

Construction of a Muslim Woman Entrepreneur in Malay Fiction

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Abstract: - The appearance of women as entrepreneurs is in line with the Malaysian economic situation that encourages women to take their work seriously in business and industry. Participation of women in entrepreneurial activities in Malaysia is promoted as a way to supplement the family income. How are women entrepreneurs viewed in popular Malay fiction? By using a Malay novel which focuses on a Malay woman entrepreneur as its protagonist, we show that Muslim women who desire to engage in business must strike a balance between their private and public worlds. As a wife and mother, she must show deference and devotion; as an entrepreneur, she must be judicious and prudent; as a Muslim, she must not shirk from her faith.

Key-Words: - Malay fiction; Muslim women entrepreneurs; motivation; conflicts; private and public domains

1 Introduction

In this paper, we explore the images of women Malay entrepreneurs in a Malay novel, *Aroma Hati* [1]. This novel is reflective of many Malay novels which portray women as entrepreneurs. It is also symptomatic of reading materials that appeal to Malay readers, judging from the amount of novels published using the same storylines. As Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Shahizah Ismail Hamdan [2] have emphasized, popular Malay novels have “outnumbered literary Malay novels” by their glossy covers and predictable plots. By looking at an example of a novel which portrays a Muslim woman entrepreneur, we argue that it reflects the general perception about women and the cultural and social roles they play in their Malay communities as entrepreneurs.

The appearance of women as entrepreneurs is in line with the Malaysian economic situation that encourages women to take their work seriously in business and industry. Participation of women in entrepreneurial activities in Malaysia is promoted as a way to supplement the family income. Most women are involved in the production of small (cottage industries), micro-businesses and in the informal sector. Most of these entrepreneurial activities are supported by government agencies such as the Department of Community Development (Kemas) and the Department of Agriculture (DOA) which have nurtured the growth of women in business. After the Eighth Malaysia Plan, the

situation of entrepreneurship among women and their participation in non-traditional sectors such as manufacturing, construction and technology showed significant progress. The Federation of Women Entrepreneurs Association of Malaysia (FEM) estimates that about 15 percent of women entrepreneurs are involved in manufacturing.

Women in 2006 constitute about half of the total population, and their share of employment had risen from 35.6 per cent to 36.7 percent between 2000 and 2005, with representation in professional, managerial and technical levels [3]. The rise in percentage is not surprising as the number of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia has increased in the past three decades due to affirmative actions by the government. All this has been facilitated by the growth in various sectors such as banking and finance, food production, general commercial, private and public services, education, training and consultancy, and others. The establishment of the Federation Council's organizations Women's Entrepreneurship in Malaysia is a proactive step to advancing women as entrepreneurs. Combined associations of women entrepreneurs like Peniagawati, Usahanita, Wawasanita, Association of Women Entrepreneurs Association of Malaysia and Sarawak Usahanita have helped them to improve entrepreneurial activities to the global level [4]. This situation shows that women are rapidly making a mark in business. It is, therefore, not surprising that images of women as entrepreneurs become one of

the fadders of creative imagination of Malaysian writers.

2 Definitions

What are some characteristics of women entrepreneurs? According to Lavoie [5], women entrepreneurs are leaders who seize the initiative to launch a new business activity and take calculated risks in terms of financial, administrative or social responsibilities, while at the same time, they carry out their daily tasks managing their business ventures. Buttner and Moore [6] identified women entrepreneurs as those who have started a business, or have a substantial interest in the business and its management. From these definitions, it is clear that initiatives and risks are part of an entrepreneur's undertaking.

What are the characteristics needed to be a successful entrepreneur? According to a study, Zaidatol Akmaliah Phie and Habibah Elias Lope [7] argue that the success of the business hinges on several factors such as managerial and business skills, background and experience of past management, financial management and marketing skills. Personality characteristics such as being confident, courageous, energetic, determined, creative, visionary, proactive, versatile, sharp and having a perceptive mind will help one to become a successful entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs, they further state, must have a vision and set specific and realistic goals.

3 Synopsis

How has the achievement of women as entrepreneurs been translated in the chosen novel? *The Aroma of the Heart* by Zahura Zakry [1] features a woman entrepreneur as its protagonist. Alisya in AH is described as an entrepreneur of cookies, a traditional field that matches her gender inclinations. How she becomes an entrepreneur, what are the characteristics associated with successful entrepreneurship, the conflicts experienced by her and how she juggles domestic responsibilities are some of the issues raised in the novel.

