

SEARCHING NEW PARADIGMS OF MALAY WOMEN: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM LITERATURE?¹

*(Pencarian Paradigma Baharu Wanita Melayu: Apa yang Dapat
Dipelajari daripada Kesusasteraan?)*

Halimah Mohamed Ali
halimah@usm.my

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia.
Tel.: +604-6532704

Abstract

Paradigms according to science and epistemology describe distinct concepts of thought patterns. For the purpose of this paper we have to understand gender paradigm. According to Gamble, a paradigm is a belief structure about the ways men and women should act and the roles they should perform. The Malaysian gender paradigm is very much controlled by religion and culture. The paradigm has shifted through time, but is the shift significant? Basically the Malay woman in Malaysia is controlled by culture and Islam. These are two prominent factors that influence her life and her interaction with fellow women, men and society. The paradigm used to be that women were weak, not as smart as men, could not lead, and were destined to be homemakers even if they were educated. An old saying goes, a woman's place is in the kitchen, no matter how highly educated she is. This paradigm has not been challenged by women, especially by romance novel writers as will be discussed in this paper. This paper analyses two Malay novels, *Tak Seindah Mimpi* by Sharifah Abu Salem and *Adam dan Hawa* by Aisya Sofea, and looks at how the gender paradigm is portrayed vis-à-vis these two novels using the feminist theory.

Keywords: new paradigm, Malay woman, romance novel, feminist theory, gender role

Abstrak

Paradigma berdasarkan sains dan epistemologi menerangkan konsep pemikiran tertentu. Dalam kajian ini yang perlu difahami ialah paradigma gender. Menurut Gamble, paradigma ialah struktur kepercayaan mengenai cara lelaki dan wanita sepatutnya bertindak, dan peranan yang harus mereka laksanakan. Paradigma gender di Malaysia amat dikawal oleh agama dan budaya. Paradigma ini mengalami perubahan dengan berlalunya masa, tetapi adakah peralihannya signifikan? Pada dasarnya dua faktor utama yang mempengaruhi interaksi antara sesama wanita, dengan lelaki dan masyarakat. Paradigma lama menampilkan wanita bersifat lemah, tidak sebijak lelaki, tidak boleh memimpin, dan telah ditentukan sebagai suri rumah meskipun mereka berpelajaran. Pesan orang tua-tua, walau setinggi mana pelajaran seseorang wanita itu, tempatnya masih di dapur. Paradigma ini dicabar oleh wanita terutamanya penulis novel roman yang akan dibincangkan dalam makalah ini. Makalah ini menganalisis dua novel Melayu, Tak Seindah Mimpi oleh Sharifah Abu Salem dan Adam dan Hawa oleh Aisya Sofea. Tumpuan penelitian terhadap paradigm gender yang dipaparkan dalam kedua-dua novel ini menggunakan teori feminis.

Kata kunci: paradigma baharu, wanita Melayu, novel roman, teori feminis, peranan gender

INTRODUCTION

Paradigms according to science and epistemology describe distinct concepts of thought patterns. For the purpose of this paper, we have to understand the gender paradigm. The Malaysian gender paradigm is very much controlled by religion and culture. The paradigm has shifted through time, but is the shift significant? Basically, Malay women in Malaysia are controlled by her culture and religion, which is Islam. These are two prominent factors that influence her life and her interaction with fellow women, men and society.

According to Laura Hibbard, although women hold some of the most powerful positions in the United States of America, the American society has not “really changed the way [it] think[s] about leadership roles and women (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-hibbard/the-bitch-paradigm-why-wo_1_b_899363.html). Power roles are distinctly masculine and are perceived as such culturally not only in the United States but also in Malaysia. Imagine in a country as developed as the United States where feminism is active, there are still problems with the gender paradigm, that is, gender

roles. Compared to the United States, how does Malaysia and the Malay woman rate in terms of gender roles?

The paradigm used to be that women were weak, not as smart as men, could lead, and were destined to be homemakers even if they were educated. An old saying goes, a woman's place is in the kitchen, no matter how highly educated she is. This paradigm has not been challenged by women, especially by romance novel writers as will be discussed in this essay.

