

Race, Gender and Religion Within the Construct of 'Bangsa Malaysia' and 'National Islamic Identity' in Malaysian Literature

Noritah Omar and Washima Che Dan

Introduction

The construction of "Islamic Malaysia" was first made by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad through the government's campaign for the inculcation of Islamic values in Malaysian work ethics. Such a stand was reiterated by then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's introduction of *Masyarakat Madani* (Civilised Society). Later, a rather bold declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic country was made by Mahathir Mohammad in 1999 followed by an official launch and documentation of *Islam Hadhari* by Mahathir's successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2004. Such national declarations have influenced many Malaysian policies to bear Islamic principles with the aim of improving Malaysian society as a whole (particularly Malay Muslim society) in its quest to become a progressive nation. Interestingly, the creation of a national 'Islamic identity' for Malaysia is contrary to the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's vision of Malaysia as a secular country. He postulated that "[i]n a previous statement I made on religion I mentioned that this country is a secular state. It means that it is not a Muslim state. Islam is the official religion of this country, but other religions have a right to play their part as far as religion is concerned" and that "[a] Muslim state for Malaysia is definitely out of the question, though the Muslims would like to see this happen. We have to consider other races who have helped the country achieve independence" (208). The debate on "national identity" has grown intense with the creation of the theoretical construct of "Bangsa Malaysia." In considering Islam as situated in the national aspiration, this paper examines how women and sexuality are framed in Malaysian literature within the dominant national view of a national "Islamic identity" and an imagined "Bangsa Malaysia." The discussion will also highlight two major issues—the appropriation of Islamic knowledge and the ethnic-religious contexts of "Bangsa Malaysia," both situated in selected texts of Malaysian literature. Most importantly, the paper will also explore the potential of using Malaysian literary works as sources of understanding and interpretation of policies and national ideology, especially pertaining to race, religion and gender.

Islamic State and Malaysian-Identity

Federico V. Magdalena from the Centre for Philippine Studies of the University of Hawaii at Manoa in his study of Islamic identity in Southeast Asia postulates that "[f]or one, religion seems to have played a central role in the politics of identity. Membership in the *ummah* (literally, Muslim community) is what confers the Islamic identity" ("Islam and Politics"). He further argues that the politics of identity if put in a larger perspective for Muslims can be regarded as "defending their faith and *ummah* against a sea of influences, propagated by infidels (*kafir*) whose ultimate purpose is to stamp out Islam as a way of life" ("Islam and Politics"). These observations, if applied, make Malays a united community (*ummah*) which strongly hold on to their Islamic values. Magdalena further explains that Malaysia "...is secular but proclaims

Islam as a state religion, that it is an 'Islamic state' according to outgoing Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad [and that] ... it has constitutionalized or racialized the Malay as a Muslim more than anything else" ("Islam and Politics"). Malaysian social scientist Maznah Mohammad asserts that

Malaysian society is now gripped by a fundamental question: is the country, which is more than half Muslim, an Islamic state? In practice, various religious and ethnic groups give Malaysia a distinctly multi-cultural character. But the Malaysian constitution provides room for arguments on both sides of the question, and the relatively secular status quo is facing a serious challenge. ("Is Malaysia an Islamic State?")

Malaysian openness to multicultural practices has been under scrutiny with the declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic country. Md Aslam (*The Star* 22 Aug 2006) in "Debunking multiculturalism" argues that a country like Malaysia that claims Islam as the official religion faces challenges with the proponents of multiculturalism who conceive Islam as an intolerable religion and that Islam is incapable of establishing its own social-political order in promoting national unity. In response, Ng Kam Weng (*The Star* 25 Aug 2006) wrote that in a country like Malaysia, the issue of pluralism is best addressed through the notion of multiculturalism as the means to conceptualize issues relating to religious and cultural diversity. Islam as the official religion may be considered as the religion to be a *modus operandi* for defining Malaysian identity and that Islam is capable of addressing the socio-political, economic, and racial issues of a multicultural nation. The argument demonstrates the complexity in addressing the cultural diversity of a multiracial Malaysia.

