalahan itu menjadi permasalahan dirinya...permasalahan manusia setempat diberi antitesis, kemudian disintesiskan dalam bentuk karya ... dan akhirnya dilepaskan ke tengah masyarakat agar masyarakat juga menempuh permasalahan dalaman itu (p. 443).

The current human problems are mainly internal conflicts, and issues that arise from the neurotic and psychotic minds including the problems of not recognising oneself, which leads to the occurrence of rebellious characteristics in oneself ... a

lack of a clear worldview and rights (p. 431) ... a literary writer, who is highly perceptive would not remain silent and indifferent...the problem in question becomes the writer's ...the problem of local people are accorded with an antithesis and later synthesized into the form of literary works ... and eventually channelled to the mainstream with the intention that the society could deal with the internal conflicts (p. 443, Author's translation).

The qualities of a narrative are critical for generating epiphanies that enable interpretations and forging of storylines in literary works that explore various human issues (Wong 1999). In tackling the views of OWC, Shahnou's novel sheds light on marital submission in Malay culture. The simple yet disturbing plot is a useful tool for the exploration of the internal struggle, mood and emotional changes that occur in the minds and hearts of humans. Thus far, studies on the novel offer little resolution to the agenda set by OWC, not least because critics are overly focused on the physical exploitation that underpins the storyline.

However, the novel is capable of generating a critical spinoff to illuminate the emotions both transpiring and subdued in the psyche of the obedient wives when one furthers the analysis into a seismograph of life. From the outset, this discussion is aligned to the eastern values that a full and mutual subjugation to one's spouse is a virtue, be it Islamic or Confucian.⁷ Unfortunately, harmony in the gender relationship of a Malay marriage reflects a preference for a male-over-female hierarchy as played out in the current practice delineated in the New Enactment of Syariah:

The right of the ideal Islamic wife and mother is constructed around conditional clauses of loyalty, obedience, purity and subservience. While Islamic malehood is associated with entitlements, Islamic femalehood is associated with good behaviour. While malehood is gained by legal conferment, femalehood is gained by moral submission (Maznah Mohamad 2011, 175).

Nonetheless, it is necessary to evaluate the challenges Malay wives face in playing an obedient role. The exploration of the emotional terrain in marital obedience may be considered an attempt towards *syariat batin* or spiritual Syariah in Islam that leads to virtuous morality.⁸ Failing to understand the emotional undercurrent beyond the vivid descriptions of sexual references couched in metaphorical phrasing only trivialises the message of naïve young Malay wives falling victim to manipulative male protagonists. Seeking a deeper

analysis, we will investigate what it means to be obedient by translating Shahnnon's notion of literature as a seismograph of life to reconfigure the plot for the identification of experience afforded by the five human senses.

Citing holy verses such as *Surah Yunus*, *Surah Al-Jatsiyah* and *Surah Luqman*, it is clear that Islam encourages a comprehensive perception of the world wherein God encourages humans to utilize the five senses to the fullest in all aspects of life (cf. Shahnnon Ahmad 1993, 372). Optimizing one's critical mind to the fullest is a constant in Islam until today, especially as those who fail to contemplate and think are considered as lower than home breed animals (see M. Zuhail A. Lathif 2011 for an interpretation of *Surah Al-Furqan*, verse 44).

Although the novel is written within a religious framework, the exploration of gender relationships in Malay polygamy is actually cultural rather than religious in nature because "the framework that categorises the Islamic state within the parameters of Malay Muslim femininity and masculinity is very much rooted in culture rather than in Islam" (Noritah Omar and Washima Che Dan 2006, 51). In other words, the human conflicts found in the plot are indexes of conflicting interactivity and the human quandaries should not be mistaken as the consequences of religious reflexes. The interactivity in the Syeikhul's household reveals issues that are culturally-inclined rather than religiously-grounded. A few examples will thus be cited in order to show that human biases and cultural predispositions are at the heart of interactions within the plot.