This essay analyses two Malay novels *Tak Seindah Mimpi* (2000) by Sharifah Abu Salem and *Adam dan Hawa* (2006) by Aisya Sofea, and looks at how the gender paradigm is portrayed vis-à-vis the novels using the feminist theory. The writer would like to draw attention to the fact that the two novels discussed are not included in the Malay canon. The novels cannot be categorized as high literature because they are popular novels and have cult followers. However, these works can be used to analyse the role of women in current-day Malaysian society, to determine whether the patriarchal, male dominated gender paradigm has changed through the narratives produced by these modern, contemporary female romance novel writers.

THE MALAY WOMAN IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, being Malay means being a Muslim. The word "Malay" and "Islam" are, as it were, synonymous. Thus, the Malay woman is a Muslim woman.² She is controlled by the paradigms set by her society based on cultural norms and Islamic practices. The modern Malay woman goes out into the world and socializes as well as works with males and fellow females.

According to Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Shahizah Ismail Hamdan (2010:71), past studies on Malay women in Malaysia show them to be marginalized, weak and easily manipulated. They discuss the views of several scholars who have written on the Malay woman. The conclusion that can be made from this study is that the Malay woman, no matter how educated or successful she is, adheres to the gender paradigm set for her by her society and religion. A wife drops her professional identity once she reaches home and strives to be a good wife and mother—as dictated by culture and religion. In Malay fiction, most of the time the Malay woman has only two characters; she is either docile, beautiful, and soft spoken, or she is wicked. This shall be discussed later in the paper.

Malaysia has undergone rapid changes socially through the processes of industrialization and urbanization. This has affected the Malay woman

in Malaysia. She is no longer a mere housewife. With the rapidly changing world and technological enhancements, so has the Malay woman grown. She now has the dual role of professional and non-professional working woman contributing to the country's economy and growth, and homemaker. According to Roziah Omar "...an educated, urban, married Malay woman still holds strongly to her role as the dutiful wife and mother despite the fact that she is educated, financially independent and holds important position in the public domain". (2003:117). Such is the paradigm that controls the Malay woman in Malaysia.

Islam is not the only element that exerts influence on the Muslim woman in Malaysia. She is also controlled by *adat* or custom. According to Roziah Omar, "*Adat* existed in Malay society long before Islam was assimilated by the Malays, and is crucial to the construction of maleness". (2003:123). Before Islam came to the Malay Peninsula, a number of Hindu kingdoms were already in existence. Thus, it is not surprising that some traditional Malay customs have similarities with Hindu traditions, such as the chewing of beetle nuts and a number of marriage rituals that have been assimilated into Malay Muslim religious practices.

There are two types of *adat*; peripheral and fundamental.³ Fundamental *adat* is governed by religion such as the *adat* involving the distribution of the estate of a deceased person among his children and next of kin. Peripheral *adat*, however, can be discarded if a person chooses to. Peripheral *adat* involves, among others, wedding customs and traditions—for instance the *bersanding* ceremony during which the bride and groom, dressed in their finery, sit on a dais and are displayed to the wedding guests. Modernization and the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia has influenced and affected these customs.

FEMINIST THEORITICAL PARADIGM

Feminism is about women demanding their full rights as human beings. The movement can be traced back to Aristotle's Greece. There have been three waves of Feminism. Each wave is different and has influenced the way women think today. It has had an impact on women's writings worldwide and the novels under discussion certainly point to this fact.

When we discuss feminism, we cannot avoid discussing gender relations. Dube (1996:1) that has been introduced in the theoretical framework must be referred to. She discusses gender relations with regard to cultures. She argues that they are constructed separately in different cultures. The most

important area of cultural diversity is relationships. They are framework within which gender relations are positioned.

South Asia and Southeast Asia do not differ much in their cultural identity. The way men and women are treated in the cultures of these regions is quite similar. With reference to Malaysia, the Malay customs and traditions are largely inherited from South Asia. Dube discusses this well as presented in the theoretical framework section. It can be concluded from her argument that thus, women do not have a permanent place in their father's house. A husband's duty is to provide for his wife as her father used to, because the Malays are also controlled by the Islamic law.

However, more often than not, the modern Malay woman is financially independent. They do not rely on their men economically. Dube argues that South-East Asian women are more independent than South Asian women and have control over their finances and resources (1996:47). The novels under research too underscore this fact. The female characters are financially independent since they are educated like the male characters, and have careers.

