

The Representation of Malay Women Characters in Zurinah Hassan's Short Story, 'Anita'

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a feminist reading of the Malaysian short story 'Anita' by Zurinah (1987), focusing on the representation of Malay women characters in her writing. This study analyses the characteristics of two female protagonists, 'Anita' and 'I', and the treatments they received from other characters, especially from the opposite gender. The findings suggested that the story features both reasonably strong and modest Malay women characters who are opinionated and educated. The contrast between these two women characters is mainly based on their values as either a modern or traditional woman. In the story, a woman who is single, modern, and has strong leadership skills receives unfavourable treatments from her male counterparts, while a woman who is married, leans towards traditionalism, and upholds feminine ideals face no conflicts due to her reserved and obedient nature. The narrative implies that society's prejudices toward females are underscored by the fact that women who challenge traditional gender roles face resistance, while those who conform are accepted and remain conflict-free.

Keywords: Malay women; feminism; representation; Zurinah Hassan; Malaysian literature

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian literature, with its rich tapestry of narratives, provides profound insights into the evolving dynamics of gender roles and societal expectations. Within this literary landscape, the works of Zurinah Hassan, Malaysia's first female National Laureate, offer profound insights into the life of Malay women. Although she is predominantly acclaimed for her poetry, her short story anthologies, *Meneruskan Perjalanan* (1987) and *Menjelang Pemilihan* (2004) also explore significant themes related to gender relations, workplace obstacles, and the contradictory expectations imposed on women. Her essays underscore the challenges encountered by Malay women as they strive to reconcile modern desires with traditional beliefs (Zurinah, 2017).

One of her distinguished short stories, 'Anita', first published in *Meneruskan Perjalanan* (1987), embodies these ideas. The narrative centers on Anita, an intelligent, self-sufficient, and driven individual who excelled in academics, extracurricular pursuits, and subsequently, community service. Upon entering the workforce as a schoolteacher, her robust leadership and dedication to education challenged conventional expectations placed upon women. Nevertheless, her unmarried

position and candid demeanor rendered her susceptible to bias and allegations, especially from her male counterparts. In contrast, the narrator, a more reticent and traditional woman, bypassed difficulties by conforming to society standards, placing familial obligations above her individual growth and career aspirations. The pronounced disparity between the two female protagonists exemplifies the ongoing conflict between traditional and modern ideals of Malay womanhood, wherein conformity is rewarded, and assertiveness is often met with resistance.

This study seeks to examine 'Anita' through a feminist lens, emphasizing how the differing traits of the two female protagonists affect their societal treatment. Specifically, it meticulously examines how the narrative illustrates workplace discrimination, gendered expectations, and societal bias against women who defy traditional norms. Although previous studies have examined Zurinah Hassan's contributions to poetry and overarching feminist themes in her works, little attention has been given towards 'Anita' within the framework of feminist discourse. By drawing on post-feminist perspectives, which recognise both the progress made by women and the persistent challenges they face, this analysis highlights the complexities of female identity in a changing Malaysian society during the 1980s. This study aims to address that gap by critically examining how the narrative depicts the obstacles encountered by modern Malay women who deviate from conventional gender norms. In terms of research significance, this study ultimately enhances the discourse on feminism in Malaysian literature, elucidating how literary depictions of women simultaneously reinforce and challenge the traditional norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malay women: tradition vs. modernity

Malays form the largest inhabitants in Malaysia, known as *bumiputera* or the son of soil. According to Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian Constitution, a Malay is defined as someone who professes Islam as his or her religion, practices Malay cultural customs, speaks the Malay language, and was born before Merdeka Day either in the Federation or Singapore, or on Merdeka Day, has been a resident in the Federation or Singapore.

In order to parse the image of Malay women, it is very important to understand the cultural framework of the Malay community. This is because Malay women's lives are defined by the customs, culture, and religion (Rahimah & Shaiful, 2014). According to Fatimah (2009), the Malay culture admires and stresses the importance of noble qualities, courtesy, and the gentle nature of their women. In this regard, it is important for a Malay woman to be gentle and obedient to parents and elders and, when married, obedient to her husband. The traditional Malay society, which adopts a patriarchal system or worldview, places husbands as more important than their wives, as men are leaders, breadwinners, and protectors of their home. In addition, the Malay community has a perception that Malay women should always be at home to help their mothers manage the household chores and take care of their siblings, as they are physically weak (Baharuddin, 2000, as cited in Noor Aida & Nasihah, 2015). In addition, the Malay community also perceives that being at home provides training to women with various home management skills, including cooking, that can help them manage their household later. In fact, it is deemed as women's responsibility to provide food and drink for her husband and children, among many other things (Fatimah, 2009).