The continuous debate on whether Malaysia is a secular or Islamic state has very much influenced the polemics of ethnicity by Malaysian writers. The Malay-Islam problematics defines the Malay identity in Malaysia. Lloyd Fernando in his attempt to redefine culture explains the responses to the growth of culture through the works of modern literature. One of the responses includes a rejection of bicultural growth and a celebration of one's own cultural heritage. *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (1966) or *No Harvest but a Thorn* (1966), the work of Shahnon Ahmad, one of Malaysia's National Laureates, is a text Fernando considers as a means "...to see what values and hazards of a 'closed' culture system might be" (Fernando 5).

This superb novel...depicts a closed culture piercingly enough to celebrate it, but it also tacitly exposes vulnerabilities. While it dramatizes a bedrock of native vitality which vividly defines its characters, it equally highlights the physical and the moral toll of depending exclusively on traditional ways of living. (5)

A story about Malay poverty may lead to a reading of Malay-Muslims' closed mindedness to modernization and living within the confines of a homogeneous Malay community. Although Fernando does not qualify this type of writing in the third category of response—"the contradictions, dilemmas, minor tragedies and minor successes of life in confusing bicultural context..."(7), we find this novel to be situating the identity of the Malay-Muslim in contradiction. Fernando identifies this contradiction in relation to "cultural and psychological ambivalence" (5). *No Harvest but a Thorn* tells of the hardships in the lives of a rural farming family, that of Lahuma. The novel depicts the struggles of the Malay peasants in the kampong and highlights their dependence and beliefs in magic and the supernatural. The novel is illuminating in its unpacking of the 'Malay dream' which hopes for an escape from the harsh realities of life through some intervention from supernatural forces, rather than confronting and dealing with them.

From a Muslim perspective, Lahuma's family has not internalized the Islamic knowledge about destiny (*qada'* and *qadar*).¹ Further, such dependence on other than God reveals Malay Muslims' confusion and misconstruction of Islamic belief. A nationally recognized novel such as Shahnun Ahmad's which focuses on rural poverty and backwardness highlights the need for Muslims to consider the need to modernize.² In this context, the infiltration of modern social values is often observed through Western secularism. In the context of Malaysian social reality, we may assume that the dual nature of the Malay-Muslim identity may find contradiction in each other as one may find in the conflict between Islam and secularism. Magdalena asserts that "[i]deologically, Islamic precepts and cosmology are in conflict with secular governments such as those of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand" ("Islam and Politics"). Framing Malaysia as an Islamic state invites numerous controversies, particularly an increasing conflict between the ethnic and religious identities of the Malays but at the same time changing the Malay worldview into an Islamic worldview. One declaration after another made by the Malaysian government in instilling a different worldview of Muslims is identified by Professor Naquib Al-Attas as Islamization. Interestingly, Naquib al-Attas defines Islamization as "the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition opposed to Islam, and then from secular control over his reason and his language" (182). This definition contrasts with the belief that Islam may have contributed to Malay backwardness, in its quest to improve Malay morality. In other words, in this understanding, the purpose of Islam in the life of Malay Muslims is only focused on promoting good social mores, at the expense of material progress and development, and hence Malay backwardness.

For example, in the play *Halfway Road, Penang*, Ghulam Sarwar Yousof captures the Malays' pessimistic acceptance of fate and their misconceptions of *qada'* and *qadar* (similar to Lahuma's family in Shahnun Ahmad's *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan*). In a conversation about the state of their poverty, the main characters Halimah and Salleh reveal their limited understanding of religion (Islam).

Halimah: It's God's will. We should give thanks for what He gives us, and not complain. It's our *rizeki*. It's what God thinks we deserve. We'll get along somehow on that.

Salleh: Stop saying that, Limah. There must be something more than just God's will for us to fall back upon. These days many young Bumiputera have become rich overnight. Surely Azman ...

(Act One, Scene 1, p 6)

Halimah, who believes religiosity means accepting your fate as God's will and not to try to prove otherwise, is reprimanded by her husband Salleh, who supposedly is the more religiously knowledgeable of the two. However, Salleh's words reveal a different (mis)understanding of Islam, not necessarily the more accurate one. Again, the 'Malay dream' of "becoming rich overnight" is revealed here as a consistent Malay escapist fantasy, contrary to any sort of religiosity.