Ghazala (1997:3) argues that Muslim feminists received their education in Europe and America and are influenced by Western intellectual traditions, although they live in different Muslim countries. A Muslim can be defined as someone who loves peace. Ghazala argues that Islam is perfection and it is a spiritual culture. Although it is practised all over the world, sometimes it is criticized by Muslims themselves. Islamic Feminism is one such movement that does so. It criticizes Islam from within.

Ghazala views feminism as a movement within a movement to recover the dignity, freedom and equality, not only among human beings but also among the creatures that reside in this world. She concedes that she herself has been influenced by the American way of thinking. She believes that there is no conflict between feminism and Islam. However, there is a range of thought with regards to Islam and the structuring of feminism (1997:4).

She uses the term "feminist" to refer to a person who considers the welfare of a woman her or his main concern. The feminist can be a woman or a man. In this writing, she adopts the traditional approach, one that is accepted by the majority, in categorizing each human being as a man or a woman. However, she believes that this approach has adverse consequences that have an important meaning for the purpose of liberating the human towards where feminism works (Ghazala, 1997:4-5).

The assumptions of feminists (the educated Muslims that have had Western education, writers and society) can be categorized by referring to authoritative texts, which are the al-Qur'an and hadith, and the law that descends from these two authoritative sources (Ghazala, 1997:5). A majority of Muslim scholars are doubtful of the historical-critical approach in analysing the al-Qur'an and hadith (Ghazala, 1997:5).

Fazlur Rahman, in his dissertation "Islamic Methodology in History" (*Metodologi Islam dalam Sejarah*), uses the historical-critical to put forward the argument that many hadiths in the group of canonical hadiths are false. However, this controversial writing is accepted by Muslim scholars (Ghazala, 1997:5).

According to Fazlur, the al-Qur'an is Allah's own words, and he only exercises the historical-critical on the hadith (Ghazala, 1997:5). He limits the scope of his study only to the many feminist approaches towards the al-Qur'an, because the al-Qur'an has an authority that is greater than that of the hadith (Ghazala, 1997:5).

MALAY WOMEN NOVELIST

Sharifah Abu Salem is a household name in Malaysia. Her novels have been turned into television serial dramas which are watched by many millions every night when they are shown. *Tak Seindah Mimpi* (2000), the novel that will be discussed in this paper, is one of the novels that has been adapted for television. She has been writing since she was 14 years old. She has worked on a hundred television and radio drama scripts and written 10 novels to date. It is quite an achievement for such a young person, who was born on the 27 May 1961. She received guidance from the late Tan Sri Melan Abdullah, a very famous Malaysian writer.

The second novelist who will be discussed in this paper is Aisya Sofea or her real name, Hanizura Jamaludin. She is a very talented young novelist. She was born in Kelang, Selangor and her name appeared on the Malaysian literary scene with the publication of her first novel *Jauh* (1997), which was well received. She became famous after the success of her second novel *Jendela Hati* (2000). The fact that the novel was printed 15 times between 2000 and 2009 is indeed proof of her popularity. Her writing style which is characterized by a certain calmness manages to attract her readers. She portrays the feelings of love and restlessness well through the characters she creates in her novels. Her third novel *Kau Untukku* (2003) is an interesting story that accentuates the strength that one has to have while

being in love. This novel too brought fame and fortune to her and turned her into a household name in Malaysia. To date Aisya Sofea has produced twelve novels with the Malaysian publishing house Alaf 21. Her fans too have also grown in numbers. This paper will concentrate on one of her novels, *Adam dan Hawa* (2010) which has been adapted to a television series by the same title.

THE MALAY WOMAN IN POPULAR FICTION

This section will discuss the two novels under research. It will postulate how the Malay woman is presented in the two chosen novels *Tak Seindah Mimpi* (2000) and *Adam dan Hawa* (2010). From the reading we will come to the conclusion whether there is a need for a new paradigm in the presentation of the Malay woman in fiction. This is important because fiction extracts from life. The two writers being discussed in this paper are popular cult novelists who have ardent fans. Their fans have created web pages that discuss their lives and their novels. Readers being influenced by the writings that they read, thus emulating the paradigm that has been set in the fiction about women. It is important for us to look at the paradigm that is set in the fiction and question it as well as suggests new paradigms if the given paradigm is not suitable for modern day women that live in a progressive society.