AH tells the story of Alisya, a qualified banker, who is skilled in making biscuits. When her banking job becomes increasingly taxing, Alisya's husband proposes that she quit her job to start a business making cookies full time. Alisya begins her endeavour with Alisya Biscuit Company. With hard work and business acumen, she not only succeeds nationally but also penetrates the international market. But success in business soon causes cracks in the marriage, resulting in their subsequent

divorce. Alisya is deceived by another female partner, Myra, who plots for her downfall so that she could take over the biscuit business. At the end of the novel, Alisya becomes less materialistic and reconciles with her husband.

4 Motivation

Push and pull factors motivate women to start their own business. Lack of employment opportunities, blocked opportunities, flexible work schedule requirements for family responsibilities are some motivations that encourage women to pursue entrepreneurship [8]. Other factors pulling women towards setting up businesses include fulfilling dreams, getting financial independence, commanding social respect, desiring to achieve wealth in the future, and having trust in their own abilities [9]. "Glass ceiling", a concept in which women cannot penetrate the higher levels due to prejudice against women, is also seen as an incentive to start their own companies due to the failure to be promoted because of gender bias. Another important contributory feature is the aspiration to "make a difference" which means that female entrepreneurs take on different approaches in relation to customer-friendly methods, ethical operations and social responsibility in their pursuit of economic attainment [10]. As can be seen in the novel, while the protagonist's husband is not an entrepreneur, his idea of entrepreneurship is different from his wife's vision. These different approaches to business become the source of conflict in the novel.

5 Categories of Entrepreneurs

There are three types of entrepreneurs: "chance entrepreneurs", "forced entrepreneurs" and "created entrepreneurs" [11]. The three categories are based on the ways in which the business starts or factors and motivations that influence the decision to start a business. "Chance entrepreneurs" are entrepreneurs who start a business without a having plan or clear goals. Such entrepreneurs are likely to start with a hobby that is later turned into a business. "Forced entrepreneurs" do not have a choice but start a business due to urgent situations such as the death of close relatives or the family is burdened with financial problems. Therefore, "forced entrepreneur" is driven by financial needs. "Created Entrepreneurs" initiate the opportunity to be entrepreneurs by being motivated, encouraged and developed through entrepreneurship programs. These categories of entrepreneurs and their motivations will be disclosed in the analysis of the woman entrepreneur in the novel.

6 Discussion

How should the woman entrepreneur in AH be categorized? Alisya has a natural ability and enthusiasm toward baking cookies. Her biscuits have always been popular amongst her friends who would buy them during the festive seasons. Her interest in making biscuits is also seen through the classes she takes on voluntarily. There is a genuine interest in biscuit making, and often she would "ask her husband Haris and children to appraise her cookies" [1]. When her banking job becomes increasingly stressful and she is often "busy", "depressed, and" tired " [1], she chooses to take up the offer to resign through her bank's Voluntary Separation Scheme. Because of the stress, her husband, who is shown to be a man who is concerned with her happiness, suggests her resignation by saying:

It's time that you fulfil your dream ... I know you aspire to own your own business. Many ways can be done if you wish to begin your business. If the question of capital is an issue, you can ask for a bank loan. You can use our rented house in Ampang as collateral. If you need a guarantor, I am willing. [1]

Thus, the factors that push Alisya to leave her job are physical and mental stress. Due to her steady clientele, creativity in trying new recipes, spouse support, and having knowledge in the field of business management, Alisya is able to prepare a detailed business plan. She was certain of her undertakings and she feels that she has the edge being a Malay woman.

Alisya rents a shop, takes ten housewives as employees, buys equipment and contacts the appropriate raw material wholesalers who will sell equipment capable of making biscuits at a reasonable price. She then markets her products to mini markets and grocery stores near her housing area. She does not make too many types of biscuits but specialises in three types only. Alisya is therefore seen as a strategic and thorough planner. From the perspective of motivation, Alisya can be categorized as a "forced entrepreneur" who is pushed into business by using her existing capabilities and needs to improve her family's economic wealth. Nevertheless, because of her background in business management, she shows maturity in starting a business. Therefore, Alisya has a good start – interest, encouragement and management skills. From the perspective of motivation and typology of entrepreneurs, Alisya is

initially not very motivated to earn a high income but due to market factors and insistence of her business partner, she later becomes an entrepreneur who is driven to make big profits. However, her success as an entrepreneur has unwanted effects on her marriage and family life.