Ummi's preoccupation with lustful desire and subscription to the belief that the body of the young wife was the preferred subject leads to her becoming surprised when Syeikhul requests that she sacrifice her turn of the night as he needed the night with Jawaher, the first wife:

Pernah Ummi sedekah satu malam kepada Kak Jawaher atas permintaan Abang Syeikhul juga. Ummi terkejut juga pada mulanya kerana Abang Syeikhul masih lagi memerlukan jadual tambahan untuk bersama Kak Jawaher. Mungkin Abang Syeikhul dan Kak Jawaher memerlukan malam itu untuk berbincang hal-hal yang lain di luar keganasan dan kebuasannya. Lagi pun apalah sangat hendak berbinatang dan berganas dengan Kak Jawaher itu. Kak Jawaher sudah tua (p. 127).

Ummi ever sacrificed a night to sister Jawaher at the request of Abang Syeikhul too. Ummi was shocked in the beginning that Abang Syeikhul still needed the extra schedule with sister Jawaher. Perhaps Abang Syeikhul and sister Jawaher needed that night to discuss matters that are not related to wild and violent behaviours.

Moreover what was there to be too wild and violent with sister Jawaher. Sister Jawaher was already old (p. 127, Author's translation).

In this respect, Ummi fails to understand the notion of Islam Hadhari, an all-encompassing concept that the Syeikhul household subscribes to. Ummi's narcissistic mind reflects a cultural self, which was far from a religious transcendental self.

It is obvious that Ummi's obedience to her husband was directed by the need for sexual gratification rather than the glory of spiritual assistance in forwarding a religious mission. For example, the immediate thought that appears in Ummi's consciousness when Syeikhul asks Ummi for her consent in him marrying a fourth wife was about all the rude sexual awakenings that the fourth wife would be enduring. Such a mindset is a stark contrast to the purported reason behind Syeikhul marrying another wife, which was to reap the benefits that lead to better concentration in his missionary work:

"Ummi macam mana pula?" Demikian akhirnya Abang Syeikhul menyoal. Semalam pun Ummi sudah dapat menangkap niat Abang Syeikhul itu tetapi Ummi tidaklah berkata apa-apa waktu itu. Tapi Ummi memang setuju ... Ummi sanggup memberi giliran malam Ummi kepada adik itu kelak ... Dan adik yang bakal datang itu pun akan terkejut juga sama seperti Ummi ... Tapi percayalah dik, kejutan itu akhirnya berubah menjadi kegemaran yang amat sangat pula kerana Abang Syeikhul ini ... ah! adik sendirilah akan mengalaminya (p. 113).

"Ummi how about you then?" In the end Abang Syeikhul asked the question. Last night Ummi already sensed Abang Syeikhul's intention but Ummi did not say anything at that time. But Ummi was agreeable indeed. Ummi was willing to offer her turn to the incoming sister ... And this new sister would be shocked just like Ummi ... Believe it sis, the shocking experience would eventually become something to look forward to because this Abang Syeikhul ... ah! sister you should experience it yourself (p. 113, Author's translation).

Ummi volunteers to sit on the committee that sources for the fourth wife and this reveals a secular preference over the spiritual necessity obvious in the selection of the candidate, Nur Musalamah. The selection for Nur was based on her family heritage, facial features and physical attributes including the skin, the waist, the description of the breast and buttocks, the ears, the cheeks, the fingers, the hair,

the teeth and the lips (see the details on p. 124). Apart from looks and physical attributes, class was also conflated with religion. In terms of class, the candidate's father is a *Bumiputera* millionaire by the name of Dato' Badruzzaman (p. 123). Close affinity between class and religion, however, was proven fatal not least as Darul Arqam's popular appeal to the cosmopolitan middle-class Malay was the main reason for its demise (Nagata 2004, 110).

Umami's verbal expression to sacrifice two nights with Syeikhul was based on her personal insecurity rather than a calculated reasoning to promote religious well-being. Umami's original intention to offer three nights to the newlywed was rejected for fear that Kak Siti, the second wife, would become suspicious of her generosity.

Umami pun sedekah dua malam giliran Umami saja. Pada mulanya Umami ingin juga pahala lebih dengan berhasrat untuk sedekah tiga malam, tetapi kemudiannya Umami buat keputusan dua malam saja; sama seperti yang disedekahkan oleh Kak Siti. Kalau sedekah tiga malam, nanti apa pula kata Kak Siti (p. 125).

Umami also sacrificed two nights of her turns. At first Umami wanted plenty of good blessings and intended to offer three nights, but later Umami made the decision of two nights; similar to what was offered by sister Siti. Umami was worried that if she sacrificed three nights, sister Siti might make of her kindness wrongly (p. 125, Author's translation).