Tak Seindah Mimpi

The first novel to be discussed is Sharifah Abu Salem's *Tak Seindah Mimpi* (2000). The theme of the novel centres around the question of sacrifice. Norjinah the main character, though she is still in her teens sacrifices many things for the happiness of her family. She forgoes her ambition to study at a university because her family cannot afford to support her since they are poor. She then goes and works with a man named Razif, who has two children, and a wife that has left him for another man. She becomes a maid in his house.

Norjinah is a young inexperienced girl waiting for her Malaysian Higher School Certificate results, works as a maid in Razif's house. She is the stepdaughter of Pak Badar. Her mother, Mak Nab, had married Pak Badar after the death of her husband. She has a half-sister named Norseha and three half-brothers.

She passes her examination with excellent results and is offered to further her studies in the field of communications at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

However, due to financial problems, she is unable to continue with her studies. Norjinhah runs away from home because her stepfather, Pak Badar, plans to marry off, against her will, to the village headman's son. Thus, she returns to Razif's house.

Norjinhah's character and her relationship with her family and Razif, can be discussed using Dube's theory of feminism. Her argument on how gender relations are constructed by different cultural groups and that they influence kinship systems have to be taken into consideration (1996:1). In her family, Norjinhah is a kind of an outsider, because although she has a mother she also has a stepfather. Her stepfather is a postmodern character. Normally, wicked stepmothers are featured in fiction, in this novel, however, the character of the wicked stepfather is introduced and given prominence to.

It has been stated earlier that South Asia and Southeast Asia are culturally quite similar. Men and women are treated the same. Both cultures give prominence to *adat*/culture. In Malaysia, the Malay *adat* is largely inherited from the peoples of South Asia. *Tak Seindah Mimpi* can be read using the above theory. Norjinhah is a female. According to the Malay *adat*, as a female, she is to be a homemaker when she grows up but while she is a child, she has to be under the protection of her parents. However, even before Norjinhah turns 21, she is forced to leave home because her stepfather hates her and refuses to provide for her and her mother. Thus, she is also forced to leave home to become the breadwinner of her family. According to Dube's theory, women do not have a permanent place in their father's house. Although a man is duty-bound to provide for his wife as her father used to because the Malays are guided by Islamic law, Norjinhah's stepfather does not do so. Her mother, her brother and sister as well as she herself, are forced to fend for themselves.

The above discussion finds support in the surah from the al-Qu'ran shown below. Allah decrees that:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards east or west; but it is righteousness- to believe in Allah and the last day, and the angels, and the book, and the messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the Allah fearing.

(*Surah al-Baqarah* 2: 177).

Norjinhah is an orphan who needs to be cared for. Allah decrees that it is the duty of humankind to take care of orphans, relatives and people in need. Norjinhah's stepfather does not provide for his family. He is a burden to Norjinhah's mother and Norjinhah has to leave home in order to support her family.

There is another important female character in the novel, Salmi, Razif's estranged wife. She is selfish and only thinks of her own needs. She does not appreciate Razif's love and leaves him to be with another man. She returns to Razif after she meets with an accident and is paralyzed. Razif takes Salmi into his household again even though she had betrayed him, because he pities her. Salmi is a typical female antagonist that can be found in many romance fictions around the world.

The al-Qur'an is very strict about adultery and fornication. It is decreed by Allah:

Let no man guilty of adultery or fornication marry and but a woman similarly guilty, or an unbeliever: nor let any but such a man or an unbeliever marry such a woman: to the believers such a thing is forbidden.

(*Surah an-Nuur* 24:3).

Salmi is guilty of adultery. The punishment for this sin is very harsh under Islamic law. However, Salmi is punished in another way. She becomes paralyzed. Although Salmi hurts Razif and leaves him for another man, he accepts her back into his life and takes care of her. However, Salmi is a very manipulative character and tries to destroy Norjinhah because the children whom she abandoned to be with another man, love Norjinhah more than they do her.

Norjinhah's biggest sacrifice is brought about by Salmi's manipulation. At the latter's insistence, Razif marries Norjinhah. She sacrifices her youth to marry Razif who is much older than her because of Salmi. Norjinhah marries Razif out of her love for his daughters Amira and Balqis. Norjinhah, unlike other teenagers, becomes a mother and a wife at a young age. However, though Salmi consents to the marriage, she treats Norjinhah with disdain. She is unable to control her jealousy, leading her to drive Norjinhah away from the house.

