

A Retelling of Legendary Women from The Malay History in Zurinah Hassan's Selected Poems Through A Feminist Lens

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Abstract

This article discussed how legendary women in Malay history as ancient, traditional uniqueness resulted in the continuity of heritage when being mentioned by Zurinah Hassan in a modern form of speeches. This continuity of heritage of these legendary women of Malay history was clear when the characters and their characteristics were revealed by Zurinah Hassan in her modern poems, as a feminist reading. By employing intertext approach and content analysis, the article focused its discussion on the selected poems by Zurinah Hassan from five of her anthologies. They were *Kumpulan Puisi dari Gunung Ledang* [A message from Mount Ledang: An anthology of poems] (2004), *Pujangga Tidak Bernama* [Poet with No Name] (1994), *Keberangkatan* [The Departure] (1985), *Nota Waktu* [Time Note] (2000), dan *Salasilah* [Lineage] (2005). Our study found that the tendency of Zurinah Hassan's thoughts in her poems towards highlighting on women emancipation was her response as a post-colonial author to keep anew the documentation of local culture in current speeches.

Keywords: Legendary Women, Feminism, Intertext, Emancipation, Thoughts

Introduction

Poems are creative speeches that are tastefully driven to express experiences, knowledge, desires, ambitions, attitudes or any questions around and about mankind. This is so because poems come from the feelings and thoughts of the author. Poems are not just one's way of unburdening their hearts or their emotional outlets, poems are also a media with which the author could establish their stand and thoughts. According to Ali (1995), the presence of traditional elements in modern poems are not uncommon especially for countries that were colonized. Many of the current poets feel threatened and 'guilty' if they leave out traditional elements in their works. Hence, some poets weaved in their experiences under colony in their countries into forms and conventional tradition in their creative products. Thus,

traditions although indirectly are able to bring the natives-of-today's thoughts towards rebuilding their identity from what was their ancestor's which was destroyed by the colonizer. The use of historical elements in modern poems could carry the topics/ issues that the poets are interested in with regards to the native's philosophy of struggle against a colonizing power. The elements that are showcased in the poems represent symbols of speech and thoughts of the people from the past. Better than that, these symbols and thoughts are given attention within the current context.

Authors who had brought forth traditional elements in their poems are Usman Awang, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Zaihasra, Ahmad Bakhtiar, Hamdan, Qassim Ahmad, Ali Ahmad and A. Samad Ahmad. Studies found little involvement of female authors in writing poems that include traditional elements post-independence. On the other hand, studies showed the tendency of Malaysian female authors to write poems that depict their personal experiences and nature especially during their early years of poetry writing. Salmi Manja and Anis Sabirin were the names that emerged in early 1950s. Salmi Manja was known for her poems "*Keluhan*" [Sighs] (Zaman, 1955), "*Antara Puspa-puspa*" [Between Beloveds] (Utusan Zaman, 28 October 1956) and "*Suara Hati*" [Conscience] (Zaman, 1957).

Later in the 1960s, names such as Maimoonah Hj. Omar, Rahimah M.Y, Maznah Ali, Aina M., Maimon Rahman and Halimah Hj. Ahmad started to come forward. However, these names ceased to grace the poetry realms only after a few years. The national Malay poetry realm was now introduced to Siti Zainon Ismail, Zaihasra, Nor Aini Muhammad, Salmiah Ismail, Siti Zaleha Hashim, Mahaya Mohd. Yassin and Zurinah Hassan. Though the listed poets were known before Zurinah Hassan, she had superseded them in terms of popularity. Zurinah Hassan's poems had won many prestigious prizes both national and internationally. Zurinah Hassan came into the poetry realm in the late 1960s with her first poem entitled "*Tujuh Gunung Tidak Terdaki*" [The Seven Unclimbable Mountains] (Mingguan, 1967). She too was keened on writing personal experience at the beginning of her work. This was clear in the poems that appeared in the anthology "*Sesayup Jalan*" [Indefinite Paths] (1967). Studies found that "*Sesayup Jalan*" was a personal anthology from Malaysian female authors thirteen years after its male anthology, "*Gelombang*" [Waves] by National Laureate, Usman Awang. Studies also shown that the 60s was the era when Malaysian female poet's awareness piqued on the importance of the spirit to fight for the freedom of the nation against the grasp of the oppressor. At this point in time, female authors had just only begun dotting the field of poetry in Malaysia post-independence. According to Kamaruzzaman (1997), these years brought about two important changes within poetry progression. The first was a strong foundation had been laid out to develop education in Malaysia and the use of national language was highly encouraged. Second, the move of literary activity centre from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur had developed the latter to become a city of knowledge and culture.