The conflict of women entrepreneurs comes from a variety of sources. As a woman who is a wife and mother, it is unavoidable that her primary role clashes with her secondary role as an entrepreneur. In the private and domestic domain, although a woman entrepreneur is a manager in the company, she is still bound by the norms and principles of being a Malay Muslim woman who must show obedience to the head of the family, her husband, and serve her roles as the caregiver to her children. In the public domain, the women entrepreneurs are not insulated from many trials. Things may go wrong and challenge the robustness of a company such as management failure, equipment failure, rupture in organization, poor quality control, and threats of bankruptcy due to unsustainable financial flows [12]. A woman entrepreneur who is expected to manage the home front and oversee the company would certainly face various conflicts and may at times be pulled in different directions.

Alisya's conflict begins when she could not juggle time with family and her commitment to the company. The seeds of a family rift are felt when her business penetrates foreign markets in Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. The high demand in production causes the plant management to operate from 7 am to 11 pm. As a result of pursuing the global market, Alisya begins to neglect the local market, but she is reprimanded by her husband, Haris. He reminds her of her risky endeavour and she should, he argues, concentrate on the local market which is more stable compared to foreign markets.

When she decides to go ahead with her programme to expand her company abroad, Haris begins to see his wife as a greedy entrepreneur. From a compliant wife and always asking for his help or ideas, Alisya has chosen not to heed to his advice. As he surmises, "his wife rarely protested. But she has become greedy. She is drawn into the profits of her business" [1]. But as an entrepreneur, Alisya feels that she has learnt the ropes and is ready to take on more risks. The confidence in her ability escalates. Her diligence, resourcefulness, creativity, insightfulness and initiative are reflective of the attributes of a successful entrepreneur as detailed in the study Zaidatol Akmaliah Lope Pihie and Habibah Elias [7]. However, Alisya feels there

is a gap between her ambition and her husband's vision:

For her, Haris' strategy is sometimes too orthodox. Today's business world requires immediate profit. The quick one will benefit the most. Alisya normally accepts the ideas presented by her husband but lately, he had been giving bad advice. The competition in business is tough. Alisya sighed. Although they discussed business strategies, her husband had never managed a business before. He did not understand her situation. She was certain that she knew all the intricacies in the business world. [1]

This communication breakdown is the beginning of the family's disintegration. Alisya's desire to make a quick profit is perceived as impulsive. She is seen to be shirking her responsibilities as a mother to the extent that her husband is compelled to say that the "children need to feel pampered by their mother's love" [1]. She feels equally disoriented because her husband initially provides support "but now he has withdrawn from giving her any" [1]. The protagonist is shown to be torn between home demands and work requirements.

However, there exists a difference between Alisya perception of herself and how others view her. The novelist persistently shows flaws in the protagonist's judgment. For example, Alisya strikes a deal with a business consultant named Myra who is described as "pretty well-versed in the intricacies of the business world" [1]. Within three months, Myra could influence Alisya to establish a private limited company to replace a single company (enterprise) where the liability issues and risks are jointly shared "[1]. Haris is suspicious of Myra "who, in her late 30's, was still alone because she wanted to devote her full attention to her career" [1]. Myra is more aggressive with the plan by persuading Alisya to take a loan of RM1 million to expand the business. The rapid extension and weight of the loan require the protagonist to put in more hours into her venture. Haris views his wife's preoccupation with her business as defaulting her responsibility; nevertheless, he is depicted as someone who piously remembers to ask for God's help that "their marriage remains peaceful until the end of their lives" [1].

The marriage increasingly becomes shaky when Alisya buys a new luxury home without prior discussion. Although both their children are happy with their new dwelling, Haris is "disappointed with the actions of his wife" [1]. He says harshly: "You

are just thinking about yourself. Don't you care about my feelings? When did you become so selfish?" [1]. Although Alisya purchases the luxury home as a surprise gift for her family due to its close distance to her new factory, Haris's ego is threatened. He feels that she is belittling their home which he has bought his hard-earned money. By buying the new house, he senses that she has been unhappy in their small home. He is now troubled that they have different expectations of happiness.

