

## Journeys of Change: *Merantau* and Diffusionism in Khatijah Sidek's *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesateria Bangsa* (2001)

RABIATUL ADAWIYAH YUSOFF \*  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia  
[rubyjusoh91@gmail.com](mailto:rubyjusoh91@gmail.com)

RAIHANAH M. M.  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

SHAMSUL A. B.  
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

*Merantau*, a migratory practice deeply embedded in Minangkabau culture, has traditionally been associated with men leaving their homeland to pursue education or economic opportunities, in line with the saying *alam takambang menjadi guru* (the unfolding earth becomes the teacher). Drawing on Khatijah Sidek's *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesateria Bangsa*, this article examines how a Khatijah, as a woman, reconfigures *merantau* in the colonial and postcolonial contexts of Malaya and Sumatra. While studies on *merantau* have largely centred on male experiences, limited attention has been given to women's reinterpretations of the tradition in life writings. While initially encouraged by her parents, Khatijah's journey becomes an act of self-determination that challenges the gendered boundaries of the tradition. Using Chabot and Duyvendak (2002) framework of transnational diffusionism and a qualitative textual analysis of the memoir, the article analyses how Khatijah adapts and transmits ideas of independence and political engagement across borders. It considers how her experiences of colonisation and patriarchy inform her reimagining of *merantau* as a tool for women's empowerment. Importantly, the article highlights Khatijah's experience as an "incomplete *merantau*," one that remains unsettled and without return, reflecting the unresolved nature of her journey. By amplifying the voices of Minangkabau women, Khatijah's memoir disrupts the male-centred narrative of *merantau*, reframing it as a practice that fosters agency, self-actualisation, and resistance to societal norms.

*Keywords:* transnational diffusionism; migration; Minangkabau; memoirs; women's narrative

### INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been central in Southeast Asian histories, yet its meanings and practices vary across cultural contexts. In the Malay world, migration was historically shaped less by fixed territorial borders than by allegiance to rulers; subjects followed their raja wherever he resided, with loyalty defining belonging (Milner, 2018). Among the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, this migration takes on a distinctive form through *merantau*, a customary practice of leaving one's homeland to acquire knowledge, experience, or wealth (Heider, 2011; Kato, 1989). Anchored in the proverb *alam takambang menjadi guru* ("the unfolding earth becomes the teacher"), *merantau* encourages individuals to expand their horizons through travel and encounter. While traditionally framed as a male rite of passage, reinforced by matrilineal inheritance patterns that encourage sons

to seek livelihoods elsewhere, the practice has also evolved in response to colonial, postcolonial, and gendered transformations (Hadler, 2009).

Within this shifting historical landscape, women's participation in *merantau* remains underexplored. Although extensive scholarship examines male *merantau* and its sociocultural significance, studies that foreground women's reinterpretations of *merantau*, particularly in life-writings, remain limited. Some research has examined how Minangkabau women navigate migration and modernity, yet their voices are often marginalised in accounts of political activism and transnational exchange. This article addresses that gap through a reading of *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesateria Bangsa*, the life narrative of an influential Minangkabau political leader whose journeys across Malaya and Sumatra defied both colonial constraints and patriarchal expectations.

Drawing on the framework of transnational diffusionism (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002), this study situates Khatijah's *merantau* within wider processes of idea exchange and political mobilisation across borders. It examines how her memoir reframes *merantau* as a vehicle for women's self-determination, political engagement, and colonial resistance. This study argues that Khatijah's experiences illuminate the gendered transformation of a historically male-dominated tradition, showing how women's migration can challenge social norms while reshaping the meanings of cultural practices.

## NARRATIVES OF MALAYSIAN WOMEN

Feminist scholarship on life-writing has long challenged androcentric notions of self, which privilege a "rational, sovereign subject" historically constructed as Western, male, and white (Whitlock, 2015, p. 3). Women's autobiographical narratives resist this framing by transforming women from objects, which are often othered, to active subjects of their histories (Gamberi, 2021; Patil, 2021). Life-writing thus operates not merely as self-expression, but as a culturally embedded practice shaped by the social worlds women inhabit. As Gamberi (2021, p. 21) notes, the "narratability" of one's life is always mediated through societal and cultural expectations, producing selfhoods that disrupt and reconfigure dominant historical narratives. Furthermore, memoirs are parts of an effort to bring "women into texts" to "disrupt the male-inscribed history from which they were either totally absent or had a very insignificant presence" (Zeiny, 2019, p. 121). Recent scholarship highlights how women occupy a space where their voices are neither fully included nor entirely excluded, often remaining unheard or misrepresented within mainstream narratives (Badyal & Kumar, 2024).

In Malaysia, women's life narratives reveal both the opportunities and constraints they have navigated across different colonial and postcolonial terrains (Hashim, 2007). Malay women's public roles have often been articulated through their relational ties as wives, mothers, or political auxiliaries rather than as independent actors (Khuo, 2020). Such framing not only limits their historical visibility but also underscores the costs borne by those associated with "female radical activism," which is often marginalised in nationalist histories that prioritise the charismatic male leaders (Aljunied, 2013, p. 153). Memoirs, then, become crucial spaces for reclaiming women's agency, especially in periods marked by the dual pressures of colonial rule and patriarchal societies.