Other study showed that Zurinah Hassan's awareness to focus on past heritage historical elements only started in 1985 in her poem "*Keberangkatan*" [The Departure]. The author wrote about past history in the current reading of "*Keberangkatan*" (1985) when she honoured motives in the past in modern speech. Zurinah Hassan's presence amongst the female authors who uphold traditions within modern speech context was said to be minute. Nevertheless, the write-up of traditions in modern speech showed that female poets had played important roles in honouring back traditional elements in modern Malay poems by using national language as a speech media. Zurinah Hassan for instance gave her opinion about the future by talking about traditional elements to compare the natives during colonization to the current context. She indirectly raised the questions that she wanted to

discuss through her selected poems for study as a post-colonial statement when traditional elements were used as the foundation with which the poems were crafted. Within this context, Zurinah Hassan had put her efforts into nurturing back the path to natives' tradition through poetry.

Hence the historical elements too were not neglected. Rather, they became the media with which events in the past were revived today in poems as a process to honour traditions in modern speech. Zurinah Hassan did more than that. She mixed historical stories in Malay History and give them new interpretations. This means the poems she authored were not just documenting events that happened in history, but the poems also become the new interpretation of the historical events. Consequently, the poems became primary resources in developing a national identity of a country.

The selected poems for the study also show tendency, changes and progression of the author's attitude from revealing her thoughts or use of *Bahasa Melayu* and then reveals them all over again in poetic language to build the soul and spirit of the current natives.

Problem Statement

Proses and poems are both literary media. However, they have different definition and characteristics. In this study, we bring forward the brilliance of Zurinah Hassan to combine the two media in order to build female characters from the classic texts into modern poem speeches. Bassnett (1993) mentioned that female authors are more meticulous in their efforts to explore any archetypes. The female authors re-write the stories of the most important archetype in the cultural history of the West. The problem statement that we have here is: how effective was Zurinah Hassan in using narrative techniques such as beautiful language styles and plays on words; intonation, rhyme, rhythm, and poetical lines in expressing the thoughts and emotions of the legendary women characters. The author's sensitivity in re-interpreting female characters in terms of leadership; dissatisfaction; rebellious; domination by ruthless men; and to showcase the courage and charisma of females to challenge traditional males' power were portrayed in modern poems without neglecting the beauty of the original stories in the classic proses. Rich (1980) encouraged female authors, readers, and critics to re-write female stories from historical texts, myths, folklores and old tales to free women from the long, deep rooted patriarchal code system. It is the responsibility of the new generation of authors, readers, and critics to free women from the language and literary of male authors. If we look at the lives of females in classic texts, their lives were neglected and trapped within the patriarchal constructions. The process of re-telling the story demanded these female characters to be freed and be given a voice especially in classic texts. For example, female characters in Malay history have never been any more than supportive roles such as a wife, a lady in waiting, a mother, and a witch (negative role). Their characters were shadowed by the interpretation that women played no important role in the history of Malay Kings (Hashim, 2003). Here is the second problem statement: how far did Zurinah Hassan go to interpret and empower the legendary female characters in Malay history; and how successful was she in doing so in terms of reading, appreciation and giving new understanding to today's society.

Objective

The objective of this study is to explain and analyze selected poems by Zurinah Hassan that showcased the virtuosity of legendary female characters from Malay history. The selected poems are analyzed using feminism approach that is revealed with new meaning.

Methodology

This study employs literature review analysis. Focus was given to analyze the inner- and outer structure of the selected poems intertextually through feminist reading. Feminist literary criticism has a wide scope with various backgrounds of progression, understanding and acceptance. Liberal feminist is one of the important branches in the mainstream feminist thoughts that emerged to highlight gender inequality and to free women within the context of liberal democracy (Paramasivan et al., 2021). Liberal feminist critics were aware that females had long been the prisoner of men within texts, genre and law. Thus, feminist critics argued on the need to build feminist criticism that would free female authors and readers from the restriction of a male author's thoughts processing centre (De Lauretis, 1986). *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was the first point of progression in liberal feminist criticism. Liberal feminist criticism is a socio-cultural and political theories that is suitable and accepted by literary scholars in the West and especially Asia.