This episode of disagreement regarding the house throws the family further into murky waters. Haris demands respect and discussion; Alisya is trying her best to provide for her family. Both have good intentions but their communication has turned awry. Furthermore, Alisya fails to strike a balance between work and domestic roles. Eventually, their marriage could not survive and the protagonist applies for divorce. Haris is reluctant to divorce his wife but he "accepts the fact that they have become incompatible" [1]. Haris is depicted as being rational while Alisya seems to place business above family happiness.

The novelist continues to show Alisya's weakness though she is a successful entrepreneur. Apparently, Alisya does not choose friends wisely. Once divorced, Haris still cares about his ex-wife and consistently worries about the true motives of Myra. Haris can read the behavior of Myra. It is shown that Myra carefully plans the couple's breakup and provides bad advice to Alisya that leads to her divorce. Envious of her partner's success in marriage and business, Myra sabotages the business by purchasing raw goods which are harmful to health, causing great damage to Alisya's biscuit industry. When her plot is exposed, Myra attempts to murder Alisya but Haris saves his ex-wife in the nick of time. From these episodes leading to the rescue, it is clear that the novelist illuminates the conditions that women entrepreneurs should abide to maintain peace at home and in the office. Although Alisya is described as creative, visionary, motivated, if she turns her back on her husband and her children, her life will not be peaceful.

How does the closure of the novel provide another clue to the way in which women entrepreneurs balance their private and public worlds? The storyline shows that the former husband still loves his wife and his concern brings the couple together again:

Although the stab wounds still hurt, Alisya embraced her children. She was very happy. Her family is actually the most valuable treasure in the world. Not money and wealth.

Alisya is now fully aware of her mistakes. Haris is also smiling. A happy smile. Full of gratitude. [1]

Alisya develops her business slowly; she has learnt to balance career and her home life, and is determined that she “would not sacrifice herself solely to the factory only” because she realizes “that love and happiness are important in her life” [1]. The novel ends with the family leaving for Mecca to perform their *umrah*. Alisya plans to show her gratitude to the Almighty and prays “that her marriage to Haris remains until the end of their lives and that their children will be pious and righteous” [1]. The resolution of this story shows three aspects - obedience to the Almighty and worship to Him, deference to her husband and devotion to the family, prudence in ambition and judicious with material wealth. This is the guidance that the novelist imparts to Malay Muslim women entrepreneurs if they wish to have both worlds in complete harmony.

7 Conclusion

Zahura Zakry [1] offers an image of a Malay Muslim woman entrepreneur who meets with various challenges in her bid to become successful in her venture. As a wife and mother, Alisya is caught between two different worlds - as a wife, she must be faithful and obedient to her husband, as a mother she must carry out the role to nurture her children, and as a new entrepreneur, she has to take risks and seize opportunities. In the pursuit of wealth, however, she becomes careless of her primary duties and abandons God. Therefore, many trials come her way – a cracked marriage, insufficient funds and business partner defections. The novelist shows three ways to overcome these challenges and provide a reminder of the main roles as wives and mothers; one, heed to one’s husband’s advice; two, do not place wealth as the only marker of happiness; and three, always pray to God Almighty for enlightenment. It is clear that the welfare of the family should come first, not physical wealth. As Muslims, devotion to the Almighty is embedded in this novel. Therefore, faith, domestic roles and career demands should exist in harmony. If one of these aspects is put aside, the female protagonist will be confronted with various plagues and calamities that shake her credibility as an entrepreneur.

Stereotypical views that women entrepreneurs cannot balance their two commitments seem to persist. This perspective is prevalent in many Malay novels that portray women engaged in professions or having managerial positions. Successful Malay

Muslim women, it would seem, have difficulty maintaining their marriages if they are overly committed to their work. They make irrational choices and learn lessons the hard way.

To reiterate, this construction of a Malay Muslim woman entrepreneur shows the conventions women must follow regardless of how educated they are and how successful they seem to be. They must subscribe to certain values pervasive in the Malay Muslim worldview. It is ironic that Alisya, educated in the business industry, makes blatant mistakes regarding her expansion programme and co-workers, but these blunders are necessary constructions to show how a good woman can fall from grace when she neglects her primary roles as wife and mother. The novel discussed here is reflective of this formulaic representation. While Malay Muslim women have gone beyond their traditional roles and created an impact in the public domain through their entrepreneurial ventures, they require instructions that remind them of their duties to their God, husbands, and children.

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