Scholarship on *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesateria Bangsa* reflects this reclamatory impulse. Hashim (2007) situates Khatijah's and Shamsiah Fakeh's life-writings within a complex negotiation of tradition, honour, and women's embodied presence in the nation. Aziz (2011) reads Khatijah through the lens of subalternity, tracing her challenge to male dominance in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the political silencing that followed her expulsion. Syed Sheikh (2022) argues that Khatijah Sidek's life story shows how patriarchal systems sustain male dominance in political leadership. Hasan (2020), in comparing memoirs by Khatijah, Aishah Ghani, and Shamsiah Fakeh, highlights the gendered dimensions of political participation in colonial Malaya. Such memoirs, along with biographies like that of Siti Norkiah Mahmud of the Malayan Communist Party, show how leaving home was often a precarious journey undertaken in the pursuit of independence, both personally and within the colonial context. Together, these studies demonstrate the centrality of women's autobiographical narratives to understanding the gendered politics of nationalism, while also revealing the silences and exclusions within dominant narratives.

Yet, no existing study has examined how Khatijah's narrative intersects with the Minangkabau practice of *merantau*, which is a culturally specific form of migration that shapes identity. This paper addresses this gap by exploring how Khatijah's movements across Malaya and Sumatra mediate her selfhood, facilitate the transmission of cultural values, and inform her political engagement in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. While *merantau* has been extensively studied as a male-centred cultural practice, little attention has been given to how women reinterpret its meanings through their lived experiences and self-representations. This study, therefore, examines how Khatijah Sidek's *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesateria Bangsa* (2001) reimagines *merantau* from a woman's perspective, revealing how mobility becomes a means of self-definition, intellectual growth, and participation in public life.

#### THE MOVEMENT OF IDEAS: A METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this paper appropriates the construct of transnational diffusion and *merantau* to discuss Khatijah Sidek's journey as captured in her memoir. Together, these frameworks enable a reading that connects the movement of people with the movement of ideas – situating Khatijah's life story within both local Minangkabau traditions and broader transnational exchanges. Diffusionism explains how ideas, values, and cultures travel and adapt across different regions (Matsuzawa, 2007). Cultural evolution occurs through interactions among individuals and communities, which shape and reproduce culture in their everyday lives (Kashima, 2008). This process requires both temporal and spatial interaction, making it essential to focus on how ideas are transmitted and received during their diffusion.

The transnational diffusionism framework formulated by Chabot and Duyvendak (2002) is apt for studying Khatijah's *merantau* journey, as it allows for the examination of how ideas spread and change across borders. This framework includes the following key elements:

- i. Items that spread can exhibit ambiguity and dynamism during transmission, and what is transferred between communities should be seen as a continuing effort instead of a finished result.
- ii. Recipients comprehend, receive and utilise a new idea in a relational or nonrelational mode of diffusion. Instead of focusing on established influencers, “which generally introduce or perpetuate stereotypical perceptions of diffusion items”, the highlight should be on ‘critical communities’, which means groups of marginalised individuals who recognise emerging social issues, create innovative ways of understanding and experiencing them, and devise fresh “political and cultural” remedies.
- iii. The evolution of diffusion can be non-linear, with the potential to “skip stages (forward as well as backward)”, and often relies on fluid and dynamic mechanisms.
- iv. More focus should also be given on the spread across diverse and interconnected areas, such as between “the non-West and the West”, “the periphery and the core, between the ‘non-democratic outskirts’ and the ‘democratic heartland’ instead of within hierarchical and orderly social systems” (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002, p. 706).

The application of transnational diffusionism is useful as it does not abide by the hierarchical approach of classic diffusionism, which has always privileged the West by supposing that the tumultuous state of the world today primarily stems from developments in “Europe, the United States, and other Western democracies” (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002, p. 698). In studying social movements, Chabot and Duyvendak (2002) came up with an approach that counters the assumption that new and creative ways of protesting usually start in Western countries and then spread to other parts of the world, starting in the central areas and later reaching the outer regions after becoming more widely adopted. This framework’s attention to non-linear movement and exchange aligns closely with *merantau*, a Minangkabau cultural practice that also values travel, adaptation, and learning across spaces. Therefore, transnational diffusionism opens the possibility of ideas to travel from what is perceived to be peripheries in the Eurocentric sense, challenging what even the periphery itself is.

Similarly, *merantau* privileges movement as a form of learning and self-formation, not as a linear journey from centre to margin but as an ongoing process of becoming. The notion of movement is also not foreign in Southeast Asia. In Minangkabau culture, the concept of migration and travel, or *merantau*, holds a central role and “was a rite of passage” (Lindquist, 2009, p. 29). The phases of a Minangkabau individual consist of being born, growing up, experiencing childhood and adolescence in the village, then going on a journey and becoming someone who, in turn, benefits their nation, country, and religion (Sjarifoedin, 2020). Purposefulness is indispensable in the practice of *merantau*, for there are expectations for individuals to give back to their communities, as illustrated in the quatrain:

*Keretau Medang di hulu,  
Berbunga berbuah belum,  
Merantaulah bujang dahulu,  
Di kampung berguna belum*  
(The Medang train upriver,  
Blooms bear no fruit yet,  
Wander, young man, first,  
In the village, are you useful yet?)