To further describe the sense of Islamic consciousness of the Malays, a survey conducted by a scholar in Islam, Patricia Martinez, suggests that "Islam became the defining element of Malay identity after other Malaysians adopted such aspects of Malay culture as food, dress and language. . . [t]herefore, since racial differentiation is politics, policy and fact of life in Malaysia, perhaps the mostly Malay respondents of the survey chose being Muslim as indicating the boundaries of their identity" ("Malaysia: Increasing religiosity"). Such growing religiosity amongst modern Malay-Muslims forms a strong image of the "Islamic identity" of the Malay-Muslim of Malaysia. Carolyn Hong of SITNews describes:

The best-selling *Mingguan Malaysia* newspaper runs a full page of religious advice every Sunday, with experts answering readers' questions ranging from straightforward queries about prayer to intimate issues of marital relations. Most Muslim parents send their children for after-school Islamic classes. The government wants all national schools to offer religious classes, and some states already do so. More than 20,000 Malaysians go on the haj to Mecca annually, and because of country quotas imposed by Saudi Arabia, the waiting list for pilgrims now stretches to over three years. Soon after their wedding last week, Malaysian superstar Siti Nurhaliza and her businessman husband planned to head to Mecca to perform the minor pilgrimage, *umrah*. ("Malaysia: Increasing religiosity")

Such observations confirm "the growing orthodoxy, with 77 per cent wanting stricter Islamic laws and 44 per cent in favour of allowing the state to police morality, such as indecent dressing" ("Malaysia: Increasing religiosity"). Maznah Muhammad comments that some Malay-Muslim efforts to Islamize Malaysia "...comes at a time when conflict in the Middle East has further politicized Muslim movements in Malaysia. They view themselves as counter-forces to cultural domination by the west, asserting their religious identity in the face of what they regard as imperializing ideas like secularism and human rights" ("Is Malaysia as Islamic State?"). Syed Hussien Al-Attas in his response in 1988 to the establishment of Malaysia as an Islamic state asserts that "...You can be a good Muslim as you want in any state. That (maintaining Islamic values) can be without having an Islamic state" (Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah). One may question the purpose of the government's slogan such as "*Masyarakat Madani, Membangun bersama Islam dan Islam Hadhari*" (literally "Modern Society, Progress with Islam and Islam Hadhari"—our translation) (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud 3) as an official documentation of *Islam Hadhari* (civilised Islam). Is its intent to improve the civility of Malaysians through Islamic values or to create a moderate (rather than extremist) Islamic community? The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in defining Islam Hadhari, asserts that

Islam Hadhari is not a new religion. Islam Hadhari is not a new teaching. Islam Hadhari is not a new school of thought. Islam Hadhari is an effort to bring back Muslims to the basics of Islam—the fundamental. The Basics and the fundamental as stated in the *al-Quran* and *Hadith* which are the basis of Islamic Civilization. (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud 5) [our translation]

According to Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, Islam Hadhari is an approach in order to form a Civilizing Islamic Community, thus the more accurate term of reference would be "Civilized Islamic Society" rather than "Civilized Islam."³ Islam Hadhari is not the first approach to changing the mindset of Malays; a more culturally oriented approach to changing the mindset of the Malays is found in the publication of the book *Mental Revolution (Revolusi Mental)* in 1971. Datuk Senu Abdul Rahman, one of the authors of the book, said that "[t]he mental revolution is a movement for change.. .This is also an answer for non-Malays who have been seeing the Malays as dependent on government's help...Hence we believe that this movement will not cause anxiety or be misunderstood as being racist..." (Senu Abdul Rahman et al xiii). Similarly, the launch of Islam Hadhari is said to be a positive signal by the Malaysian government, as it promotes an inclusive rather than exclusive policy for all races in Malaysia (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud 14). Further, despite the clear banner of Islam as the guiding principle in the ruling of the country, Islam Hadhari claims to be no threat to those of other faiths because "in a civilized society, no believer of any religion has the right to force any one into their faith" (24).

