Rethinking Malaysian Perspectives of Gender Constructions through Ethnographic-Oriented Approach

Ruzy Suliza Hashim *, Noraini Md. Yusof, Shahizah Ismail @ Hamdan & Raihanah M. M.

Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Malaysia

Abstract

This action research encompasses three phases. In the first phase, the current practice of students engaging in reading texts through the perspective of gender is examined. Gender identities: Malaysian Perspectives is a course taught to third year students for the Bachelor of Arts (Literature in English) Programme. The course provides an exploration into constructions of gender identities through literary texts. Because students are more familiar with Western oriented gender theories, they often appropriate Western perspectives in their analysis of texts, marginalising their own beliefs and values in the process of interpretation. In this research, through an ethnographic-oriented approach, students will be exposed to various methodologies as an intervention programme to enable them to rethink gender stereotypes and explore the ways in which we read and make meaning out of texts and contexts. Through ethnography, they will be able to compare their findings with the established findings elsewhere, so that they can analyse differences between the local scene and international landscape in matters related to gender.

Keywords: ethnographic orientation; gender; literature; Malaysian perspectives;

1. Introduction

Appropriating the gender lens in analyzing literature is not new in Malaysia. Zainab Awang Ngah’s (2006) compilation of Studies on Women in Malaysia 1990-2004 shows the width and breadth of women’s studies in Malaysia. Feminism is equally a popular critical approach used by many scholars, and it is taught to many undergraduates and postgraduates as a valid framework of analysis. However, gender has always been subsumed within courses, and was not given as a course on its own. With the introduction of the course entitled Gender Identities: Malaysian Perspectives, students from Literature in English Programme at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia are exposed to various gender theories and issues as part of the syllabus in their three-year programme. In 14 weeks, they learn about the constructions of gender identities through applications of selected literary texts. However, it is a challenging task for the students to be critical readers when it comes to gender issues. While they may be well acquainted with various Western theorizing, but they are not able to adapt these theories to local texts.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-603-8921-6481; fax: +0-603-8925-4577.
E-mail address: raz ukm.m
The course has sensitised them to gender matters, but they do so at the cost of marginalizing their own local perspectives and orientations. Therefore, this action research takes on an ethnographic-oriented teaching which is designed to provide students with grounding in participatory methods where they are engaged in real settings so that they may explore the ways in which literary texts are mimetic of the real world. In this way, it is hoped that they have a better understanding of gender issues from their own Malaysian/local context.

Gender identities, according to Gale (2006: 1), “is a person’s sense of identification with either the male or female sex, as manifested in appearance, behavior, and other aspects of a person’s life.” In our everyday life, the common construction of our gender identities is based on the concepts of masculinity and femininity. What characteristics make a man masculine or a woman feminine? What practices are acquainted with either masculinity or femininity? In the Malaysian context, a person’s gender is associated with biology but the construction of gender identity is also influenced by the family’s practices, religious beliefs, ethnicity and societal norms. To be certain of students’ constructions of gender identities, we investigated their assumptions about gender through several tasks (see Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2010). It is found that students are aware of stereotypical ideas about gender roles and behavior. They are knowledgeable about the techniques of making women’s subordination appear natural and desirable. Their narratives showed the gendering practices which they have been exposed to at home and other institutions. These practices, because they come from parents, religion and the environment, are accepted as the way things are. Therefore, cracks exist between these two perceptions: how they have been socialized and how they would like to achieve change. Gender-biased child-rearing practices within the home setting make permanent imprints of gender. At a young age, they were taught how to look physically male or female, and in many cases, their play revolves around strict gender roles where young girls play domestic games and young boys amuse themselves with rough games. They were also subjected to family traditions, religious practices and peer influence that further shape their gender identities.

It is necessary here to provide the impetus for this action research. Having taught the course for the third time, we felt that Malaysian students’ current practice of analysing through the gender lens leans heavily towards Western theorising. Because feminist and gender theories are mostly developed in the West, most undergraduate students fail to adapt these conceptual frameworks to fit local contexts. Their predisposition to make use of Western feminist theories is due to two reasons. One, they have not acquired the critical eye to manipulate an approach which would render it more suitable for local texts and contexts. Two, they may be influenced by stereotypes of gender assumptions. Oppression of women occurs in many societies and cultural practices albeit at varying degrees, and this collective likeness is the raison d’être behind the appropriation of Western-derived theory which can facilitate in explicating issues related to gender inequality. While borrowing from these theories is valid, the process of circumventing their own beliefs and values in their interpretation of texts should not be encouraged. Local values are equally important considerations in developing critical skills of literary analysis.