In the Malay culture, women are men's responsibility and accountability (Nor Hashimah & Norsimah, 2006). It is from birth until death, fathers, brothers, spouses, and sons support and care for the women. When a woman is still a child, it is the father's obligation to feed and care for her. When she is married, her spouse is responsible for her well-being. When she becomes a widow, her children (especially sons) are accountable for her care. If she does not have children, her brothers will take over the duties and responsibilities regarding the upkeep of his sister. This practice was influenced by the values of Islam, which places emphasis on the men's role as leaders (Rahimah & Shaiful, 2014).

The Malay world is a world dominated by males. During the reign of the Malacca Sultanate (1400-1511), women were used to be tools, concubines, or mistresses to the sultan, and they were only treated as sex toys (Hassan, 2013, as cited in Noor Aida & Nasihah, 2015). Women in those

days also served as gifts and tools for political interests, either to recognize power or to commemorate one's services. In contrast, there was also evidence in Malay manuscripts from the 15th to 18th centuries (*Sejarah Melayu, Tuhfat al-Nafis, Hikayat Siak dan Rengkasari Cetera Kelantan*) that Malay women played important roles as rulers and peacemakers (Haryati, 2016). These prominent Malay women figures include *Cik Siti Wan Kembang, Puteri Sa'dong, Tun Kudu, Tun Teja, and Tun Fatimah*. Despite the fact that traditional Malay women are often equipped with traits such as weakness and passivity, they played challenging and active roles during the pre-Independence nationalist movement. According to Miller (1982, p.81, as cited in Hirschman, 2016), Malay women's participation in rallies, demonstrations, and the nationalism movement during the late 1940s was "challenging, dominant, and vehement", thus making it the most salient element of post-World War II Malayan politics. This active role can be attributed to education, as it has significantly elevated women's status in the public sphere. In the late 1920s, most parents began to abandon their traditional beliefs and saw the benefits of sending their children to school, especially their daughters (Nang Naemah, 2016). Post-independence, women's participation in the educational process grew and is now comparable to that of males. According to Nang Naemah (2016), the United Nations (UN) has proclaimed declarations on women's rights and educational opportunities via the Women's Decade 1976-1985 and the 1995 Beijing Declaration, highlighting the need to increase educational opportunities for women at all levels and forms of education. These resulted in an increase in Malay women's enrollment in tertiary education at local and foreign universities.

Modernity, which is brought by education, has helped and empowered women to take risks and challenge the status quo. According to Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin and Norsimah (2006), women these days occupy key positions and make significant contributions to the growth of a country, and they are no longer afraid to express their opinions and rights openly. However, Kalthom et al. (2008) claim that Malay women are torn between modernity and tradition. While many are now working, they are nevertheless expected to be family-oriented and uphold the traditional female role (Kalthom et al., 2008). Nonetheless, according to Kalthom et al. (2008), Malay women are more focused on family than self-fulfillment; therefore, when choosing between job and family, family always comes first.

The representation of Malay women in the traditional and contemporary Malaysian literature

It is generally believed that the world of reality and the world of literature are inextricably related. This is because literary works do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are produced from human experience and connections, which will impact how the characters are portrayed in the fictions.