Apart from the theme of sacrifice there are a few issues that are highlighted in the novel. Some are related to the different kinds of love, for instance, Norjinhah's love for Amira and Balqis. In the beginning, Norjinhah is not

comfortable with Razif's children but later she learns to love them. Even before Norjinah is married to Razif, his children already call her "mama". On one occasion, Norjinah leaves Razif's employ but then decides to return due to her love for Amira and Balqis.

There are a few gender issues that are presented in this novel. One of them is that man is unable to assume the woman's responsibility of taking care of the family and home. This is evident when Razif hires Norjinah as his maid after his wife leaves him. Razif is portrayed as inept in handling his children. When Norjinah leaves his employ for a short while, Razif gets his mother to take care of his children. Razif is depicted as a very brilliant businessman and Norjinah, a very good mother substitute. The division of duties between man and woman as presented in this piece of fiction further underscores the stereotype that women are good at being housewives and men at being breadwinners.

The stereotype discussed above is best read using Roziyah's statement which was cited earlier that in Malaysia, "... an educated, urban, married Malay woman still holds strongly to her role as the dutiful wife and mother despite the fact that she is educated, financially independent and holds important position in the public domain" (Roziyah, 2003:117). Norjinah may not be an urban, educated woman, but a role has been accorded to her. The role is that of a docile kampung girl who dreams of becoming an educated woman, but ends up being a homemaker instead. Norjinah does not seem to fit the picture of the modern Malay woman described by Roziyah above. The character created is an ideal of the modern Malay woman who yearns for the good old days when the roles of the man and the woman were clearly defined, the man the breadwinner and the woman the homemaker.

The next gender issue presented is the contention that a woman is emotionally unstable. This is demonstrated through the character of Salmi who becomes hysterical after Razif marries Norjinah. As time goes by, Norjinah adapts to being a wife and the "mother" of Razif's children, which only heightens Salmi's jealousy. In a fit of rage, she shouts at Norjinah and becomes abusive. She demands that Norjinah lives in another house, away from her and the children, though the children do not want to part with the girl. Salmi's internal conflict shows her to be emotionally unstable. This is clear when in her rage, she throws a vase at Norjinah. Razif, on the other hand, is pictured as a kind and loving husband whom Salmi, regardless, left for another man. He takes Salmi back into his life, cares for her and follows her every wish, to the extent that he is willing to

marry Norjinhah at his wife's insistence. The difference between Razif and Salmi reinforces the hypothesis that men are more stable emotionally than women.

However, the wicked stepmother stereotype is not present in the novel. This is because the writer consciously avoids pigeonholing the stepmother as someone who does wicked things to her stepdaughters, as is usually done in famous fairy tales like Snow White and Cinderella, to name a few. Norjinhah loves her stepdaughters and treats them as if they were her own.

The writer reverses the situation in this novel. The wickedness is transferred to a male character; Pak Badar, Norjinhah's stepfather. He always complains about the fact that he has to support Norjinhah though she is not his own daughter. He does not allow her to further her studies and decides on his own to marry her off to the village headman's son. A role reversal is present here in the character of the wicked stepfather.

Another gender question that is foregrounded in this novel is the true responsibilities of a woman. Through Norjinhah's character, the writer portrays the woman's dual role as a mother and wife. Even before she becomes Razif's wife, she is depicted as a docile and loving woman who carries out her duties as a maid and mother substitute successfully. Norjinhah is further stereotyped when she accepts Razif's offer of marriage without thinking about her ambition to further her studies. Via Norjinhah, the writer suggests that it is the dream of every woman to become a wife and a mother. A female character who goes against this conventional image is killed off in the end, as Salmi, Razif's estranged wife is. From this we can conclude that the author holds the opinion that if a woman is unable to become a good wife and a mother, she does not have a place within her family and society.

Adam dan Hawa

The second novel that will be discussed is Aisya Sofea's *Adam dan Hawa*. Its theme centres on the role fate plays in controlling the lives of individuals. Fate is portrayed as a force that holds sway over the life of the main character Ain Hawani. Although she tries her best to fight it, in the end she is forced to relent. She is "caught in a compromising position", known as *khalwat* in Malay, with Adam Mukhriz. In Islam, a man and a woman cannot be alone together in a secluded place without a third adult present unless they are married or have blood ties. Thus, Ain and Adam are forced to marry each other since they are caught being alone together without any third party

present in Adam's house, where Ain goes to send food to Kak Zah who is her boss and Adam's sister.