(Nurhalim, 1995)

The quatrain advises young men to travel since they are young for various purposes – job opportunities, knowledge and experience – as village life can be limiting (Sjarifoedin, 2020). The practise of *merantau* enables Minangkabau individuals to travel, bringing with them their values, culture and experiences, to be applied wherever they find themselves settling in. Hard work is a requirement, and challenges are expected (Sjarifoedin, 2020). To transform into a man, a boy must embark on the journey of *merantau* as it equates a man’s worth with his pursuit of fortune, knowledge, and experience, reflecting the culture’s deep emphasis on gaining wisdom. An individual is encouraged to be a *cadiak pandai*, a term which translates to being wise and intellectual (Heider, 2011). Both attributes are mentioned in the saying:

*Pilih-pilih kawan bakanti*  
*Aso cadiak, kaduo panda*  
*Katigo urang mentahu*  
(Choose friends wisely:  
First, the intelligent, second, the skilled,  
Third, those who are knowledgeable)

(Heider, 2011, pp. 64–65)

The saying compels one to surround oneself with people with skills and knowledge. When connected to another Minangkabau proverb, “*alam takambang jadi guru*,” which translates to “unfolding nature becomes the teacher,” the expectation of an individual becomes clear (Heider, 2011, p. 48). *Alam* is a prevalent concept in Minangkabau culture, and the saying can be translated as “the Minangkabau study and learn from the revelations of the natural environment” (Heider, 2011, p. 48). The world (*alam*) is forever expanding (*takambang*), and this compels the Minangkabau people to widen their horizon. This is in line with the people attributing “their knowledge to nature” and deeming it as the source of “experience” (Heider, 2011, p. 49).

This study uses a qualitative, thematic analysis of Khatijah Sidek’s memoir to trace how her experiences of *merantau* intersect with the movement of ideas, values, and cultural practices, applying transnational diffusionism to explore how these movements shape the course of her life. Themes were identified using a deductive-inductive approach, drawing on transnational diffusionism and *merantau* as conceptual lenses while remaining open to emergent patterns from the text. Passages from the memoir were selected and grouped according to key stages of Khatijah’s life: her early life, where *merantau* was encouraged by her parents; her political awakening; her move to Malaya, where she transmitted values and ideas; and her later disrupted *merantau*. In doing so, the study links a theory of idea exchange with the Minangkabau value of purposeful migration, illustrating how Khatijah’s movements enable both personal transformation and the circulation of values between Malaya and Sumatra. Positioning the author within her community context would enrich the insights gleaned from the study, enabling a clearer emphasis on her lived experience and thereby advancing the depth of analysis. The study situates itself within wider debates on mobility and identity in Southeast Asian life writing, contributing to ongoing discussions on how women’s journeys reshape understandings of migration, culture, and agency.

AWAY FROM HER HOMELAND: MERANTAU IN MEMOIRS OF KHATIJAH SIDEK:  
*PUTERI KESATERIA BANGSA*

Throughout her life, Khatijah Sidek moved between different places, from Sumatra to Malaya, embodying the Minangkabau tradition of *merantau*. Her cultural identity as a Minangkabau woman remained central to her self-perception, a connection she actively affirmed in her writing. This is reflected in a Minangkabau saying:

*Bundo kanduang,  
Limpapeh rumah nan gadang,  
Sumarak dalam nagari,  
Hiyasan dalam kampung,  
Umbun puro pagangan kunci  
(Bundo Kanduang,  
Providing joy at home,  
Nurturing within the community,  
The foundation of every household,  
The key to every gate*

(Nurwani, 2017)

This quatrain encapsulates the ideal of womanhood in Minangkabau culture, embodied in the figure of *Bundo Kanduang*, the matriarch of the communal traditional house (*rumah gadang*). Just as the matriarch anchors the household, women in Minangkabau society hold a central position in both family and community life.

In her memoir, Khatijah notes that her parents “are from Minangkabau in Sumatra” and that, as a matrilineal society, “all the property goes to the wife in the family, always to the woman” (Sidek, 2001, p. 31). For her, Sumatra was more than a birthplace – it was the cultural root that shaped her sense of identity and belonging. She also highlights how in Minangkabau customs, “young men go to their wives' house to live, but the girls do not go to their husbands' houses” (Sidek, 2001, p. 31). Her memoir documents how these traditions endured into the early twentieth century, even under colonial rule. The preference for daughters and the inheritance patterns tied to them reveal the resilience of matrilineal practices in West Sumatra (Hadler, 2009).

The prominence of women in Minangkabau culture profoundly influenced how Khatijah saw herself, particularly as the much-awaited daughter after several sons (Sidek, 2001). Being treasured from birth shaped the aspirations her parents held for her and the confidence with which she pursued them. This cultural grounding became integral to her self-definition, guiding the choices she made and the paths she took. It also underpinned her own *merantau* journey, which would later serve as an inspiration for other women navigating their roles in times of political and social change.

GENDERED *MERANTAU* AND THE DISRUPTION OF MATRILINEAL EXPECTATIONS

Khatijah Sidek’s early departure from home, undertaken in pursuit of education, exemplifies a negotiation of the Minangkabau practice of *merantau*. Naim (1971, p. 6,11), a Minangkabau scholar, defines *merantau* as “migration, leaving one's homeland, travelling where the river flows,” categorising it as a “phenomenon” which has been “institutionalised in” the “social” fabric of the Minangkabau people. *Merantau* refers to any effort to depart from one's home village, even if only to a nearby town, with the purpose of earning a livelihood, gaining “knowledge”, or developing skills for a temporary period, always with the intention of homecoming (Naim, 1971, p. 16).

In this light, Khatijah's experience disrupts the conventional matrilineal script. Such decisions were difficult, as daughters like Khatijah were expected to remain in the village to care for family and property. Given that women are seen as the embodiment of home, the act of *merantau* challenges this traditional role. She was already moved from her village by her mother, who disagreed with her father's decision to register her "at a Dutch school" (Sidek, 2001, p. 36). He was willing to send her to Padang, which was far away from her home in Pariaman, reminding her that "she must have education" (Sidek, 2001, p. 38). She faced the impact of colonisation and attended a Dutch school, as per her father's wish. The necessity for her to leave home for education is caused by their high expectations of her – her mother wished for her to be a "religious leader", and her father wanted her to have "a European education" (Sidek, 2001, p. 36). In both visions, education was the route to becoming *cadiak pandai*, the wise and capable figure valued in Minangkabau society.