Walters (2005, as cited in Noor Aida & Nasihah, 2015) states that women are often depicted negatively in literary works to show perspective and dominance of men over them. Most male authors portray women as submissive, passive, surrendered to fate, and having no hope for the future (Noor Aida & Nasihah, 2015). In classical literature around the world, women characters are often portrayed as 'damsels in distress' with undesirable characteristics such as being passive, weak, emotionally unstable, restrained, and domestic (Noor Aida & Nasihah, 2015). For example, popular stories like "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," "Ramayana," and "The Story of Perseus and Medusa" represented women as weak and highly dependent on the male characters to rescue them. Similarly, in traditional Malay literature, women were typically depicted as being unable to think, feel, or act on their own will (Rahimah & Shaiful, 2014). The researchers further argue that it was impossible for these female characters to survive on their own, and they could only hope for support and assistance from the male protagonists. According to Rahimah and Shaiful (2014), *Hikayat Raja Donan, Hikayat Raja Dondang, Hikayat Anggun Che Tunggal, Hikayat Malim Dewa, and Hikayat Parang Puting* had a line-up of passive women who succumbed to their fate and merely followed the arrangements made for them. In addition, when presented with specific situations, female characters in traditional Malay literary genres were "silenced" by their authors, who did not allow them to stand up for themselves, much less their rights (Rahimah & Shaiful, 2014).

In modern literature, many writings have moved beyond the constraints and stereotypes on how women characters should be and do. According to Nor Hashimah and Norsimah (2006), there

has been a shift in the way women characters are portrayed in modern literature, as female protagonists in popular novels are increasingly shown as courageously asserting their rights and overcoming problems. Siti Khariah's (2007) analysis of selected novels by women writers indicated that Malay women characters are featured reasonably and positively, with most of them playing active roles in politics, economics, and social spheres. In addition, Malay romance fictions, for example, have created new spaces for women's voices, communities, and experiences as sexual beings without being too obscene or radical (Ruzy & Shahizah, 2010). It means the modern Malay women characters still adhere to Malay feminine standards and do not violate their customs or *'adat.'*

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes textual analysis from a feminist perspective to investigate gender roles and the portrayal of women in the short story 'Anita.' The narrative was specifically chosen because it is written by a female author, which enables an examination of the manner in which women represent their gender experiences in literature. Since the original text is in Malay, it was translated into English using Google Translate to facilitate analysis. Yet, this method has its drawbacks, as direct translation may overlook cultural nuance or subtle meanings, which could compromise the accuracy of the analysis. The study identifies patterns reflecting cultural attitudes about women through the analysis of character portrayals and language use. The analysis focuses on how female characters are presented, the roles they occupy, and the obstacles they encounter, especially in relation to power and social expectations. Through this approach, the study seeks to elucidate how gender is constructed and presented within the literary text, as in a short story.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Anita and I: The comparison and contrast

The following analysis attempts to look at the similarities and differences between the two Malay female characters, Anita and 'I,' in terms of their school and education, leadership ability and other social skills, contributions to society, relationships with men, and the treatments they received, especially from the opposite gender.

School and education

'I' was a close friend of Anita and they both grew up together and studied at the same school and university. However, Anita appeared to have multiple intelligences and more intellectual abilities than the narrator, 'I'. *"Semasa di sekolah menengah dia menjadi terkenal di bandar kami kerana kehandalannya dalam lapangan bahas; syarahan dan drama. Pelajarannya cukup cemerlang dan boleh pula bermain bola jaring untuk sekolah. Aku jadi tukang tepuk di belakang sahaja."* [While in high school, she was a well-known figure in our town because she excelled in almost everything. She was on top of the class in her academic performance. She was a fluent debater and a leading actress in drama society, while I was just an ardent spectator in the audience. Not enough with that, she was also in the school netball team, while I was only a member of the cheer group.] (Zurinah, 2016, p. 38)

Apart from being an enormously talented person, Anita was also gifted with natural beauty. This attracted many boys' attention and invited jealousy among girls. In reality, women are often valued for their beauty over their intelligence. In the story, regardless of Anita's accomplishments in academic and non-academic fields, she was popular among the boys because of her beauty. *"Aku tahu ramai pemuda yang berasa bangga kalau dilihat berjalan atau bercakap-cakap dengan Anita."* [I knew many young men who felt proud when they saw Anita walking or talking] (Zurinah, 2016, p.38). In other words, Anita was a trophy friend that these boys 'used' for a temporary boost of confidence.