The formation of this "national Islamic identity" has revived the volatile discussion on the formation of "*Bangsa Malaysia*" (literally Malaysian race, but often taken to mean the Malaysian nation). The Chief Minister of Johor (the southern state of Malaysia), Datuk Abdul

Ghani Othman in his opening speech at the UMNO (United Malays National Organization) Annual Assembly 2006 asserted that the Bangsa Malaysia concept needs “..people of different races in the country to be ethnically diluted and mixed up...” (“Bangsa in mind” in *The Star* and *Berita Harian*). In a recent media coverage on the concept of Bangsa Malaysia, The Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak explained that “Bangsa Malaysia means we do not evaluate someone by his skin colour, race or religion. It does not question the special rights of the Malays, our quota or anything of that sort” (“Bangsa in mind,” *The Star*). He further confirmed that the concept of “Bangsa Malaysia’ had nothing to do with the Constitution or national policies, but was related to an individual state of mind” (“Bangsa in mind,” *The Star*). To the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) President Datuk Ong Ka Ting, Bangsa Malaysia refers to “...the rakyat Malaysia spirit [and that] .. [n]o race will be deprived of its original identity, culture, religion, language, and traditional practices” (“Bangsa in mind,” *The Star*). To former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad, Bangsa Malaysia is about “ ‘people being able to identify themselves with the country, speak *Bahasa Malaysia* (the Malay language) and accept the Constitution’ [and]... create an inclusive national identity for all inhabitants of Malaysia, thus abandoning the National Culture Policy that asserted a Malay ethnic national identity” (“Bangsa Malaysia”).

Such polemics on the concepts of Bangsa Malaysia and “Islamic nation” bring about implications as to how the Malays view themselves. Both concepts lead to various understandings of how the Malays relate themselves to the state and their religion. Some believe that Islam secures their identity as Malays and that the Malay identity is assumed within their Islamic identity, thus protecting both their rights as Muslims and as Malays. David C. L. Lim in a critical analysis of Bangsa Malaysia postulates that “... a neutral concept like Bangsa Malaysia (the ‘Malaysian race’) transcending race and religion ...” is a means of “... ethnic reconstruction that may turn into [a] problem when there are conflicting views on what constitutes neutrality where the construction of ‘national race’ is concerned, or when there is disagreement on how power ought to be aggregated between competing groups” (26). Lim further argues that in his study of K.S. Maniam’s works, he finds that Bangsa Malaysia is depicted in the “togetherness, trust and innocence ... [and] exchanges of small tokens of friendship between members of different ethnic communities...” (183).

The tendency of Malaysia to be an Islamic state is further explained by Shirley Lim that “[in] Malaysia, although Christianity is tolerated, the state has promulgated national culture as that of Malay customs, cultural values and religion” (Ismail Hussein in S. Lim 168). The unpacking of the construction of Malay Islamic national identity may be read in the works of modern Malay writers writing in English as well as those writing in Malay.

This conflict between cultural and religious identities is often explored in the works of Che Husna Azhari. In her collection of stories *The Rambutan Orchard*, for example, Che Husna Azhari depicts

[t]he conflict between culture and religion—oftentimes created by the Kelantanese love for art and leisure which paradoxically is perceived as potentially threatening to their religiosity—is ... narrated in “The Mascot” where even the religious leader, the Tok Imam, has to come to a compromise by allowing a troupe of performers to perform their *wayang* [shadow puppetry] in the village. (Rosli Talif et al 3)

By highlighting the conflict between culture and Islam, a writer such as Che Husna Azahari questions the compatibility of Islam with Malay practices. Khoo Gaik Cheng asserts that the questions of compatibility are raised when Islam is defined from the perspective of “scripturalist Islam”⁴ which sluices it from any forms of adat/customs (6). The customs may refer to the ones that are “symbolized by the ruler, feudal society, the *bomoh* (traditional healer) and life-cycle

rituals....” (Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan qtd in Khoo Gaik Cheng 6). Other than Che Husna Azahari, Dina Zaman in her recent journalistic work *I Am Muslim* (2007) grounds the cultural-religious conflict in confusion or loss of identity. She asserts that

Being a Muslim in Malaysia can be complex and confusing. In school and religious classes held after school, a young child is taught to read the Quran and conduct his life as a good Muslim. He or she may go home and face a different world altogether: MTV, parents who drink socially and yet pray, and cannot put two and two together. (10-11)

Dina Zaman further poses the following question—“Are we Muslim Malaysians lost?...What makes us Muslim when we wear the *hijab* [headcover] but consort with shamans, drink and hold discourses on Cuban cigars while attending Friday prayers diligently....”(11).