Although Ain tries to forget the incident by forcing Adam out of her life, fate still controls her. She is separated from Adam for eight years by her own choice and stubbornness. They finally meet each other by chance in Mecca. She tries to fend Adam off but she is unable to do so. Adam has changed for the better through the years and has shed his playboy image. After returning to Malaysia Ain still does not want to accept the fact the Adam is her husband though he has tried to fulfil his duties as her husband by providing financial giving money to her mother every month since they were first married. In the end, Ain accepts her fate and admits Adam into her life. She bows to fate and tries to start a new life with Adam.

There are a few issues that the author points up in the novel *Adam dan Hawa*, one of which is life's many struggles. Ain is born into a poor family and this demands that she be very strong. After she finishes school, Ain decides to seek temporary employment at a kindergarten to earn money in order to further her studies at tertiary level. Though her pay is small, she is grateful for the income that she receives.

After her marriage to Adam, Ain gets an offer to study in Australia. Although her mother begs her not to go she is adamant about leaving for further studies and walking out on Adam. Upon graduating from a university in Australia, she becomes a lecturer at Universiti Teknologi Mara. Although she is successful in her professional life her private life is in shambles. This is a woman who discards and challenges the *adat* that has for centuries constrained the Malay woman, bind her to a marriage contract, and compel her to adhere to Islamic values as well as Malay customs.

As has been discussed earlier on, Islam is not the only element that controls the Muslim woman in Malaysia, *adat* does too (Roziyah, 2003:123). Ain Hawani discards both peripheral and fundamental *adat*. The Malay woman, however, is governed by both because Islam states that it is a woman's duty to be by her husband's side. The author through Ain Hawani, challenges this fundamental *adat*.

Love is also spotlighted by the writer in this novel, because love is a universal subject. It is presented through a myriad of relationships. First of all, love that seals the bond between husband and wife is featured. This is reflected in Adam's love for Ain. He waits for her for eight years and does not neglect his duty as a husband by continuing to provide for Ain though the money is sent to Ain's mother. Finally, Ain forgives Adam and takes him back into her life. The moral of the story is that true love will prevail.

The second type of love involves familial relationship. Ain's mother-in-law loves her although she only meets her after Adam and Ain are married. She does not in any way show resentment or anger towards Ain. Her mother-in-law always tries to persuade her to return to Adam, and live with him as his wife though they were married under unusual circumstances.

The third type of love depicted in the novel is love between friends. Ain has a close relationship with Johan and Azie; it is as if they are her family. Azie is always there for Ain. She relies on her in times of need. Even in Mecca, where they go to perform their *umrah*, Azie is always there for her.

Apart from the people who love her, Ain also has enemies. Ain has to face the wrath of Adam's girlfriend. It is her doing that Adam and Ain are caught alone together in his mother's house and charged with committing *khalwat*. Dee is portrayed as a typically evil woman, a character commonly found in literary works no matter where they originate from. As has been stated earlier, the women in Malay fiction are either good or evil. Dee is a doubtlessly evil character. Even after Adam and Ain are married, she still tries to seduce Adam and take him away from Ain.

Gender issues are also present in *Adam dan Hawa* as the writer clearly assigns typical qualities to male and female characters. This can be seen in the division of labour between the male and female characters at the kindergarten. Although Adam only drops in occasionally to help his sister with the odd chores at the kindergarten, the division of labour between him and the female characters is evident through the types of tasks that he and they carry out. The women are given the duty of caring for the babies and children, and Adam the carpentering. For example, he helps his sister, Kak Zah, to build the fence around the kindergarten. Adam is also portrayed as a typical male character as he does not know how to make his own drink and relies on Ain to do so. The assigning of typical male and female roles consonant with the gender paradigm is evident in the text, as seen in the excerpt below:

Aku bangun dan berjalan menuju ke tingkap sambil membawa seorang bayi dalam dukungku. Dari jauh, aku lihat Am sedang bertukang membina pagar kecil untuk pendidikan sains di bahagian belakang bangunan. Lagaknya selamba dah bersahaja. Daya tarikannya sungguh memikat walaupun dalam keadaan dia berpeluh dan berpakaian serba ringkas dan agak selekeh.