Unlike Anita, the narrator was only an ardent spectator and a member of the cheer group in the audience. Although the narrator received the same education and opportunities like her friend Anita, she preferred not to speak in public. She sat quietly behind the class and did not actively participate in the lesson. In fact, she often lowered her face to avoid questions from her lecturers. In contrast, most of the time, Anita would eagerly raise her hand to answer questions or give opinions during classroom discussion. This shows that Anita had her own thoughts and was not afraid to let her voice be heard. It also shows that Anita did not conform to the tradition that tells women to remain quiet and submissive in the presence of men.

Leadership and other social skills

The narrator described Anita as friendly and getting along easily with everyone. "*Dia peramah dan pandai bergaul dengan sesiapa saja.*" [She is amiable and proficient at conversing with others.] (Zurinah Hassan, 2016, p.38). Anita befriended the boys that she met in students' debate and speech activities or on the sports fields. In addition to her friendliness, Anita also demonstrated her leadership skills through her confidence to speak up her mind in front of the crowd. On one occasion, Anita gave a brilliant speech on how to improve the living standard of rural people in her nation. "*Aku melihat betapa kagum seluruh dewan apabila Anita mengeluarkan pendapatnya tentang cara-cara memajukan taraf kehidupan rakyat desa.*" [I observed that the audience was astonished when Anita articulated her views on the standard of living among villagers in rural areas.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.39). She spoke eloquently in front of an audience and impressed them with her ideas. The narrator acknowledged that she was sometimes jealous of Anita's accomplishments and the attention she received. Deep down, she also wished that she would have exceptional ideas and opinions like Anita. Nevertheless, she knew that she was not as brave as Anita. In fact, standing in front of the crowd would cause her to shiver.

In university, Anita continued to demonstrate her charismatic personality and outstanding leadership skills. According to the narrator, Anita was elected as a committee member of the Malay Language Association and became a well-known leading personality among the students at the university. "*Di universiti, Anita terus menunjukkan ketokohnya. Pada tahun pertama lagi dia sudah dipilih sebagai ahli jawatankuasa Persatuan Bahasa Melayu. Beberapa bulan sahaja selepas ketibaan kami di universiti, Anita sudah menjadi terkenal sebagai personaliti yang terkemuka.*" [Anita persisted in exhibiting her leadership at university. In her inaugural year, she was appointed as a committee member of the Malay Language Association and became well-known as a prominent personality.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.39). In addition, she also became one of the prominent student leaders who was renowned nationally. "*Betapa pesatnya perkembangan pada diri Anita. Dia menjadi salah seorang pemimpin pelajar yang dikenali di seluruh negara.*" [How rapid Anita's development was. She emerged as a prominent student leader recognized nationwide.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.39). The narrator was so proud of Anita. In the meantime, the narrator realised as Anita progressed significantly in terms of knowledge, intelligence, maturity, communication skills, and leadership skills, she was otherwise. The narrator had not changed much, did not speak much, often stayed quietly behind her class, and only jotted down other people's ideas. She knew that as a university student, she was supposed to be more proactive and should not shy away from expressing what was on her mind. The narrator's behaviors reflect the characteristics commonly associated with traditional women, who tend to be passive, reserved, and hesitant to assert themselves in social or intellectual spaces and claim leadership roles.

Voluntary work and other contributions to society

Anita was an active university student who loved to do charity work to help her own people, especially in the rural areas. "*Anita memang banyak minatnya tetapi minat utamanya ialah kerja-kerja amal berbakti kepada masyarakat seperti memberi kelas-kelas bimbingan kepada pelajar-pelajar di kampung-kampung.*" [Anita possesses numerous interests; however, her main passion is charitable work, particularly in community service such as conducting tutoring classes for students in villages.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.40). In doing so, Anita would spend her semester breaks leading a

group of university students to visit rural areas and provide free tuition for weak students there. Besides, she also led, managed, and pioneered innovative projects that involved events such as talks, 'gotong-royong' and other community works. Anita felt the responsibility to help her own people to upgrade their quality of life, change their attitudes, and she tried to encourage other university students to do the same. "*Dia sendiri membuka kelas-kelas untuk orang dewasa yang buta huruf dan mengajar dengan tidak meminta bayaran.*" [She initiated classes for illiterate adults and taught without asking for payment.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.39). According to Anita, everyone should be committed to the betterment of society. Anita believed that the Malays in rural areas lived in such poverty and depressing situations because they were unwilling to make changes in their lives. The community strongly believed that they were doomed to be poor, as in '*rezeki secupak tak akan jadi segantang*' (a little sustenance would never be a bushel of sustenance). As a modern woman, Anita claimed that this archaic way of thinking must be eradicated from the collective consciousness of the people, and it was the responsibility of the educated ones to alter the rural Malays' attitudes and way of life.