Thus, liberal feminist criticism was used to analyze selected poems in this study. Liberal feminist criticism was chosen based on its suitability to be applied in order to analyze Malay systems of social, culture, thoughts and acceptance as they were predominant in the selected poems. Study methods in this article include the concept of liberal feminist in text and it was proven and explored using famous liberal thinkers' ideology as in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan and *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill. Wollstonecraft is known for her article *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), where she pointed out that women intrinsically are not at a lower rank compared to men. However, lack of knowledge in women caused them to be so. Wollstonecraft demanded that women and men be accepted as equals and rational. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, women have been trained since childhood to doll-up to attract men. They were taught to accept the nature of the social system that women are weak, loyal, obedient, less-than-perfect being and to accept the men's presence in their lives as a blessing.

In the first paragraph of *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill argued his first premise of the principles that hindered social interactions between genders and how these principles have allowed subordination of one gender (male) over the other (female) was a mistake. This norm must be corrected by allowing a total equality between gender; and disapproving any one-sided power and privilege (Mill, 2008).

Betty Friedan mentioned that women are trapped in a mystique that imprisoned them in a male-centric systems of social, politic, and economy. All three liberal feminists agreed upon the fact that females have been dominated and quieted in both the reality and creative works. It is the duty of female authors to free female characters by reprocessing the stereotype images of females in male authors' work especially in classic texts that were written under the influence of patriarchal system.

Reprocessing was the narrative strategy found in the selected poems by Zurinah Hassan. All three aspects of liberal feminist were used to present the change of Malay female characters in classic proses who submitted themselves to men (patriarchal system) to independent females who strengthened their credibility in modern poems written by a female author. Liberal feminist criticism was fit to Zurinah Hassan's social system and culture. She was not radical in demanding a paradigm shift in her poems, unlike feminists in the West. Her tone and style of presentation were still bound to the patriarchal system but she strived to give a voice to female characters from classic texts.

Results and Discussion

It was evident from our analysis of the selected poems by Zurinah Hassan that she presented legendary female characters who were ideal. An ideal woman has a special character that in general went back to the women in the past. Using traditional elements of these legendary women in the current speech became Zurinah Hassan's response parameter discourse to bring back traditional values that were ruined by the past colonial discourse (Kartini & Ali, 2021). To the poet Zurinah Hassan, the women's world in the past was still very much connected to the women of today in terms of its meaning and truth. In fact, it was connected to all mankind. We found legendary women characters often became Zurinah Hassan's choice in her selected poems. Legendary women whom Zurinah Hassan highlighted in her poems were Wan Empok, Wan Malini, Puteri Gunung Ledang, Tun Teja, Tun Kudu, Tun Fatimah, Tun Senaja, and Wan Anom. Chronologically, legendary women characters had only been given attention by Zurinah Hassan in a poem anthology *Keberangkatan* (1985) in her poem "Perarakan Suku Abad" [Quarter Century March]. Zurinah Hassan continued to showcase legendary women characters in her poems through poem anthologies *Pujangga Tidak Bernama* [Poet with No Name] (1994), *Kumpulan Puisi dari Gunung Ledang: A message from Mount Ledang: An Anthology of Poems* (2004) and *Salasilah* [Lineage] (2005).

The presentation of legendary women characters was an education media for traditional Malay society. Usually, these stories are didactic and are meant for the society to take heed and be modest in everything, act rationally and follow the prescribed guidance (Anisza, 2019). Zurinah Hassan honoured legendary women characters in her poems as a way to honour natives' traditions. The revelation of these legendary women characters put them on a high rank within Malay society (Zubir, 2012). Not only because these female characters were the products of the traditional source: Malay history, but also from how Zurinah Hassan reprocessed those motives. She had honoured tradition in modern speech. Indirectly, these legendary women characters were brought back to live by Zurinah Hassan to carry the theme of poems where otherwise native female characters were muted and seen as a group that lives only within a special and unique sensibility (Paramasivan et al., 2021). Therefore, in making any decision in life, native women especially the Malays are synonym to the expression, "*jika diam, tanda setuju*" [silence means consent]. Similar thing was depicted by the author of the original text. This happened a lot in matters of matching a native woman to a future spouse.

Based on the explanation mentioned above, this study found the application of an ideal woman motive in some of the selected poems. We saw this in "*Episod Tun Fatimah*" [Tun Fatimah's Episode], "*Malam Persandingan Tun Fatimah*" [Tun Fatimah's Wedding Night], and "*Perempuan Melaka Episod Terakhir*" [Women of Malacca: The Last Episode]. These three poems had their backgrounds from crucial, important episodes that took place in Malay history: the assassination of Bendahara Seri Maharaja, the elder brother of Bendahara Seri Nara Diraja Tun Ali. The tragic murder was fueled by vengeance, slander, envy and lust that were caused by the beauty of Tun Fatimah, as depicted in "*Alkisah Cetera yang Ketiga Puluh Tiga*" [The Thirty Third Story];