The decision to send a daughter away in this context was both a cultural adaptation and a subtle act of transgression. It reinterpreted *merantau* as not merely a masculine rite of passage but a viable path for women's self-advancement. As colonised subjects, her parents lacked political authority but exercised agency through educational investment, enacting what might be read as a form of transnational diffusion: transmitting a male-coded migration practice to their daughter for the purpose of securing her future.

Little did Khatijah know that her *merantau* journey would transcend her temporal and spatial familiarity for the rest of her life. Khatijah wishes to go to Medan, 400 kilometres away from her village, because she "wanted to see the world" and "be a leader of women and to better the lot of women" (Sidek, 2001, p. 44). Her desire aligns with the philosophy of the Minangkabau people, encapsulated in the proverb "*alam takambang jadi guru*," meaning "unfolding nature becomes the teacher" (Heider, 2011, p. 48). Khatijah expands her *alam* through education and women's empowerment. *Merantau*, then, enables the diffusion of wisdom and women's centrality. By pursuing her ambitions away from home, she finds her mode of growth and advocacy. Her aspiration to champion women's rights reflects the matrilineal values of her upbringing, even as distance from her women-centric roots prepares her for new challenges. The memoir shows how *merantau* allows a woman to become a *cadiak pandai* and achieve transformation.

Her educational journey was not all beds of roses; at times, it can be a paradox to exist as a Minangkabau woman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She was expelled from school and requested her mother's permission to study in Java, but was rejected as the latter desired for her to stay "home" and find a husband (Sidek, 2001, p. 44). This is the irony present in the culture – even though women are central to property, they are also expected to marry. A matrilineal society is no guarantee of a woman's autonomy. Khatijah refused to budge. The contradiction in her early life shows that her practising a male tradition of *merantau* failed to free her from gender-based expectations to bind herself to a man.

Khatijah Sidek's case was not the exception, and she was far from being the only woman to partake in *merantau*. Other Minangkabau women had done the same since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in intellectual movements, deeming themselves as "cosmopolites, taking part in global movements and living in a worldwide progressive era" (Hadler, 2009, p. 148). *Merantau* could no longer be confined to physicality – there is space for the women to evolve in an abstract sense that would encourage them to "pick up, leave the village, and travel" out of their familiarity (Hadler, 2009, p. 154). Even though it has been argued by Salazar (2016, p. 32) that *merantau* practiced among women "represent a partial break with earlier cultural traditions", it neglects the fact that a cultural value could evolve and change overtime, particularly Minangkabau culture as it is known to be

resilient, having faced civil war among Minangkabau people themselves and Dutch colonisation (Hadler, 2009).

In hindsight, Khatijah's *merantau* was necessary to avoid early marriage and lifelong dependence on a man. *Merantau* for the purpose of education, then, became her vehicle to resist patriarchy and gain independence for her selfhood. At this point, *merantau* becomes instrumental in redefining Khatijah's fate as a woman in Minangkabau society. Her experience illustrates the dynamic nature of cultural practices, showing how they adapt as they circulate – particularly under shifting gender roles and colonial influences – emphasising that transnational diffusion is an ongoing process rather than a fixed transfer of ideas.

#### MALAYA: THE LAND OF FAMILIARITY AND ISOLATION

Khatijah began organising women wherever she migrated. In Binjai, she founded “Semangat Bunda, Spirit of Motherhood” and organised “the wives of Indonesian officials, and also the Dutch officials’ (Dutch) wives” and established an association in which “eighty girls from all over Sumatra” who hailed from difficult circumstances were given “a six months’ course” and “worked for their training” (Sidek, 2001, p. 44, 64). For her, it was not enough to practise the values she believed in. Instead, she extended her hands to reach those like her, requiring her to move from one place to another, forging connections at every turn.

She did not explicitly state that she was imparting the practice of *merantau* in a Minangkabau context, but her actions align with Pierre Bourdieu's (1981, p. 81) concept of habitus, described as “a socialised body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world.”

As a Minangkabau daughter, Khatijah carried elements of her heritage, evident in her commitment to women's empowerment as she ventured beyond familiar surroundings. In a patriarchal society where young women rarely stepped beyond domestic confines, she played a crucial role in enabling others to benefit from *merantau*. Her efforts align with the first two elements of transnational diffusion, which emphasise the ambiguity of ideas and the role of critical communities. By encouraging women to travel for self-improvement despite *merantau*'s traditionally male association, Khatijah demonstrated that such values must be lived and experienced rather than merely learned. Both she and the women she mentored – her critical communities – faced the marginalising effects of colonisation, which heightened the significance of her initiatives. In transmitting the value of *merantau* to other women, Khatijah evolved from adopter to transmitter, reflecting the non-linear and fluid nature of her journey, consistent with the third element of transnational diffusionism.