The establishment of the country as an “Islamic Malaysia” has called on creative writers to ponder on the state of Malay-Muslim identity which is seen through the Malay Muslims’ overt ethnicity and religiosity. The national declarations of Islam as a framework to change not only the Malays’ but other Malaysians’ worldviews in terms of improving the moral ethics and civility of the nation are responded to by Malay-Muslim writers through their depictions of the cultural-religious conflict within the Muslim communities. This conflict is further interpreted by these writers as resembling the hypocrisy of religion. The declaration of Malaysia as an “Islamic Malaysia” may be seen as the act of one ethnic group asserting their religious identity as much as Islam is seen as a male-dominated religion. Thus, the Malays may be read to have imposed their patriarchal power against the nation through religion.

Islamic State and Gender Construction

Radical feminists such as Sisters in Islam may be perceived to be most vocal in leading this effort through their overt contestation of the Islamic law, such as the practice of polygamy in Malaysia. Sisters in Islam have demonstrated their active role in appropriating Islamic knowledge through their involvement in lobbying for changes in Islamic law and social policies relating to women established by the government. Although such feminists are seen as appropriating Islamic knowledge through their radical resistance to Islamic jurisprudence, the bigger influence which is not so obvious is that from non-radical mainstream Malay women who conform to prescribed gendered divisions of power by the patriarchal society. In other words, they wield their influence by conforming to notions of femininity within Malay society, defined in this research as silent power. This can be seen, for example, in the celebration of ‘Islamic femininity’ through Islamic dress whereby the *hijab*, represented simply by adorning the *tudung* or the headscarf and now a common sight in Malaysia, is worn by majority of Malay women. The increased visibility of women wearing the *tudung* in the media, by political leaders, religious figures, pop stars and others may be perceived as a manifestation of the construction of the ‘ideal Malay/Muslim woman’ within the context of modern-day Islamic Malaysia: she is one who celebrates her femininity without transgressing religious boundaries, and who also plays active roles in modern society.

The evolution of the Malay adat has always been mapped according to definitions of Islam. As mentioned earlier, Khoo Gaik Cheng in her discussion on the types of Islam differentiates between “syncretic Islam” and “scripturalist Islam” (6). We interpret “syncretic Islam” as culturally-based Islam. “Scripturalist Islam” is based on Islamic law (*Syariah*). The problematics of gender in an Islamic state is located between these two definitions. Sisters in Islam, for example, have contested both definitions in which Islam, which is culturally practised in Malaysia based on Islamic law, is biased against women since many of the legal Islamic jurisprudence is interpreted by men. In relation to the gender-biased Islamic law identified by

Sisters in Islam, Khoo states that “... [t]he types of Islam to have made an impact on Malaysia also alter the status of adat in Malay society”(6). She further argues that

in the modern constructions of culture by Malaysian writers and filmmakers, adat is not impermeable to patriarchal interpretations; in fact, patriarchy responds through various channels: secular discourse of nationalism and the nation-state, through the conservative interpretations of Islam promulgated by PAS (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, the Islamic opposition party), certain fringe *dakwah* (Muslim proselytizing) groups such as Darul Arqam and Jemaah Tabligh, and perhaps more subtly, through the more moderate *dakwah* group ABIM populated by Malay urban professionals.(6)

The different definitions of Islam are based on the contestations between culturally practiced Islam and Islamic jurisprudence. Much of the contestations in relation to defining gender are concentrated on women’s body/sexuality. The parameters of the construction of gender in Islam point at aspects of male-female relationships (polygamy, husband and wife relations), women’s body (especially how women dress, femininity), and more recently and also most controversial, alternative sexuality.