(Aisya Sofea, 2010:32)

I rise and walk to the window, carrying a baby in my arms. In the distance, I see Am busy erecting a small fence at the back of the building for our science class. He appears relaxed. He has this magnetic attractiveness despite being all sweaty and simply dressed and rather dishevelled.

Adam's reliance on Ain to make him a drink is evident in the following excerpt:

Dia meletakkan alat pembuka tin di atas meja dan berganjak ke tepi memberiku ruang untuk membantunya... Dan tidak sampai seminit aku sudah membukanya.

(Aisya Sofea, 2010:54)

He put the can opener on the table and stepped aside to allow me to help him...And in a trice, I manage to open it. (My translation)

It is mentioned in the novel that Adam does not know how to use a can opener. From the above excerpts, it can be deduced that the author is advancing the idea that women need men to do the heavy work and that men are not suited to work in the kitchen and perform tasks that are traditionally associated with women. The duties of men and women have been clearly defined. Gender paradigm is definitely in play here. Having closely examined the work vis-à-vis gender roles, it is clear that the writer has set typical criteria for both male and female characters. Men are more capable and handling hard labour than women, and women are destined to be housewives.

The text can be read using the feminist view point. Any discussion of feminism will inevitably involve the discussion of gender relations. It can be deduced from Dube's arguments in the theoretical framework that the way a man and a woman behaves, and are treated in their society is very much influenced by *adat*. The text portrays Ain and Adam in a very patriarchal setting, a setting controlled by men, though the author is female. This may be due to the fact that the writer lives in a society that is dominated by patriarchal law. Thus, Adam is portrayed to be good at mending fences and Ain at making tea and opening cans.

Another stereotypical character of the woman portrayed by Aisya Sofea is that of the weak-willed woman who is easily manipulated by men who ply them with gifts. For example, Ain in the beginning does not like Adam but

her emotions take a new turn when he presents her with roses and a teddy bear (Aisya Sofea, 2010:53-46). Although Ain hates Adam after they are married, she still keeps the teddy bear.

The next gender question that is addressed in the novel is the way women worship good-looking men. Adam is portrayed as a very good-looking man who has a brilliant career. He is also the son of a very rich woman. He is depicted as a playboy before his marriage to Ain. His charisma, good looks and wealth never fail to draw women to him. Dee, his ex-girlfriend, still wants to be his wife although both of them are married to someone else (Aisya Sofea, 2010:31). Dee's attitude shows that women want to marry the perfect men. This fact is well demonstrated in the excerpt below:

"I want my Am back, Ain. I love him so much. *Tak ada lelaki lain selepas dia. I merana bila dia tinggalkan I. I tak percaya apa yang dia lakukan pada I.*"

(Aisya Sofea, 2010:426)

I want Am back Ain. I love him so much. There is no other man for me. I suffered when he left me. I couldn't believe what he did to me. (My translation)

Women are portrayed as weak where rich handsome men are concerned. This gives the impression that women are obsessed with the way men look and with their financial status, more than anything else. Women in the text are thus portrayed as shallow.

Dee's character is not in keeping with Ghazala's concept of the Muslim feminist. She states that Islamic feminism is a movement within feminism which has the objective of recovering the dignity, freedom, equality of human beings as well as other creatures (1997:3). Dee does not respect tenets such as those outlined by Ghazala. She does not care that Adam is already married. The way she treated Ain and arranged for the authorities to catch them in a compromising situation so that Adam would be embarrassed and forced to marry Ain, goes to show that Dee is neither influenced by Western feminism nor Muslim feminism. She has been portrayed as the typical other woman who is wicked. *Adam dan Hawa* is a novel that does not really advocate change for the male-female relationship in Malaysia. It is tied down to archaic patriarchal ideals and the formula of traditional romantic fiction. There is nothing novel in this fiction for the modern feminist reader.

Another gender question that is underlined in this novel is the authoritarian voice of the male. After Ain and Adam are caught committing *khalwat*, her

voice is drowned by the voices of the men around her. She tries her best to tell them that she is innocent and has done nothing wrong with Adam (as shown in the excerpt below), but her pleas of innocence fell on deaf ears,

“Encik, saya cikgu tadika di sini. Saya tak bohong,” rayuku....Mereka mentertawakan aku. Keikhlasan dan kebenaranku dipersendakan. Aku rasa amat terhina waktu itu. Aku tahu dosa dan pahala.