"Kata sahibul hikayat, maka tersebutlah perkataan peri baiknya paras anak Bendahara Seri Maharaja yang bernama Tun Fatimah, terlalu sekali eloknya, tiada bercela lagi, sedap manis pantas bagus, seperti laut madu, bercahaya-cahaya, berkilat, seperti bulan purnama ketika cuaca. Tambahan anak

Bendahara pula barang lakunya dan barang pakaian larangan semuanya dapat dipakainya, makin bertambah-tambah baik parasnya".
(Shellabear, 1995)

["A storyteller talked about the ethereal beauty of the daughter of Bendahara Seri Maharaja named Tun Fatimah. So beautiful was she there was no flaws in any way. She was sweet and pure, like a sea of honey, shining radiantly like a full moon. Because she was the daughter of the Bendahara (treasurer) she was bestowed with expensive things and even those prohibited to others; these only enhanced her beauty"]

From these points on Tun Fatimah's beauty, Zurinah Hassan revealed and hinted at her thoughts: through a female's point of view that is feminine and her ability to understand deep into Tun Fatimah's soul as an ideal woman motive. For example;

Akulah Fatimah
[I am Fatimah]
Yang menyaksikan Melaka di penghujung jari
[Who witnessed Malacca at my fingertips]
Ketika langit dicalar senja dan negeri dicakar luka
[When the sky was scratched by the dusk and the land was scratched by scrapes]
Betapa anehnya lelaki
[How weird men were]
Mengharap musuh yang paling kubenci
[Hoping that my sworn enemy]
Kukasih sebagai suami
[Be my beloved man]
Namun, apakan daya
[Alas!]
Kupijak hamparan kaca
[I walked on walks made of glass]
Kulangkahi permaidani berduri
[Putting my steps on carpets of thorn]
Ke singgahsana raja Melaka
[To the throne of the King of Malacca]
Mengambil tempatku sebagai permaisuri
[To take my place as the Queen]
Kerana hidupku adalah untuk negeri
[For my life is for the land]

(Hassan, Z., 2005)

Through "ku" [I/my] that was used to depict the person and the soul of Tun Fatimah, we could sense her courteousness, loving-nature, nobility in her character, her strength, her determination, courage and honesty. These were all superior qualities found in Tun Fatimah. These ideals/ superiorities were inherited from her parents, beside her exposure to her social circle made of the wise ones and strengthened by her education and awareness of the current event and experience.

Furthermore, with the balance that Zurinah Hassan found in Tun Fatimah's personal characteristics, the author went deeper and highlighted Tun Fatimah's ideals in living within the females' world. After her husband, Tun Ali was murdered, Tun Fatimah was forced into marriage with Sultan Mahmud Syah to satisfy the Sultan's lust. Despite the circumstances, Tun Fatimah's loyalty towards her people and religion was clear, touching and impressive. Having gotten the title "*Raja Perempuan Besar*" [The Queen Mother], as a symbol of dignitary and worldly wealth that she acquired, she was not happy.

Walaupun jiwaku memberontak
[Though my soul rebels restlessly]
 Tak mungkin dapat kuelak
 [Avoid it I cannot]
Jika aku menolak
 [For if I said no]
Melaka mungkin lebih bergolak.
 [Malacca may never rest]

(Hassan, 2005)

When Malacca was declining and facing its ruin, Tun Fatimah demonstrated her courage, strength and determination to stand up for the dignity of the people. Tun Fatimah highly encouraged Tun Kudu, Tun Wati and Tun Dewi to save Malacca alongside other heroes.

The ideal women motives were also showcase through Tun Teja in the poem "*Surat Teja Kepada Tuah*" [Teja's Letter to Tuah] (2005). Tun Teja's ideal was depicted in this line; "*kerana Teja bukan perempuan biasa*" [because Teja is no ordinary woman]. Tun Teja's role cannot be underrated. She had sacrificed much by marrying a man she did not love (Hassan, H., 2016). Tun Teja was the victim of a dignitary's trick when the latter wanted to amend his mistake towards the Sultan.

Tun Teja was the daughter of Bendahara Pahang (Pahang's Treasurer) Seri Amar Bangsa Diraja and was betrothed to the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan Abdul Jalil (Shellabear, 1995). Tun Teja became the victim of Sultan Mahmud Syah's insatiable desire to have a beautiful wife. To fulfill his dream, the Sultan offered an irresistible prize and pardon for anyone who could bring Tun Teja to Malacca.