In contrast, the narrator had never been involved in any community work because she felt she had no talent and leadership skills like Anita. Although the narrator was embarrassed with her own mindset, she knew that it was impossible for her to join such programmes. According to the narrator, Halim would disapprove of her intention, as he thought it was better for her to go home and help her mother with the house chores or take care of her younger siblings. "*Dan lagi, kata Halim, lebih baik aku berlatih banyak-banyak membuat kerja rumah dan menjaga adik-adik kerana tidak sampai setahun kami akan mendirikan rumah tangga.*" [And again, said Halim, it's better for me to practice a lot doing housework and taking care of my younger siblings because in less than a year we will be getting married.] (Zurinah, 2016, p. 40). In Halim's opinion, these would serve as a platform for the narrator to practice the skills needed to become a good wife and mother, as they would be getting married soon. Halim also emphasised that he did not need a community leader as a wife but a woman who could focus on the family. The narrator just agreed to what Halim had said as she got carried away dreaming of her future life with him. "*Aku tidak banyak soal lagi, terus sahaja tenggelam dalam mimpi-mimpi indah membayangkan masa hadapan di samping Halim.*" [I did not care anymore and simply dreamed, imagining my future with Halim.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.41).

In this case, we can see that the narrator was a traditional Malay woman who conformed to the traditional gender roles of the patriarchal society. In patriarchal Malay society, a woman is complete when she is married and has children. According to Zurinah (2020), marriage is not always a matter of the heart but, for convenience, family honor, economic arrangements, social responsibilities, and, more often than not, to spare a lady and her family from social disgrace. In marriage, "a woman must be less herself in order to be more of a woman" (Zurinah, 2020, para.1). This is because, when marriage occurs, a woman will have new priorities which require them to change their routines. In traditional marriage, household chores and responsibilities are not shared equally, as a woman is expected to cook, clean, and do housework chores besides taking care of her husband and children.

Relationships with men

When the narrator was in upper form six at secondary school, she began her romantic relationship with Halim, who rode with her every day on the school bus. The narrator's relationship with Halim is sustained through their university years together. The narrator felt her attachment to Halim was an advantage, as the male students did not dare to disturb her, as she 'belonged' to Halim. "*Mereka menghormatiku sebagai 'kepunyaan' Halim.*" [They respect me as Halim's "ownership".] (Zurinah, 2016, p.41). Therefore, she was safe from being the victim of gossip and slander for the way she dressed or wore make-up. Their relationship eventually ended up with marriage after Halim was appointed and worked as *Penolong Pegawai Daerah* in their district. At that time, the narrator had a few months left to graduate from her studies in the Diploma of Education. The narrator claimed that the reason for their early marriage was to prevent her from being positioned as a teacher at schools far from her husband's workplace. "*Tujuan kami berkahwin cepat adalah supaya senang untukku minta mengajar di tempat sendiri.*" [The reason for our early marriage was to easily request

the teaching position in my hometown.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.42). It was Halim's idea, and the narrator only followed his decision. In this case, we can see that the narrator's life and decisions were dictated by her male counterpart who soon became her husband, Halim.

In contrast, during secondary school, Anita continued to gather friends and fans from the opposite gender but none of them was special enough to become her lover. According to the narrator, "*Hingga ke tingkatan enam atas, Anita terus mengumpul kawan dan peminat dan belum memilih sesiapa untuk dijadikan sebagai teman lelaki istimewanya.*" [Anita continued to gather more and more friends and admirers until upper sixth form, but she still had not chosen anyone as her boyfriend.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.39). The narrator realised that Anita was not in a rush to form a relationship. She was different from the other young women who were chasing after men. To most women, marriage is viewed as a top priority, and their conventional upbringing has instilled in them the fear of remaining single. Anita, on the other hand, was ambitious, self-reliant, and focused on things that mattered to her. To her, men and marriage were not her priority.