We also attempt to create a more enriching environment of teaching and learning literature. The literature programme at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics at UKM moves away from focusing on canonical works with its emphasis on postcolonial theories and texts, and makes deliberate attempts to stress on students’ autonomy as part of their preparation to become more independent learners. They have been taught critical appreciation of literary texts but the ethnographic method is a more engaging and hands-on way of approaching literature.

2. Intervention: Plan of Action

How is ethnography relevant to literary studies, especially in relation to gender matters? As Rachel Alsop (2005: 111) has argued cogently:

ethnography as a research methodology is typically associated with the social sciences, most usually, although not exclusively, with the discipline of anthropology. It is chiefly a qualitative research strategy that relies primarily on participant observation and concerns itself in its most general sense with the study and interpretation of cultural behavior.

How does this kind of approach work for literature students? We have adapted the plan of action to cover these activities: meeting and interacting with women who have made tough choices or lived with disabilities; comparing
newspaper reports of domestic violence with representations in literary texts, and researching into cyberspace identities through analysis of Facebook “friends” and conducting a focus group interview with Facebook users. In all these activities which complemented traditional analysis of literary texts, students get first-hand and close-up experiences with issues related to gender. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to include the third part of the action plan on virtual constructions of gender due to constraints of space.

For the first activity, we chose two women speakers to talk to the students. One of the women was an entrepreneur, and the other one was a woman who was suffering from bipolar illness. Both women are members of the eHomemakers, a network which started as an enterprise to help women who wish to work from home. Chong Sheau Ching was one of the founders of eHomemakers, and through her own experience of being a single mother, and yet wanting to support her child, she started the idea of working from home. What was initially a small network now boasts of a large corporation which has helped many women who are poor, lacking in skills, and marginalized from the mainstream to become financially independent by empowering with the skills to work from home. As indicated on their website, eHomemakers is

Southeast Asia’s only community network that promotes work life balance, teleworking and SOHO businesses through the use of information and communications technology. Our e-community promotes self-help, business partnerships, entrepreneurship development and green living. Our social profit is derived from a pro-poor project to help women help themselves. (http://www.ehomemakers.net/en/index.php)

What was enlightening was Mrs Chong’s journey as a woman who had a comfortable career with the United Nations and making the decision to privilege her maternal instincts by quitting from her job and becoming a full-time mother. Unexpectedly, however, she found herself as a single mother when her marriage fell apart. She wanted both to be a mother and earn an income, and eHomemakers provided the avenue to balance work with mothering.

Justina Low is a bipolar and also suffers from Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE). She related a time in her life when she was passive, depressed, isolated, had low self-esteem, and lacking in skills to earn an income. With the help of eHomemakers, she joined an end-to-end poverty alleviation programme where appropriate empowerment and a low-capital income-generation solution have been tailored for her. She now raises earthworms from discarded cartons and vegetables and turn their castings into fertilizer. She also helps with the selling of eco-baskets made by other women that also gives her the much-needed social interaction and a sense of community.

Both women form two extremes of a continuum of women. One was educated and made some difficult choices; the other was uneducated and had a disability. Nevertheless, they both showed different facets of their gender identities. It shows a community of women that has helped one another positively. Most importantly, they provide examples of women who have overcome tremendous economic and social hurdles.

For the second activity, students were required to choose newspaper reports related to domestic violence or empowerment of women. In order to make the learning a practical exercise which also involves keeping track with local and international news, being engaged in collaboration, and being involved in making decisions, we strategized this activity into three phases. In the first phase, we included domestic violence as a topic in the syllabus. A local play entitled Polishing by Charlene Rajendran was chosen as a sample. This play shows two abused Malaysian Indian women and the sufferings they endure from their loved ones. The older woman, already in retirement, has been abused by her husband. Her niece, a modern, young and educated woman, suffers both physical and sexual abuse by her father and brother. Both women break traditions and their silence by walking out of their abusive relationships. The play debunks the perception that domestic violence only happens to illiterate women in some rustic areas. Both victims are well-educated, financially-independent urbanites. Yet, they, too, suffer within the four walls of their home. The play shows that domestic violence is actually a problem which transcends race, religion, and place.