Although she had begun imparting to other young women in Sumatra the value of *merantau*, in which she trained women from all over to participate in politics and the pursuit of freedom, she was urged to go beyond the confines of her *alam* (Sidek, 2001). After tirelessly mobilising women in Sumatra during Indonesia's independence era, she decided to move to Malaya in 1946. The difficult decision was grounded in the need to “look into the position of the women there, and to organise them” (Sidek, 2001, p. 69). Khatijah's relocation exemplifies the dynamism of her diffusion journey, again reflecting the adaptability of transnational diffusion. This move required her to leave behind everything familiar and restart her efforts in an entirely new environment where Minangkabau values were not practised. Her journey also demonstrates how a cultural practice like *merantau* can skip stages, evolve, and be reshaped as it encounters new contexts. By bringing the practice of *merantau* from Sumatra to Malaya and mentoring

women in the process, she highlights how values can spread across diverse and interconnected areas, not merely in a unidirectional flow from centre to periphery, thus adhering to the fourth element of transnational diffusion.

Malaysia (then Malaya) has historically been, and remains, a common destination for Sumatrans migrating abroad. The link between Sumatra and Malaysia is strong; for instance, the phrase “going to Klang” was once widely understood as *merantau* to any place in Malaysia (Naim, 1971, p. 11). Klang served as a stepping stone for Minang people who would often stay with “family or relatives who had settled there” before “deciding what to do in the new *rantau*” (Naim, 1971, p. 11). Therefore, both lands have always been interconnected with each other. However, Khatijah’s experience was different; she arrived without family support. Her acute sense of isolation further motivated her to build communities for other women in Malaya. Her sense of solidarity with women there stemmed from her belief that her fellow people in the Malay Archipelago were “all really one people” including “Malaya, the whole of Borneo Island, New Guinea and the Republic of Indonesia” and “culturally” could be extended to “the Philippines and also Madagascar (now called Malagasy)” (Sidek, 2001, p. 69). In her mind, Malaya was not a foreign land, but a continuation of her own world, providing her with another reason to fight for her peers.

Observing the fragmented state of women’s organisations, with “no overall body” and “weak women’s sections”, she founded an organisation called Himpunan Wanita Indonesia Malaya (HIMWIM) in 1947 (Sidek, 2001, p. 71). Through the spirit of *merantau*, Khatijah expanded her influence beyond her Minangkabau heritage, centring women in her mission and tirelessly working to uplift them. Her role as a mentor to women did not cease upon being a wife and mother to several children. Despite her husband’s protest, Khatijah welcomed a few girls to live with her in Johor, prompting the husband’s remark that she “was turning” her house into a “welfare home for girls” (Sidek, 2001, p. 138). She persevered without any financial help as she “wanted to bring up women to be independent and to claim their own writers and also wanted women’s votes for UMNO” (Sidek, 2001, p. 138). Her encouragement for these girls to *merantau* thus served two intertwined aims: fostering personal development away from home and enabling political participation. Six girls stayed with Khatijah, each embarking on their own *merantau* journey with her as a transmitter.

Her *merantau* journey took on a distinctly political dimension when she joined Kaum Ibu, the women’s wing of UMNO. She travels unceasingly in her capacity as an UMNO leader as she “went all over Malaya, first to Negeri Sembilan, then to Johor,” mostly “by motorboat” (Sidek, 2001, p. 119). As her contact with fellow Malayan women improved, she began training them in many skills, particularly the “president and the secretary of each branch” of UMNO (Sidek, 2001, p. 123). She “wrote speeches for them and then taught them how to make speeches” (Sidek, 2001, p. 123). They lacked confidence in the beginning but improved as Khatijah advised them to “use their voices” (Sidek, 2001, p.123). Her achievements were incredible – in a short period of time, she “organised about a hundred and thirty branches throughout the country, and increased UMNO’s women members by about ten thousand” (Sidek, 2001, p. 123). Khatijah had no early mentors; she learned by leaving home for school and toughened herself under colonial oppression, eventually sharing her knowledge as a freedom fighter with women in Malaya. In Khatijah’s eyes, it is no longer sufficient for women to participate in their *merantau* journey and seek independence; they should also be imbued with leadership skills to help the country achieve independence. Khatijah’s journey shows that the role of transmitters and adopters is not fixed and may even change

dimension. She adopted *merantau* first for education and later, as a political leader, used it to empower other women, helping them resist patriarchy and colonial rule.

Yet Malaya became a place of both belonging and alienation for Khatijah, shaped by gendered realities. The rules of *merantau* differed for men and women, particularly in a foreign land where an unmarried woman without family faced persistent risks. To secure protection, Khatijah accepted the proposal of Dr Hamzah, a married man with children, on the written condition that he would not prevent her from continuing to work and organise "the women of Malaya for independence" (Sidek, 2001, p. 84). This underscores the contrast between male and female *merantau* experiences. As a Minangkabau woman in unfamiliar territory, marriage offered Khatijah safety but also compromise: despite her advocacy for women's rights, entering a polygamous marriage without the first wife's consent exposed the tension between survival and her ideals of empowerment. The security she sought soon proved fraught. While staying in her husband's hometown of Muar, locals mocked her *kebaya*, a dress "worn by the wives of workers on the plantations" (Sidek, 2001, p. 99). Khatijah remained "proud" of her "customary dress" (Sidek, 2001, p. 99). Even within marriage, she was compelled to defend her customs, revealing the contradictions between safety, respectability, and cultural identity.

Moreover, Khatijah's purpose of *merantau* has also undergone transformation from furthering her education to fighting "for Indonesia's independence, for Merdeka" (Sidek, 2001, p. 44). As she grew older, she looked back retrospectively and knew that she "went away" from her parents not for "money," but for experience and to fight for Indonesia (Sidek, 2001, p. 45). During her early years, she abided by the traditional expectation of the practice, that is, to acquire knowledge. Colonisation has coloured her *merantau* journey as the Dutch occupation of her homeland impacted the education system that was available. Later, she gained more awareness living in a colonised society, finding herself inclined towards the struggle for Indonesia's liberation as she "had been thinking a lot about Independence", particularly after being expelled from school (Sidek, 2001, p. 43). *Merantau* enabled her mission, which required acquiring knowledge to become a *cadiak pandai*, or wise person. She continued this path in Malaya, organising women. Khatijah's story shows that *merantau*, though a Minangkabau cultural value, is shaped by external forces like colonial domination. Whereas leaving home once aimed at fortune and experience, under Dutch control of Sumatra, fortune now meant living free from subjugation.