Umami's subsequent lonely nights at the end of the story were spent wandering about in her bedroom imagining the possible pleasures her husband derived from spending additional nights with Nur Musalamah and if the newlywed Nur Musalamah would experience rude shocks from Syeikhul in her bedroom. Umami's erratic behaviour and erotic imaginings existed both before and after Nur Musalamah became a household member and indeed whenever she had to sleep by herself. Obviously, Umami exhibits psychological disorientation rather than religiously-troubled behaviour. The so-called psychological disorientation, however, is but a normal part of a young wife's mindset if we compare Umami's situation with the sexual deprivation of Che Nerat bt. Musa that was recognised by the *Kadi* (the Islamic court judge) in the *Mahkamah Syariah Perlis* (Islamic court of Perlis in northern West Malaysia) in 1965 (Maznah Mohamad 2011).⁹

Umami serves as a prism that illuminates the possible tribulations a wife faces in performing marital obedience. Acknowledging that each marital relationship is unique, a male or female actor intending to perform the obedient role may experience a lower level of distress if Umami's emotional outcomes can be used as

a psychological benchmark for forging interpersonal unions. The plot may be an avenue in contemplating intelligently when performing obedience since each human interaction is emotionally-laden. The following section explores emotion as the modus operandi of human interaction.

Emotion as the worldview of interactivity

Scepticism on emotion as a legitimate aspect in human relationship often perceives human emotion as super-organic and relegates emotion to the non-intellectual aspect of culture. Following Wazir J. Karim, emotion is considered to be the basis of human actions in human interaction:

A vital component of the energy of action is human action. It reaffirms the social sentiment of the group, also weakens or destroys it, and makes an attempt to reconstruct and support new ideas. Thus emotion and action constitute the human workshop of experience on which culture is built—the level of interpersonal relationships where meanings are being sorted, where conflict and ambiguous ideas are provided with interpretation, conforming or unconforming to established values, but generally determining the pathways of future social relations (Karim 1990, 12).

Emotion as a worthy locus in this cultural-literary analysis is underlined by the recent work of literary scholars on hate and vengeance as significant destructive forces in Malay literature. Amida Abdulhamid (2004), for example, analysed 17 *hikayat* or classical texts to determine the origin of hatred and its impact. Not all the hatred led to destruction although there were many examples of anarchy that destabilized various peaceful settings. Whenever a reader identifies with the emotions of a character a co-identification is re-enacted in the literary appreciation.

According to Peter Slovic, emotion and worldview are functionally similar in that both are used by humans to navigate a complex and uncertain world. The public, including so-called scientists, are aware of the emotion of being *affected*, with this being defined as *a positive or negative evaluative feeling toward an external stimulus* (Slovic 1999, 694). Investigating the affect of marital obedience as a manifestation of the Malay value system is to transcend the structural framing of social affairs that ultimately neglects human agency. Arguably, emotion appropriates and influences the decision making process of social actors (cf. Sew 2010). Ong Aihwa observed that married Malay women in Kuala Langat, Selangor are expected to conceal their *aurat* or nakedness; and even to maintain the specific *adat* or art of preserving their sexual attractiveness to retain their

husbands' interest (1995, p. 166).¹⁰ Not unlike scenarios in the nineties, Malay married women today still have to juggle multiple trade roles and domestic responsibilities expected of them while observing their modesty by avoiding male-dominated spaces, such as bars and pubs (cf. Suriani Suratman 2011).

My conjecture is that marital obedience is a complex concept affecting Malay females with emotion being an important element in the decisions made in daily interactions. Human emotions form the underlying basis on which interactivity transpires between social actors and thus play a significant role in constructing our perception. Emotion as part of the social psychology of Malay minds is recorded as a relevant business trait worthy of the attention of outsiders in Malaysia and Singapore. The best-seller *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands: How to Business in 12 Asian Countries* makes an interesting point on how Malay business relations are influenced by emotion:

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The subjective feelings of the moment form the basis for truth, with faith in the ideologies of Islam having a very strong influence ... (Morrison and Conaway 2007, 80).