In the second phase, we asked the students to read and analyse local and international reports on gender violence or gender empowerment in the media. Based on the issues that they have found, they were required to find a text (prose or poetry) which matched the reports. In this way, they compared real events and fictitious actions. It was an exercise that involved analyzing two kinds of narratives – the newspaper reports came without accompaniments of details but raw and first-hand exposure while the literary text was embellished with literary mechanics, all deliberately crafted by the writer.
In the third phase, the students made comparisons between the two kinds of narratives and presented them in the form of a poster measuring the size of 24 inches x 36 inches. While posters have always been one of the important types of scientific communication at scientific conferences, the use of posters in the field of social sciences is still new. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to summarise the findings of a social science research in the form of a poster, because by its disposition, even a social science research paper cannot be condensed in the same way as a scientific report is written. Nevertheless, herein lies the test of scrutiny: the student who can capture the essence of a particular text in the form of a poster by combining words and images in striking and meaningful ways has the potential to be a critical literary analyst.

Two concepts frame the issue of poster designing in the literature classroom. By definition, a scientific poster is “a large document that can communicate your research at a scientific meeting, and is composed of a short title, an introduction to your burning question, an overview of your trendy experimental approach, your amazing results, some insightful discussion of aforementioned results, a listing of previously published articles that are important to your research, and some brief acknowledgment of the tremendous assistance and financial support … if all text is kept to a minimum, a person could fully read your posts in under 10 minutes” (http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm; downloaded 2 September 2008). But while these characteristics are crucial for a successful scientific poster, a literature poster may require other information. In most instances, a literary analysis does not require graphs or statistical charts to convey the results. Discussions of a certain literary finding and perspective may involve other kinds of visuals and illustrations. The considerations students make in designing a meaningful poster are some of the learning processes they experience in the exercise.

The other concept encompassing poster designing in the literature classroom is the element of cooperative learning that takes place. Cooperative learning is an “instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximise their own and each other’s learning” (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1993: 9). As Jacobs, Power and Loh (2002; xi) emphasise, cooperative learning “encourages students to see peers through the cooperative window, as resources, as people to share with, as fellow adventurers in the search for knowledge. Clearly, individual work and competition still have their place, particularly when preparing students for the world outside school. With cooperative learning, we attempt to tilt the balance in favour of cooperation, not to eliminate the other two perspectives.

3. Findings and Results

The activities are ethnographic-oriented because they privilege first-hand interaction with people at ground zero. How do “real people” create their gender identity? What signals do they provide to show their femininity or masculinity? Based on these tasks, the students have learnt that local norms and practices are important, and they should value and privilege their own beliefs and be more critical in their use of Western theories.

The students responded to the face-to-face interaction with the eHomemakers people positively. They revealed that they have never thought about work-life balance and perceived mothering as a simple issue. They believed that the concept of women empowerment is the greatest lesson that they have learnt from the talk, and they were inspired by the experiences of the speakers that women should not be too dependent on men. They realized the power of financial independence which is necessary for women to have a sense of purpose and self-esteem.

To put in our local context, the common constructions of gender identities show women as less independent, emotional, gentle and weak. The business/agency that has been set up for people especially mothers to improve their life is seen as a great way to help women in trouble. This talk is in fact has enlightened them that in Malaysia, women are becoming more independent and strong. Adie and Kelvin (names have been changed), the two male students, admitted that the talk has changed their perceptions and ideas about life and how much it has impacted their gender identity. They were surprised at women’s strength and their will to survive and help other women in need. This kind of networking and sisterhood was something which they read about in some literary texts, but to hear of it from the women themselves was an eye-opener. The talk also gives them a clearer view about gender issues in our local context because previously, they were only engaged with the Western concepts and stories of gender. Kelvin confessed that:

When I heard the story of Miss Chong, where she was abandoned by her husband and she began her new life without any help from other people, I think that it is really the thing that we should
learn. The story of Justina also shows women’s abilities to succeed. Why do some texts show women as weak? There are many real women out there who defy the odds.

He believes that the input from the talk was not only useful for women but also to young men like him. Thus, we can conclude that, both male students do not view women as weak and incapable and they believe that men do not necessarily have the upper hand in terms of status. The cultural assumption about men and women status is no longer accurate. Women are not weak – it is merely a stereotypical perception which should be dismantled.