(Aisya Sofea, 2010:99)

“Sir, I am a kindergarten teacher. I am not lying,” I begged....They laughed at me. They sneered at my sincerity and innocence. I felt so disgraced then. I know what is bad and what is good (sin and reward) (My translation)

Her words are treated with contempt. Her pleas not heard. Her uncle (Pak Lang) who wants her to marry Adam that very night only demonstrate the power that men have over women. Her Pak Lang does not believe her and accuses her of sullyng their family name. This is evident in the excerpt below:

Aku membantah cadangan Pak Lang tetapi Pak Lang tetap berkeras mahukan kami dinikah ketika itu juga. Dia tidak mahu nama keluarganya terus dicemar dan Am bebas tanpa tanggungjawab terhadap perbuatannya.

(Aisya Sofea, 2010:103)

I protested against Pak Lang’s suggestion but Pak Lang insisted that we be married there and then. He did not want his family name to be tarnished and Am freed from taking responsibility for his actions. (My translation)

The voice of truth presented by a woman is ignored as men dominate the situation and see the truth only from their own viewpoint. Male dominance is at once apparent. The paradigm is that women are weak and men strong. In any given situation, the woman’s voice is silenced by that of the men’s.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE LITERATURE?

What can we learn from the literature? These novels are representative of the myriad of popular novels on the Malaysian literary scene. They are popular romance novels with a devoted following made up, especially of female fans. There is not much to be learnt from these novels. They portray

stagnant stereotypes of the gender paradigm. Females are weak while males are strong. The roles of male and female are defined according to the classic gender paradigm.

The roles of males and females delineated in the novels do not match up to the progressive society that Malaysia represents. Malaysia is a progressive Muslim country but the female characters in the novels are still pigeonholed as weak and submissive. Women tend to accept their fate, as Norjinnah does in *Tak Seindah Mimpi* by sacrificing her ambition, marrying Razif, and becoming his second wife. In *Adam dan Hawa*, although Ain tries to build a life for herself and take control of it after her marriage fails and she is put in a dilemma by the people around her, she is not pictured as strong enough to resist the fate that religion and society have chosen for her. However, she takes Adam back into her life eventually.

The women in the fictions, though depicted as strong when they are playing the roles of mothers and daughters, become tractable and weak when their men are around them. These are stereotypes that are present in most popular romance fictions written by women.

Is there a need for new paradigms for women? Yes there is. In a modern country like Malaysias, women should not be meek and ever willing to accept whatever comes their way. Women who write popular romance fiction, therefore, should postulate a different paradigm, one that reflects the women of present-day Malaysia, strong, intelligent, hardworking, and inclined to challenge and debunk the traditional gender paradigm set for them. Malaysian women today are no longer submissive and complaisant. They have successfully created a niche for themselves in a world dominated by men.

CONCLUSION

This paper strives to look critically at the gender paradigm present in popular Malay novels. As has been stated in the introduction, paradigms according to science and epistemology, describe distinct concepts of thought patterns. The belief structure of the gender paradigm that is present in the novels is dominantly patriarchal. The two novels analysed seem to indicate that the Malaysian gender paradigm is very much determined by religion and culture. Although the paradigm has shifted through time, the shift is not manifest in the two novels analysed in this essay. We can safely conclude that the Malay female characters portrayed in the fictions are controlled by culture and Islam although they try to break free from the manacles of customs and traditions.

These factors rule supreme in the characters' lives and in their interactions with fellow women, men and society. The classical paradigm which states that women are weak, not as smart as men, cannot lead, and are destined to be homemakers even if they are educated, is not challenged by the female characters in the works. The Malay old saying that states no matter how educated a woman is her place is still in the kitchen, runs through the fictions discussed. Research and studies have proven that this paradigm has yet to be challenged by Malaysian female romance novel writers.

NOTES

1. This paper has been written with the Short Term Grant awarded by Universiti Sains Malaysia to the researcher
2. According to Roziah Omar (2003:121), "Being Malay is identified as being Muslim. The two are not separated".
3. Refer to Roziah Omar (2003:123).

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