Khatijah's journey exemplifies the female experience of *merantau*, highlighting its complexity and adaptability across cultural and political boundaries. Using a transnational diffusion framework, her story shows how *merantau* is practised, transmitted, and adopted in the pursuit of women's empowerment and liberation from colonisation. Immersed in Minangkabau tradition, she entered a polygamous marriage for security, a personal sacrifice made for her cause. Moving from Sumatra to Malaya, she navigated unfamiliar terrain while fostering a transnational community of women committed to self-improvement and social change. Her narrative thus illustrates the diffusion of *merantau* between Sumatra and Malaya, demonstrating the transformative potential of this practice.

THE INCOMPLETION OF *MERANTAU*: DIFFUSION DISRUPTED

Khatijah never fully witnessed the fruits of her transnational diffusion firsthand, accentuating the unpredictability of her journey. She “joined UMNO in April 1953” when it “was weak, like a seed thrown upon stone”, working relentlessly to improve the membership numbers and thus contributing to the “success of 1955 elections” (Sidek, 2001, p. 14). Yet her outspoken nature led to her expulsion not once, but twice (Sidek, 2001). Aishah Ghani, in her memoir, remembered Khatijah as a steadfast freedom fighter but noted that her decisions were sometimes too rash, which contributed to these expulsions (Ghani, 1992). This intertextual presence situates Khatijah within a broader network of female activists, highlighting how her actions and character were perceived and remembered by contemporaries, and underscores the gendered and political challenges she navigated. Her expulsion from UMNO disrupted her influence, severing her connection with the women in UMNO, the intended recipients of her efforts, and leaving her unable to relish the outcomes of her work. Such is the nature of transnational diffusion as exhibited in Khatijah’s story – it can be interrupted by unforeseen circumstances.

Direct evidence of the lasting impact of her political engagement remained uncertain. UMNO finally secured independence for Malaya, and the celebration for it was decided to be held in Kuala Lumpur “in the daytime on August 31”. Khatijah was reluctant to go but decided to attend anyway (Sidek, 2001, p. 151). For two days, UMNO women from all over the country noticed her, “crowded around, and suddenly they wept” (Sidek, 2001, p. 152). This was the moment that cemented the impact Khatijah had on UMNO women – despite her expulsion, many of them still remembered and treasured her contribution, unlike the high-ranking ministers who “sat in the government seats”, looking at her from afar (Sidek, 2001, p. 152). As a transmitter for the value of *merantau*, brought from her Minangkabau homeland, Khatijah did not get to bear witness to the results – one woman even commented that she had “laboured”, but others reaped “the harvest from the seeds” she had planted (Sidek, 2001, p. 152). Khatijah herself admitted that she “had worked hard and the results were good” despite not receiving any advancements or benefits to her own personal station (Sidek, 2001, p. 152). Indeed, her efforts had not gone to waste. The women’s wing in UMNO continued to advance women’s political roles by stepping into public spaces and refusing to remain confined to the domestic sphere in Malaya, even after Khatijah’s departure. Her legacy was remembered by many.

Not only that, her *merantau* journey itself was disrupted. The third element of transnational diffusion emphasises a non-linear, unpredictable path, which resonates with Khatijah’s experience. As previously discussed, the concept of homecoming is integral to *merantau*, carrying with it an “explicit demand to return home,” as *merantau* embodies a form of “circular migration” (Lindquist, 2009, p. 7). Thus, “the relationship with home” remains central and explicit (Lindquist, 2009, p. 7). Khatijah, however much she wished, was prevented from going home and thus completing her *merantau* journey due to her desire to help Malaya break free from colonialist chains. For this reason alone, she faced disapproval by other freedom fighters, Agoes Salim being one of them. When they met in Singapore, he remarked that she should have remained in Indonesia, but Khatijah rebutted him, deeming her work in Singapore to be “an extension” of her struggle for liberation from where she came from (Sidek, 2001, p. 79). Her mother also begged for her to return to Indonesia. She knew that Minangkabau was home, but had chosen to remain in the land she moved to for the pursuit of independence.

For Khatijah, if her “struggle for liberation was not yet completed”, her mother “should pray to God” for her and nothing more (Sidek, 2001, p. 99). The danger in this thinking is that there is no certainty when liberation is to be gained. Khatijah’s move to Malaya was, indeed, not

intended to be a permanent one – she wished only “to open a branch” of her “school” by hiring a few of her “students from Indonesia as teachers for the Singapore and Malaya branches” (Sidek, 2001, p. 73). This is aligned with the tradition of *merantau*, in which homecoming is an expectation. Little did she know that her homeland would remain only in her memory. She found herself to never be settled at one place at a time for at least “two and a half years” (Sidek, 2001, p. 119). The purpose of her *merantau* journey has taken her to a point of no return, in which her homeland grows more distant with each passing day.