Che Husna Azhari in her short story “Mariah” manages to capture most of the parameters identified above in depicting the sexuality of a religious leader, Tok Imam, who falls for the charms of a widow whom he eventually takes as his second wife. The story centers on the attractions of “the mesmerizing nasi seller, Mariah, whose overt sexuality, defined by her unmarried status (she is a widow, therefore drawing upon the reader’s knowledge and expectations of the experienced woman who is available and most probably in need of companionship and physical contact), and the pull of her attraction to all the men of the kampung (including the Imam) due to her sensuous “swaying hips” as well as her acknowledged skill at preparing the ‘*nasi belauk*’”(Che Dan). The story addresses conceptions of both Muslim masculinity (through the Imam’s sexuality and polygamous tendencies) and femininity (through the Imam’s barren wife and Mariah’s sexualized status as a widow or *janda*).⁵ Mariah is seen as a symbol of Malay femininity while the Imam represents Malay masculinity. The presence of the Tok Imam’s masculinity and Mariah’s femininity suggest the implicit power of religious man and simultaneously may be interpreted as the superiority of Muslim men in general over Muslim women. This kind of femininity and masculinity shapes the national Islamic identity of the Malays. The Malay men’s ownership of multiple wives asserts men’s degree of masculinity (Omar 107-120). This Malay-Islam equation has led to not a few competing discourses on the definition of Malay Islamic national identity.

Further observation of gender relations is made by Shahnon Ahmad in his novel *ummi & abang syeikhul* which

explicitly constructs a religious Malay text world which centers sexuality, expressed through the practice of polygamy. In this text world, women in such situations are depicted as reduced to sexual objects which must be gratified by the attention of the husband, and hence, unthinking in their acceptance of their roles in fulfilling their husbands’ lust, as this is perceived as sacrifices made for the sake of God and the ummah. (Che Dan)

Such negative depictions of Islamic polygamy in Shahnon’s works are also explored by Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani. In his analysis of two novels by Shahnon, Mohd. Zariat

finds that the issue of Islamic polygamy, which is dealt with in both *Tok Guru* and *Ummi & Abang Syeikhul*, is solely confined to the depiction of its deviation, without any apparent effort in treating comprehensively the true understanding and practice of polygamy, as sanctioned by Islam. Rather, both novels are more directly concerned with

the weaknesses of Islamic polygamy, which is seen as the root of discrimination towards women. In addition, both novels also render this deviationist polygamy so explicitly, by way of the full employment and manipulation of sexual and erotic elements, that it seems to be a deliberate effort to sensationalize Islamic polygamy.

The preoccupation with polygamy by Malay Muslim creative writers as illustrated by the above works may lead to a strong masculine presence in Malay society which indirectly disempowers women. At the same time, the depictions of disempowered women create a celebration of Malay women's femininity which objectifies the women's body. The framework that categorizes the Islamic state within the parameters of Malay Muslim femininity and masculinity is very much rooted in culture rather than in Islam. If Terry Eagleton's definition of culture (2) rooted in the Latin word *colonus* which means colonialism is applied to our analysis of Malay culture, then Islam may be categorized as an agent of colonialism. The reading of Islam as syncretic (Khoo Gaik Cheng 6-7) may be considered a bias against Muslims because it is a brand of Islam defined as culturally based. This continuous debate of Islam as culture provides opportunity for criticism of the establishment of the Islamic state within a multicultural nation such as Malaysia.

Aminah Wadud-Muhsin asserts that "despite common misinterpretation, Islam is not culture. Nor does it fully determine the cultural aspects of community. It is a belief system that operates in particular terms with first principles that must necessarily be universal, and therefore, non-sexist."