However, during her second year at the university, Anita was in a relationship with a college student named Asmawi. Just like most traditional men in a patriarchal society, he also had a strong desire for control and felt compelled to use it in their relationship. Therefore, after a few months, the couple broke up. "*Mereka berputus terus apabila Asmawi melarangnya menerima tawaran ke Jepun.*" [The couple separated when Asmawi forbade Anita from accepting the offer to Japan.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.41). When Asmawi failed to convince Anita to reject a scholarship to go to Japan for a short course study, he left her. His action indicated that he did not view his partner's needs and feelings as important as his own. He also showed little respect for what Anita had worked for and achieved and was not even supportive of her decision and ambition. In addition, it can also be assumed that he was not comfortable dating a modern, intelligent and strong-willed woman like Anita because he could never dominate her, and this would hurt his ego.

Career and challenges

After they finished their degrees, Anita and the narrator both did their Diploma in Education to qualify as teachers. The spirit to educate the poor in rural areas was strong and steadfast in Anita's heart. She was eager and passionate about teaching even though a graduate of such standing like her would have no problem getting better jobs in the city. In contrast, the narrator became a teacher because she thought that was the only job that she could do. "*Aku mengambil diploma pendidikan kerana itulah satu-satunya bidang kerja yang aku fikirkan aku boleh buat.*" [I pursued a Diploma in Education because I believed this was the only job I could do.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.42). Furthermore, Halim encouraged her to be a teacher, as he said that this occupation is more appropriate for women. "*Halim menggalakkan aku menjadi guru. Katanya, orang perempuan lebih baik jadi guru. Kerja setengah hari sahaja. Sebelah petang boleh bersama anak-anak.*" [Halim encouraged me to be a teacher, as he believed that this occupation is more suitable for women. According to Halim, teachers only work half a day; therefore, more time could be spent with the children.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.42).

In terms of teaching, Anita was a responsible, devoted, and innovative teacher who performed her job with enthusiasm while bringing some innovations to upgrade her students' performance. Anita continued to serve the society even more by joining the Youth Associations that conducted programs for school leavers and free classes for the illiterate adults. The only problem for her was her unmarried status.

Malay society has certain stereotypes and assumptions about single and unmarried women. It believes that a woman's life should revolve around her marriage. Therefore, when Anita was completely self-sufficient on her own and devoted to her work, she became an object of slander among others, especially men. Anita's male students, for example, made fun of and gossiped about Anita's unmarried status. This is evident when one of the students remarked, "*Baik-baik sikit, Cikgu Anita tu tak ada teman lelaki, nanti kita ditangkapnya.*" [Be careful. Miss Anita doesn't have a boyfriend. She might catch us anytime soon.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.44). In addition, some teachers were offended and talked behind her back after Anita made some remarks about their way of teaching. According to Anita, some of them were not prepared to teach and only asked students to

answer exercises after exercises without marking any of them. When Anita had proposed that stricter teaching observation should be made upon teachers with the school principal, she was accused of being a snitch and obsessed with work. Cikgu Bakar, a male teacher, for example, accused Anita of being someone who could not see others at ease and mocked her unmarried status. He said, "*Perempuan kalau lambat kahwin, itulah jadinya. Nak ganggu orang sahaja. Tak boleh tengok orang senang. Kalau diberikan jantan seorang kepadanya barangkali barulah dia diam.*" [This is what happens when a woman marries late. She just loves to be a nuisance and cannot stand seeing people at ease. If she is given a man, maybe she will shut up.] (Zurinah, 2016, p.45). His words were followed by sinister laughter from others.

In addition, her single status also became a problem to other women. It is often assumed that unmarried women are desperate to date or be in a relationship with anyone. In the story, Anita was attacked by a lady who later accused her of having a romantic relationship with her husband, the Vice President of the Youth Organisation. The lady thought that Anita wanted to steal her husband even though Anita never had such an intention. Anita was called an old maid who was desperate for a man, which made her feel sad and embarrassed at the same time. "*Anita mengeluh panjang. Aku lihat wajahnya bertambah muram apabila dia menyambung. Katanya lagi, aku ini anak dara, tua dah susah nak cari laki, suami orang nak dikebas.*" [Anita let out a deep sigh. As she went on, I noticed her expression darkened. "I'm an old maid, and it's difficult to find a husband, so I might steal hers.] (Zurinah, 2016, p. 43)

On many occasions, the narrator as Anita's close female friend could only support her in silence. The narrator was too stunned to speak when Cikgu Bakar ridiculed Anita publicly. When Anita was humiliated by the lady, the narrator could only sympathise with her and console her afterwards to ease her broken heart. The following dialogue between the narrator and Anita underlines the disparity between modern and traditional views of femininity:

"*Susah jadi perempuan,*" kataku.