The female students also admitted that the interaction changed some of their perceptions of women and work. As Christy Lin (name has been changed) stated that:

I think that the way this social community runs is that they force women to come out of the situation and do something about their problems. I think it’s good because then the women realize that they need to work on their problems with their own and as much as they have the support group, they realize that they are able to be happy with their own life even though now they are single. Therefore, when they become successful, they know that it is all from their hard work.

All of the students agree that besides reading literary texts and theories that are mostly written by the Westerners, Mrs Chong’s talk has been one of the best methods (authentic situation) that allows them for more enriching ways of learning about gender identities. What the students have learnt from the exercise is a better sense of the constructions of gender identities. Women can empower themselves in various ways, and communities of women can strengthen and help one another out of poverty.

In the second exercise, the student produced innovative posters to show the link between fact and fiction. By looking at newspaper reports on the ways in which women take revenge on their male partners, the students compared with female vengeance in *The Trifles*, a play by Susan Glaspell. Below is an example of a poster produced by them:

![Poster Example](image)

**Figure 1 Female Vengeance**

By choosing on reports of women taking revenge, the students showed the wrath of women when they exercised their agency negatively. They compared these stories with the story of Mrs Wright in Glaspell’s play entitled *Trifles*. The female protagonist kills her husband out of desperation when he takes away everything she loves – company of friends, singing, and even the bird which she has kept as a pet. Using “female rage” as the theoretical framework for
understanding female vengeance, they see it “as a primary source of creative power” where women act to be set free from oppression which comes in many forms.

![Figure 2 Gender Equality](image)

The poster above is another creation to show how women can be agents of change. The students took the empowerment of women positively and showed how Maya Angelou’s poem entitled “equality” shows a woman who is undeterred by obstacles and will carry on to fight for gender equality.

![Figure 3 Equality](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poster</th>
<th>Fact</th>
<th>Fiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Female Vengeance</td>
<td><em>Trifles</em> (a play by Susan Glaspell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sisters on trial for plot to kill hubby</td>
<td>“Small things matter”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Man claims wife tried to poison him with</td>
<td>“Nothing here but kitchen things”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chlorine</td>
<td><em>Trifles</em> may have a gothic plot whacha the woman takes a desperate revenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Woman returns slap from hubby with a stab</td>
<td>The story looks to the psychic rage of the oppressed woman to expose the injustice inherent in the legal system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Figure 3     | Equality                                   | “Equality” (a poem by Maya Angelou)         |
|              | Agent of change                            | I stand by you boldly (the woman who is empowered) |
|              | Guan Eng: tap into women power             | Equality, and I will be free (hope for the future of women) |
|              | Women power does wonders                   | There is a sense of doom and despair: “But if I’m just a shadow to you/ could you ever understand?” |
|              | Wanita PKR seeks bigger party role         |                                             |
|              | Women must stand tall                      |                                             |

4. The way forward

As teachers of literature, we have often complained that students are not critical users of theory, especially those that are imported from the West. They are confined in the ivory tower, preoccupied mostly with reading tasks and assignments. By guiding them to value their own beliefs and perspectives, we empower them with critical insights into texts. By making them aware of adaptations of local lenses, we would be doing our social responsibility of nurturing these young minds to be more grounded in their own contexts and surroundings.
Indeed, the students felt that the ethnographic way increased their awareness of ethnocentricity. It is, as they say, insights from ground zero, not from printed texts. As one of them elaborated, “I borrowed easily feminist theories from Chodorow, Showalter and Kristeva. I did not know how to adapt them. I found myself labelling Malaysian stories as backward because the women here incorporate different strategies of empowerment. But I realise now that we have different parameters for our own gender identities.” By focusing first on people and texts which are not literary in nature, and then comparing them to literary materials, they could see different constructions of gender for different groups of people. Gender identity is something that is not carved in stone. This recognition is important because it has given these students knowledge which they can use to act on in the future.

This method of teaching and learning is designed to provide students with grounding in participatory methods where they are engaged in real settings so that they may explore the ways in which literary texts are mimetic of the real world. We hope to give students opportunities to identify their own ethnographic orientations within the domain of literary studies and to develop the research methods, interpretive procedures, and conceptual frameworks specifically related to real gender issues. By connecting textual materials with the private and the public domains, students will be able to explore how texts are negotiated, interpreted and given meaning by the reader or viewer. By using making ethnographic approach as part of their learning tasks, we hope to encourage them to become independent, critical readers of practical and theoretical materials and collaborative learners of the future.

5. Acknowledgements

This research was funded by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (grant code: UKM-PTS-047-2010).

References