While the dynamics of a Malay market has as much to do with feelings as it does with price and products, we are mindful that Malays are encouraged to constantly engage in self reflection. Asking "Who am I?", for example as a form of self-reflection is considered relevant for Malay intellectuals such as Shahnnon Ahmad in revisiting the Malay identity complex. According to Mohd Yusof Hasan (1995), such an introspective query allows a Malay person to bring in religion as the underlying foundation to explore humanity.

Emotions of obedience

Umami's emotional states are found in the narratives containing her recollection, interpersonal interactivity and intrapersonal imagination. we will explore these emotions to highlight possible marital experiences that might be encountered by a submissive spouse. Studying the emotions of marital obedience based on literary analyses offers a familiar entry point for a layperson to think about the issue related to OWC as if the folk psychology of a society is tapped (cf. Sew 2011b). Metaphorical extensions, either framed in alignment to Umami's experiences or construed as a variant from Umami's worldview creates anew one's intrinsic knowledge (Sew 2004). The obedient role is defined as a concerted effort to suppress the negative as well as the positive feelings toward any external stimulus in order to maintain a mindset of reverence in displaying a submissive stance.

The suppression of two emotion extremes, namely that of relish and revolt, was necessary for Umami to maintain a calm demeanour in public. The "well at ease" self image was the norm expected of a Muslim missionary's wife. Looking dishevelled in the eyes of the other Syeikhul household wives would be tantamount to a loss of face. The concept of face is closely related to cultural and emotional intelligence – a significant notion relevant in the Asian business world (Earley, Ang and Tan 2006). Umami's obedient behaviour was underlined by a reverential attitude to a subject of subjugation. In other words, performing obedience is desirable.

Umami balances different emotions in performing obedience in various locales, not least because Umami's marital obedience was constantly oscillating between two extremes, from a state of suppression whilst in public to that of a disruptive disposition when alone. She was submissive in interacting with Syeikhul while feeling both happy and unhappy, as well as both angry and confused which gradually results in a worrisome state of mind. The varying sensations that emerge from physical contacts generate a series of recurrent and perceptive memories which give rise to tumultuous and imaginative mental trajectories. Umami's affect, or *rasa kasih sayang* are based on her utterances in reported speeches, which are recounted in the plot in the first person's voice. *Rasa* (feeling) as a significant component in Umami's psyche incurs various feelings (*perasaan*) in obeisance performing.

Instead of feeling contented like an obedient subordinate should, Umami constantly has to cope with a series of complicated emotions. While Umami is fully aware of turn-sharing among wives with her husband, she nevertheless finds it difficult to refrain from hallucinating about the intimacy between her husband and the second and later the fourth wife. Umami's emotional ordeal generates frantic dispositions within her own bedroom which includes the constant chasing of her imaginary demons. Umami's delusions lead to anger and madness and yet these negative feelings were suppressed and prevented the corrosion of Umami's obedience to such an extent that she herself volunteered to find a new wife for Syeikhul.

Physical submission as the means to heaven is a thought that remains firmly etched in Umami mind to the exclusion of any possible alternatives. Umami thus re-enacts a stereotypical reproduction of gender relations by trusting Syeikhul's words and thereafter surrendering her body to him, firm in her belief that she could be ever available, infinitely gratifying, sexually and physically ideal in her stereotypical gender role. In this illusion, Umami is convinced that she is the answer to her husband's spiritual needs and therefore would gain her eternal reward through the subjugation of herself to him.

Paradoxically, while Umami acknowledges the importance of sharing her turn with the other two wives, she also assumes that she deserves all the turns of union with Syeikhul. Umami's social psychology demonstrates a conflicting and hypocritical mental state. Suppressing these contradictory feelings would eventually cause disruptive behaviour as Umami's mind was filled with jealousy, anger and sarcasm towards the second wife whenever she was alone. A manifestation of wild behaviours resembling a kind of madness on Umami's part follows suit. Umami's desires and feelings had given rise to an insurmountable challenge in the practice of obedience. In psychosocial terms, Umami desires for a plenitude of intimacy (cf. Sew 2007, Cameron and Kulick 2003), in which Syeikhul was the real object of Umami's desire in her plenitude.