"*Tidak susah, kalau jadi perempuan yang sederhana macam you.*"

Aku faham maksudnya dan menjawab, "Yang susah apabila menjadi seorang perempuan yang berkebolehan dan mempunyai azam sendiri sepertimu, Anita."

["It's hard to be a woman," I said.

"It's not hard if you're a simple woman like you."

I understood what he meant and replied, "What's hard is being a capable and determined woman like you, Anita." (Zurinah, 2016, p.45)

When the narrator asserts, "It is difficult to be a woman," she recognises the challenges women encounter, possibly alluding to societal expectations, gender roles, and enforced limits. The passage illustrates a contemporary consciousness of gender disparities, wherein women acknowledge the difficulties of self-assertion and transcending traditional values. However, Anita's reply suggests that a woman who embodies modesty, passivity, and obedience will encounter no hardships. The term "*sederhana*" ("simple") suggests that women who do not contest society norms can avoid difficulties, thereby promoting the notion that traditional women are anticipated to conform without scrutinising their duties. This dialogue exemplifies the conflict between traditional and modern notions of femininity, with one viewpoint perceiving gender roles as confining, while the other posits that adherence results in a more superficial, socially accepted existence.

The findings from "Anita" resonate with prior studies on modern Malay women in literature. Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin and Norsimah (2006) have noted that female protagonists in contemporary literature are being depicted as more assertive and resilient in the presence of societal obstacles. In the same way, Anita exemplifies this change as she confronts conventional norms and assumes leadership responsibilities. Furthermore, Siti Khariah (2007) observed that contemporary Malay women are frequently depicted in a positive light, actively engaging in a variety of societal domains. The story also exposes the persistent societal resistance to such roles, despite the fact that Anita reflects this trend. Although Ruzy and Shahizah (2010) contend that Malay romance fiction establishes spaces for women's voices without violating *adat*, "Anita" presents a more nuanced perspective. The ongoing negotiation between tradition and empowerment is

illustrated by the story's juxtaposition of two women: one who conforms and is accepted and the other who is ambitious and marginalised. These findings indicate that, despite the growing popularity of empowered female characters in modern literature, it also continues to illustrate the societal tensions that women encounter when they defy traditional gender norms.

CONCLUSIONS

The short story 'Anita' depicts a compelling contrast between two Malay women who, despite possessing similar educational backgrounds, navigate life in clearly different manners due to their convictions and perspectives on gender roles. The narrator exemplifies the archetypal Malay woman—demure, family-centric, and compliant—who avoids conflict and favors home duties over individual or societal engagement. In contrast, Anita, a strong-willed and aspiring woman, actively engages in leadership and societal advancement.

Through this contrast, the story highlights the societal biases against women who transcend beyond their traditional roles. In the story, as well as in reality, modern women like Anita continue to receive unfavourable treatment from society when advocating for their rights and pursuing leadership positions, whereas those who conform are accepted yet constrained in their potential. This dynamic reflects overarching gender disparities, wherein women must navigate between societal acceptance and personal empowerment.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of these themes, further research could investigate the representation of similar topics in other Malaysian short stories, especially those written by female writers. In addition, subsequent research could investigate male characters' viewpoints on female empowerment to gain a deeper comprehension of the underlying opposition to modern women. An interdisciplinary approach that includes sociology or gender studies may offer a more comprehensive understanding of how literature mirrors and shapes societal ideas of women's roles.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits or commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Nurhafizah carried out the research, wrote and revised the article. Mazni and Nor Zaitulakma conceptualised the central research idea and developed the theoretical framework. Aida and Nurul Akmal Johar designed the research and supervised research progress. Nurhafizah led the review process, managed revisions and approved the final article submission.

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