One of the new generation of writers of Malaysian literature in English, Dina Zaman, continuously challenges the national Islamic identity by using provocative language and opening up issues which are most sensitive to Muslims. In her short story collection, *Night and Day*, Dina foregrounds the female body and the raw 'earthiness' of male-female relations. Khoo observes that "[m]ost of Dina's stories reflect earthiness or bawdiness and the characters' constant self-awareness of female libidinal desires, as women refer to their breasts ... and their genitalia ..." and comments that "Dina Zaman's confrontational writing style is a calculated move against Islamic repression of sexual discourse and the clampdown on female (and gay) sexualities" (Khoo Gaik Cheng 150-151). In her most recently published journalistic writing, she collects stories of Muslims who dare to expose their most intimate sexual identity such as homosexuality among Muslim women. By doing so, Dina claims, "[t]his is not a discourse or religious book about Islam. It is a very selfish series of articles by a writer exploring her religion and people. I see it as an adventure of meeting strange, new and wonderful people who call themselves Muslims" (11). Dina Zaman's claim may be considered as resisting national Islamic discourse portraying Islam as a means to solving socio-cultural and economic problems faced by Muslims. The depictions made of Muslims tell us of the vulnerability of the Muslim as individuals and the tendency of seeing Islam as a façade for human weaknesses.

Karim Raslan, another new-generation writer writing in English, politicizes "sexual repression in relation to Malay Muslim practice which the author observes to be culturally pretentious and to be regarded with suspicion" (Rosli Talif et al 7). Raslan depicts sexuality behind close doors, both in male-female relations and in contemporary alternative sexualities. Boldly provocative in his depiction of homosexuality, Raslan's works such as "Neighbours" mocks the Malays' religious hypocrisy in their obsession with presenting a respectable image.

Conclusion

The problematics in recognizing the need for Islam to be the *modus operandi* of Malaysia's socio-political challenges lie in conceptual definition. Definitions play an important role in understanding the relationships amongst the categories of race, gender and religion. Each category delimits meanings that make up a meaningful understanding of Islamic identity which in turn becomes the basis of the nation's Malay identity. Syed Ali Tawfik states that "[d]efinition is a construction in which the genus is indicated along with its difference. In order to capture the essence of the thing defined with respect to other things, the definition has to indicate all the differences pertaining to it" (Syed Ali Tawfik Al Attas and Tieh Chuan Ng 131). In Malay/Malaysian literature, the problematics of race, gender and religion is studied by connecting the social reality of Islamic Malaysia with conceptual definitions and literary representations. Wrongly locating the definition of Islam may lead to racial bias against the Malays as an ethnic group. The study of the textual politics of Malaysian writers writing in Malay and English can be an opening to frame both the concept of femininity and masculinity within the Malay-Islam equation, hence constructing the Malaysian values and ethics system from the perspective of an Islamic country which has been modernized through the recent construction of "civilized" Islam by the present Malaysian government.

End Notes

- ¹ Qada' and qadar refer to Islamic concepts of destiny in which Muslims believe that God has fixed three aspects of their lives that include life and death, provision, and marriage partner.
- ² It is important at this juncture to reflect on Professor Syed Naquib Al-Attas commentary on the concept of "modern." He argues that "[i]n Western Christian cultural history, it was the very religion, as interpreted by the Church, that gave rise to the attitude conceived as modern so that the very meaning of the term is governed by Christian doctrine which ultimately rest with the clergy ... it was conflict with and opposition to the teachings of the Church that brought about the modern attitude, that is, rationalism, individualism and internationalism which in the West has always been understood as humanism. Clearly, such a concept cannot be applied to Muslims, for in Islam there has always been neither 'Church' in the Western Christian sense nor clergy, and the rationalism, individualism and internationalism understood by the Muslim has always been in harmony, not conflict, with religion" ("Islam and Secularism" 180-181).
- ³ According to Professor Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud (2006), the terms of reference between Islam Hadhari and Masyarakat Islam Hadhari must be made clear since it can lead to misunderstanding that the Islam promoted by the Prophet Muhammad is uncivilized and only relevant to the Prophet's times, and that it is unprogressive. Professor Wan Muhammad Nor is certain that those who supported the concept of Islam Hadhari do not mean it in a negative sense (9).
- ⁴ In reference to the work of Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan (2000). "A fresh look at Islam and adat in Malay society." *SARI*, 18: 23-32. Khoo Gaik Cheng differentiates between "syncretic Islam" and scripturalist Islam." "Syncretic Islam" refers to the co-existence of Islam with Malay customs.

- ⁵ In Malay, the word 'janda' can mean either widow or divorcee, and carries connotations of a sexually available woman who is threatening to married women for the attractions the 'janda' may hold for their husbands.

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