Her *merantau* journey has also displaced her from the homeland in her memory. Khatijah felt the constant nostalgic longing for West Sumatra. When she was pregnant in jail, she remarked that she would have received a better treatment had she remained in Sumatra as the tradition was that “when a woman is pregnant for the first time, she must be watched and looked after very carefully”, especially with her being an “eldest daughter” and was “to have special care” (Sidek, 2001, p. 93). Khatijah’s action can be said to be a consequence of a Minangkabau woman who chooses to leave home, one that she is expected to embody. Her homeland is also associated with her own mother, as the latter sent her letters, requesting that she “go back to Indonesia” (Sidek, 2001, p. 99). However, Khatijah often justified her decision to continue her *merantau* journey as her “struggle” was not for her alone but for society at large (Sidek, 2001, p. 99). Even after her expulsion from UMNO, her “sister in London” offered to help her return to “Sumatra with the children”, and so did “other Indonesians living in Malaya” (Sidek, 2001, p. 147). However, their wishes were not heeded, and Khatijah decided to “stay on” and “would not let them drive” her “out” so that she could “endure to see what would happen” (Sidek, 2001, p. 147). Therefore, she subverts the traditional form of *merantau* in her culture, which expects the return of a Minangkabau person who has travelled far away. Instead, she finds comfort in her struggle for independence for both Indonesia and Malaya while yearning for home at the same time. The evolution of Khatijah parallels the evolution of *merantau* as a cultural value. Despite her Minangkabau roots, her experience of *merantau* is shaped by what she deems essential for her fight for liberation, exercising agency and autonomy in her decision-making.

Khatijah’s story reveals the complexities of transmitting cultural values amid interruption and transformation. She encountered interruptions in her transnational efforts, unable to fully gauge the impact of her training and influence on the women in Malaya, especially within UMNO. Interestingly, her *merantau* experience challenges traditional definitions, which typically include a return home, something Khatijah ultimately chose to forgo. Her journey illustrates that *merantau* is an evolving practice shaped by individual experience, particularly for a woman navigating colonial and later postcolonial society. Nonetheless, her deep-rooted belief in cultural values and selfhood empowered her to transcend these limitations, journeying from Sumatra to Malaya. This enabled her to carry and disseminate her cultural heritage, ensuring its transmission and evolution among others, regardless of the outcomes achieved. Furthermore, her experience highlights the uncertainties and risks faced by women in political leadership, even today, showing how agency and influence can be disrupted despite commitment and capability. Khatijah’s story demonstrates how *merantau* offers a framework for navigating such unpredictability while engaging in the struggle for liberation.

## CONCLUSION

*Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesateria Bangsa* is a powerful account of a Minangkabau woman whose journey reflects the innovative practice of female *merantau*. Since *merantau* is traditionally reserved for men in the Minangkabau context, Khatijah's journey abides by yet subverts the age-old practice, which encourages individuals to gain wisdom through experiences and challenges, learning from the world beyond one's comfort zone. Throughout the narrative, she consistently asserts her roots in matrilineal Minangkabau society, yet dares to apply aspects of such a society that were not meant for her. The practice of *merantau* was an inherent part of the community she was born and raised in, proven by her parents' encouragement for her to leave home for education, making the absorption of values intrinsic to such customs entirely natural. Even though her *merantau* journey was initially urged by her parents, who wished for her to be educated, she eventually made her own decisions to leave home to further her studies as a young woman entering adulthood, inadvertently participating in and transmitting the practice.

Khatijah Sidek was not an exception; indeed, she was one of many Minangkabau women during the early 20th century who left home to expand their universe – physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Once she reached the stage of mentoring other young women, she became a transmitter of *merantau*, encouraging and guiding them toward independence. This applied to both her political activities in West Sumatra and Malaya and her leadership in UMNO's Kaum Ibu, which saw the recruitment of numerous women into the political party. Her universe – *alam* – continued to expand in the later chapters of her life, particularly after her move to Malaya. Nonetheless, challenges abounded. She faced isolation and prejudice as a woman from West Sumatra, Indonesia. There is a fracture in her narrative – despite fighting for women's rights, she entered a polygamous marriage as a second wife to ensure her safety as a political leader, demonstrating the necessity of marriage for a woman in an unfamiliar land. Nevertheless, she continued to face mistreatment in Malaya, culminating in her expulsion from UMNO, this highlights how women's participation in *merantau* remains disruptive, unsettling traditional norms and exposing them to vulnerabilities and disapproval, as demonstrated in Khatijah's case.

Her story also highlights a fascinating aspect of transnational diffusion, particularly the cross-cultural exchange of ideas from Sumatra to Malaya during colonisation. Her constant movement and refusal to settle, driven by her quest for independence, were pivotal in transforming her purpose. As a young girl, *merantau* was pursued to obtain an education beyond her village, in line with the Minangkabau value of becoming a *cadiak pandai* (a person of wisdom). Her experiences with colonisation and patriarchy reinforced her belief in the necessity to confront oppression, leading her to struggle for the liberation of Indonesia and, later, Malaya. In this sense, *merantau* not only facilitated the diffusion of ideas, as it enabled her to meet people and share knowledge, but also served as a tool of diffusion itself, as she mentored and educated other women who, like her, had left their homes in search of better opportunities. Her story further reveals how the purpose of *merantau* evolved in response to colonisation. Despite facing disruptions in her education, marriage, and political career, she persevered, focusing on empowering women by training them to become leaders and involving them in politics. Her navigation of these challenges as a Minangkabau woman partaking in *merantau* enriches the concept of transnational diffusion through her agency in adopting and transmitting the practice. She trained colonised women to take on leadership roles when such opportunities were rare. Beyond her parents' expectations, Khatijah used *merantau* to resist societal patriarchy and Western colonial powers, grounded in her own

reality. Her narrative thus demonstrates the extensive agency and autonomy exercised by individuals engaged in transnational diffusionism.