The mindset of an obedient spouse expecting maximal affection in the quest of plenitude goes haywire when her desire is constantly punctuated with denial. Fortunately, hope becomes an important emotion within the experiential realm of Umami's desire with the feeling of *hopefulness* being a universal emotion. Averill (1996) found that hopefulness situates certain Asian cultures similarly to the Western counterparts because this feeling has contributed to being non-inhibitive in expecting sensual gratification. OWC's publication of *Islamic Sex*, Edison Chen and his collection of nude photographs in 2008, several heterosexual and homosexual criminal cases making headlines in the Malay dailies of 2009, as well as the internet sex scam resulting in financial extortion in Singapore (Shaffiq Alkhatib 2012, Sew 2012) are evidences of this.

In a parallel analysis, it may be said that there was no love without hope in the case of Nazreen, the wife of Iryadi in Isa Kamari's novel *Kiswah*. Nazreen, the female protagonist has lost her hope with her husband's unbecoming behaviour during their honeymoon, which spanned from India to Pakistan and ending in Mecca, which was to be the final destination of their short-lived marriage. Nazreen finds her sexual experiences with her husband in Delhi, Kashmir and Kathmandu shocking and begins doubting her decision in marrying Iryadi, a charismatic undergraduate student from the School of Architecture. In contrast, at least in the expression of negative emotion, it is not uncommon for Malay characters in the novel to abandon a spouse when hope has diminished. For example, when hope and respect for the Malay bridegroom in accordance to the Minangkabau customs have dissipated, the bridegroom would be deployed to scare chicken, pound the mortar and fire the salutes for the wife's clan (cf. Peletz 1995).

The concept of *fasakh* (judicial divorce) never occurs to Umami (see Maznah Mohamad [2011] for a discussion of *fasakh*, which has transformed from an exclusively married Muslim women's right to a providence that a husband may now apply for in the current Malaysian Syariah). We extrapolate from Umami's

marital obedience that the object of desire in the plot was not the wives but the husband. The author shows Syeikhul's desirability to Umami through the description of his shiny black hair, fragrant mouth, thick goatee, and well-built figure (p. 68). In Umami's plenitude, Syeikhul provides Umami with instructions to enjoy intimacy and promises her a rewarding eternity for playing along. In this instance, Umami represents the naive believers, which subscribe to an omnitemporal timeframe of a holy text prescribed orally by a religious figure (cf. Wong 2011a, 138).

Both the object and relationship with the object make Umami feel complete; that Syeikhul is the formal object/subject in Umami's desire is in consonance with the understanding that a woman's emotional life is attracted to the concrete but not the abstract (cf. Padua 2010). The interplaying of emotions in Umami's mind and heart reiterates the fact that the husband, and not any of his wives, is the object of desire in performing obedience *à la* OWC. The notion of husband as the object of desire is congruent with the attributing of eroticism (*nafsu*) to the females, indicating that the natural outcome of male control is the exclusive access to the enclosed sanctum of the covered female body (cf. Ong 1995, 179).

Concluding remarks

Shannon states explicitly that Islam is against the spousal exploitation of women and yet, the contradiction between Shannon's personal values and his craft is ironic. Jostling the lust of a religious leader through the manipulation of holy verses as a pretext to seeking pleasure from young women, Shannon nudges his readers to view the plot as a means with which to criticize the systemic exploitations found in the existing climate. The plot is a literary critique of religious malfunction par excellence as it highlights the exploitation and malpractice of certain groups in the community. If Umami can indeed be regarded as a representative of an obedient wife, her internal struggles nevertheless serve as a warning that emotional disorder is a persistent challenge to marital obedience. An obedient spouse is required to manage a conflux of different emotional states that she is constantly facing.

Furthermore, this analysis underlines that desire is a prerequisite of obedience in marriage. Contrary to the belief that wives or women are stereotypical objects of desire to husbands or men, this discussion suggests that the rousing of desire operates in the opposite direction, namely that the husband is desirous to the younger wives. The physical and mystical attributes of the husband in the narrative indicates that obedience or submission is sustainable if there is a powerful lead actor who is desirable to an obeying household within a polygamous context. Underlying an obeying relationship is a blissful response

from a person capable of fulfilling certain expectations, be it secular or religious as represented in the diagram below:

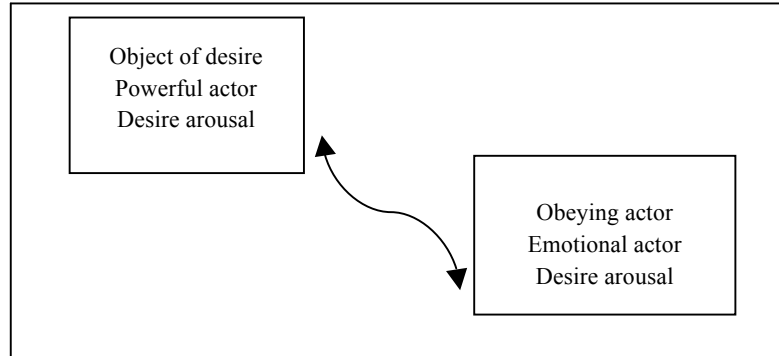


Figure 1. The desire of obedience in *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul*

This discussion suggests, then, that understanding, identifying, and curbing certain emotions in the experience of an obedient actor are relevant to a harmonious relationship. Ummi's emotional states may serve as a literary basis for the investigation of other feelings underlying marital obedience across varying cultures and among different age groups. A roadmap for marital obedience, perhaps, could be properly studied and outlined for enhancing a relationship that operates by the precepts of a socially sanctioned subjugation and yet one that is taken to be a virtue in society.

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Notes

1. The Malay kinship term for an elder brother, *abang*, is normally used as a form of politeness and endearment for addressing the husband in conversation (cf. Sew 1997). It is difficult to imagine a Malay wife calling her husband by his personal name without any addressing term since direct referencing is not part of the norms in Malay pragmatics.
2. Nagata (2004, 106) reports that Ashaari's initial inspiration came from his association with the Sufi gurus, e.g. Sheikh Suhaimi and Sheikh Mahmud Al Bukhari. The mystical styles of worship and chanting (*dzikr*) and the idea of a utopian commune incurred a large following.
3. A narrow-minded literary focus as an analytical tool has a limiting view band incapable of in-depth analysis. The negative outcome in the evaluation of *Salam Maria* read in short-ranged literary lenses by a Malay scholar, resulting in the failure to appreciate the use of diverse resources by the author to image the protagonist of the novel, is a case in point (Wong 2011a).
4. If a textual interpretation is a select judgment, which stems from prejudgments, among other things, a moderating committee to arbitrate individual interpretations of any religious texts is quite necessary. Selected cases of educated Muslim Malay women interrogating and challenging certain religious prescriptions are recorded in Suriani Suratman (2011).
5. Another detrimental extreme that a new-single female is subjected to the "*T-am-available-sexually*" view is the popular belief that a new widow is on a constant look out for men, including the married ones (Karim 2002).
6. It was reported in Maznah Mohamad and Rashidah Shuib (2011, 163–164) that Rosnah pawned her jewellery for the trip to the third wife's house in Sungai Patani, Kedah. Upon arrival, Rosnah broke into the house and went on a rampage breaking up every item in sight. Furthermore, by holding her husband at knife-point Rosnah managed to force him driving for six hours all the way to the Jeli Syariah Court in Kelantan to execute an official end to the marriage.
7. The Chinese adage, *san cong si de* (三从四德), or better known as the *three submissions and four virtues* is a common cultural consensus in Confucian and neo-Confucian societies. The male-oriented social practice expects a Chinese woman to worship all the men closely related to her because the so-called three submissions stipulate that a pious Chinese woman must submit to her father, husband and son in different stages of her life, *accordingly and obediently*. The other four virtues expected of a female include virtuous moral values, exquisite verbalism, immaculate mannerism and expert craftsmanship.
8. For a current discussion on the essence of Islamic practice *a la* Sufism as well as the difference between the legal and the soulful interpretation of Islam, please refer to Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2011).
9. The Malay legal summary of the Kadi in the case of *Nerat bt Musa v. Ahmad B. Kancil* (Kadi Court, Perlis 1965) has been translated into English, "The court is extremely sympathetic towards the suffering of Che Nerat bt Musa (plaintiff) especially in regard to the matter of her sexual fulfillment; as a young person who is healthy she will not be able to suppress her natural desires for sex. If these desires cannot be satisfied by an acceptable route (*jalan yang halal*), then it is possible that this would be obtained by whatever means" (Maznah Mohamad 2011, 173).
10. The Malay *adat* is identified as a pre-muslim element (Nagata 2004).

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