By uncovering the historical texts, Zurinah Hassan indirectly set the measuring yardstick and benchmark for women's position in the society in the past. The author had indirectly discussed the weakness of the women who stayed quiet, never fought back and those who submit to the patriarchal advantages with a fortitude as were seen in the legendary women in historical texts.

However, behind Zurinah Hassan's poems in her lines and stanzas, there were cynical and contemporary voices that urged women to stand up and not accept their fate and destiny mindlessly. Zurinah Hassan had formed a feminist reading when Puteri Gunung Ledang [Princess of Mount Ledang] was lifted up as a symbol of females uprising against patriarchy. She portrayed Puteri Gunung Ledang as an example of a woman's rejection of patriarchal oppression.

Besides that, Zurinah Hassan emphasized the need for a woman to face a challenge in its face and take the initiatives to reform. With poetic language, the author had formed a response discourse by giving an autonomy power to women by demonstrating Puteri Gunung Ledang's adamant and dead-set decision to reject Sultan Muhammad's love in Malay history

text. Such depiction indirectly revealed that behind the firm and stubborn poet, there was also grace and finesse in her when she did not neglect a woman's experience. Female emancipation continued to be the focus in Zurinah Hassan poems as in "*Surat Teja Kepada Tuah*" below;

Tuah, aku adalah perempuan malang
 [Tuah, I am an unfortunate woman]
Yang harus merana kerana paras rupa
 [Who has to suffer because of my look]
Kecantikan ku bukanlah satu dosa
 [My beauty is no sin]
Namun ia telah diperdagangkan
 [But it has been sold]
Dengan pintar percaturan lelaki
 [Cleverly by cunning men]
Seperti bunga pada sesedap gubahan
 [Like flowers' fate at the mercy of a florist]
Di hujung lidah seorang sultan
 [Mine is on the decree of a king]

(Hassan, 1994)

The poet had brought forward noble women subordinate position. Noble women valued their dignitary and lineage and Tun Teja was no exception. However, Tun Teja was made a fool and played by a man, Tuah. In this context, Rahmad (2005) associated the West as the man and the East as a woman. This power-play could be seen through the concept of power that is set within patriarchal world where men act as the authority and women are the dominated. Our selected poems showed this concept but to emancipate women.

The event showed how Malay women in the past were no more than a plaything that could be possessed in any ways including trickery. A woman's willingness and consent were never the prerequisites for her love. Her feelings were completely neglected (Hassan, H., 2016).

Their life journey, experiences and the events that these great women characters went through that were depicted in her poems showcased Zurinah Hassan's ability to search deep into herself for the same great woman and she mustered what she found in beautiful words. Her ability to write these beautiful words spoke greatly about the capacity of her creativity (Ali, 2019). Moreso in the 19th century when the questions about Malay women had been persistently asked by Abdullah Munshi in the 1850s. In "*Hikayat Abdullah*" [Abdullah's Story], he had recorded the roles that Malay women played in their homes as something essential to the household. At the time, there were Malay women who left their homes for work to support their families (Munshi, 2009). In other words, poems not only record experiences; poems could be an ideal media for native speakers to re-interpret the experience that has been lodged in a poet's mind for a long time (Kartini & Ali, 2021).

Conclusion

Traditional literacy is a historical record that is mixed with beautiful language and great imagination. Historical literary works are unique because they kept the aspects of history without neglecting the beauty of literature. Historical literary works still get the attention

from both literary and history researchers. To the young generation that gets carried away by the waves of science and technology in this 4.0 industrial revolution era, studies and researches of classic texts could bridge the gap between Generation-Z and classic literature. The involvement of writers and authors in forming, interpreting and re-presenting classic works in modern literature is plausible in order to sustain classic literature across time. Though classic literature texts especially historical literary catch the attention of researchers, specific and in-depth research on women characters and their contribution in the history of the country is little. It is hoped that this article could introduce legendary women characters from classic texts that were given a new breath in selected poems by National Laureate Zurinah Hassan. Her contribution in the national literary realm is undeniable. More than that, her power and initiatives to bring forward and introduce the legendary women characters in her modern poems deserve an appreciation. The greatness of Tun Kudu, Puteri Gunung Ledang, Tun Teja and Tun Fatimah was told by Tun Sri Lanang in his historical literary work *Sulalatus Salatin* [The Lineage of Kings] decades ago. The difference however, a female author gave voices to these female characters. Two different dimensions of character presentation in prose and poems. Zurinah Hassan's strength and uniqueness were obvious in the stanzas of her poems that allowed the voice of these women to be heard by the public in beautiful strings of words in poetic and modern Malay.

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