In the end, Khatijah's *merantau* journey proves to be a process of disrupted diffusion. She did not directly witness or enjoy the fruits of her efforts in training and imparting values to other women, underscoring how transnational diffusion can be non-linear and unpredictable. The expectation of homecoming eluded her, despite her deep longing. Unlike the traditional practice, where those who moved away were expected to return and contribute to their homeland, Khatijah found herself estranged from West Sumatra, unable to reunite with the home she longed for. Her *merantau* journey thus demonstrates the evolving nature of the practice, wherein circumstances may preclude one's return to their place of origin. True to the Minangkabau value of expanding one's *alam* or universe, Khatijah never ceased to explore the world, leaving her comfort zone to struggle for liberation through grit and wisdom. Even today, Khatijah's journey highlights the unpredictability of female political leadership. Her experiences show how women navigating male-dominated spaces often face disruption, demonstrating the enduring relevance of *merantau* as a strategy for agency and influence. In sum, Khatijah Sidek's memoir not only testifies to the endurance of *merantau* but also reveals its capacity to evolve as a practice of freedom and self-realisation for women navigating the intersections of culture, gender, and colonial history.

#### REFERENCES

- Aljunied, S. M. K. (2013). Against multiple hegemonies: Radical Malay women in colonial Malaya. *Journal of Social History*, 47(1), 153–175.
- Aziz, S. A. (2011). Khatijah Sidek: Suara pejuang terpinggir yang dibisukan dalam sejarah perkembangan politik UMNO. *Akademika*, 81(3), 43–47.
- Badyal, S., & Kumar, A. (2024). Co-cultural communication and resistant language: Dalit women's social strategy in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* and *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, and Viramma, *Life of an Untouchable*. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X241257999>
- Chabot, S., & Duyvendak, J. W. (2002). Globalization and transnational diffusion between social movements: Reconceptualizing the dissemination of the Gandhian repertoire and the "coming out" routine. *Theory and Society*, 31(6), 697–740.
- Gamberi, C. (2021). Autobiography as a contested genre: A gender and postcolonial reading of Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*. *Ticontre. Teoria Testo Traduzione*, 16.
- Ghani, A. (1992). *Aishah Ghani: Memoir seorang pejuang*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Hadler, J. (2009). *Muslims and matriarchs: Cultural resilience in Indonesia through jihad and colonialism*. Cornell University Press.
- Hasan, M. R. (2020). Emansipasi dan nasionalisme dalam politik wanita Melayu pra-merdeka: Sorotan memoir Khatijah Sidek, Aishah Ghani dan Shamsiah Fakeh. *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation*, 8(1), 17–27.
- Hashim, R. S. (2007). Not seeking to please: Self-narratives of two Malay female memoirists. *Malay Literature*, 20(2), 27–36.
- Heider, K. (2011). *The cultural context of emotion: Folk psychology in West Sumatra*. Springer.
- Kashima, Y. (2008). A social psychology of cultural dynamics: Examining how cultures are formed, maintained, and transformed. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(1), 107–120.
- Kato, T. (1989). *Nasab ibu dan merantau: Tradisi Minangkabau berterusan di Indonesia*. Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka.
- Khoo, A. (2020). Women guerrillas of the Communist Party of Malaya nationalist struggle with an internationalist experience. In V. A. Lanzona & F. Rettig (Eds.), *Women warriors in Southeast Asia* (pp. 173–199). Routledge.
- Lindquist, J. A. (2009). *The anxieties of migration: Migration and tourism in the Indonesian borderlands*. University of Hawaii Press.

- Matsuzawa, S. (2007). The transnational diffusion of global environmental concerns via INGOs in China: A new framework for understanding diffusion in authoritarian contexts (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego).
- Milner, A. (2018). *Kerajaan: Malay political culture on the eve of colonial rule*. SIRD.
- Naim, M. (1971). *Merantau: Causes and effects of Minangkabau*. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore.
- Nurhalim, I. (1995). *Negeri yang sembilan*. Penerbitan Fajar Bakti.
- Nurwani. (2017). *Perempuan Minangkabau dalam metafora kekuasaan*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Patil, S. M. (2021). Reading multiple selves in contemporary autobiographies. *JournalNX*, 7(9), 193–197.
- Salazar, N. B. (2016). The (im)migration of merantau as a sociocultural practice in Indonesia. In *Moving places: Relations, return and belonging*, 29, 21–42.
- Sidek, K. (2001). *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesatria Bangsa*. Penerbit UKM.
- Sjarifoedin, T. J. A. (2020). *Minangkabau: Dari Dinasti Iskandar Zulkarnain Hingga Tuanku Imam Bonjol*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Syed Sheikh, S. S. (2022). Patriarki, Politik Malaysia dan Pilihan Raya Umum: Patriarchy, Malaysian Politics and General Election. *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.54313/journalmp.v2i.65>
- Tan Malaka. (2020). *From jail to jail I*. Gerakbudaya.
- Veevers, D. (2021). Building borders in a borderless land: English colonialism and the alam Minangkabau of Sumatra, 1680–1730. In L. Hellman & E. Smith (Eds.), *Global border making and securitisation in the early modern world*, 9(s4), 58–89.
- Whitlock, G. (2015). *Postcolonial life narratives: Testimonial transactions*. Oxford University Press.
- Zeiny, E. (2019). *Ecriture feminine: feminism and nationalism in Seyyedeh Zahra Hosseini's 'One woman's war: da'*. *3L, Language, Linguistics, Literature*, 25(3).