

## Ulasan Buku/*Book Review*

Ruzy Suliza Hashim. 2003. *Out of the Shadows: Women in Malay Court Narratives*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Publishers. ISBN 967-942-637-8. 250 pp.

This volume is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, written in 1999. Ruzy Suliza Hashim has intelligently presented an analysis of traditional Malay court narratives (produced between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries), within the theoretical framework of feminist dialogics, social exchange and Islamic theology. Until her refreshing perspective emerged, the systematic study of Malay court narratives has been predominantly one-dimensional. This is to say, the majority of research had been centered mainly on their historical value. Almost all of these secondary works had aimed to show whether or not the subject matter correlated with the actual historical events of the time. Two recent exceptions to these are the works of Shaharuddin Maaruf (*Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist, 1988; The Concept of a Hero in Malay Society, 1984*) and Sharifah Maznah Syed Omar (*Myths and the Malay Ruling Class, 1993*). Together with Ruzy Suliza Hashim's work, a new analytical approach to the study of traditional Malay narratives has arrived, and seems more thorough. Essentially, Ruzy Suliza Hashim has raised the interpretive standard of Malay philological, historical and sociological interpretations of traditional Malay court writings.

In *Out of the Shadows*, Ruzy Suliza Hashim focuses her analysis on the representation of women in traditional Malay court narratives. There are two aspects of her thesis. The first focuses on methods of domination used by court scribes, to 'silence' and subjugate women. Ruzy Suliza Hashim concludes therefore, that, what is represented in Malay court writings (written by men who were commissioned by the ruler) is not indicative of the roles women actually played in 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century Malay society. The second proves that the mechanisms of domination use by traditional court scribes, while intending to project a debased image of women, in reality exposed an acknowledgement of the women's central, as opposed to peripheral role in Malay society. The author uses the critical literary approach, patterned around the three concepts of feminist dialogics, social exchange and Islamic theology.

In the first half of the book, Ruzy Suliza Hashim contends that Malay court writings demonstrate a systematic ideology of patriarchy, maintaining a certain power relationship over women. She also elaborates on the concepts of feminist dialogics, social exchange and Islamic theology. First, the author uses the analogy of looking through the "lens of feminist dialogics" (chapter 3), to explode the stereotypes and distortions created by the scribes' interpretations and representations of events in Malay court history. What this means is that we,

the reader, are now able to “re-evaluate the representations and images of women, and advance other alternatives that celebrate their hidden lives” (p. 53). The author clarifies that feminist dialogics is a feminist re-visioning of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogics. Prior to the 1960s, critical theory had little importance in the study of literature and philology. Modern English philology arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, only very recently has there been awareness among Malay scholars about the misinterpretations of Malay narratives by the turn-of-the-century colonial officers (such as Wilkinson, Winstedt and Bottoms).

Bakhtin’s dialogics concentrates on highlighting a text and refining techniques for its analysis, as opposed to the factual scholarly research of the early philological tradition. In the context of Ruzy Suliza Hashim’s work, Bakhtin’s theory is applied to the analysis of “self-censoring phallogocentric texts” (p. 55), which provides readers with the skill to read critically (i.e. between the lines) so that alternative meanings other than the one prescribed by the author can emerge. Specifically, the application of Bakhtin’s theory allows the reader to re-interpret what is not obviously mentioned in the narratives. For instance, where a woman is portrayed as silent, or ineffectual, or conveniently not mentioned at all, the Bakhtin approach allows the reader to infer that the very omission of such detail underscores the gender struggle and patriarchal domination in a society, which, in turn, re-enforces the importance of the role of the woman.

Second, Ruzy Suliza Hashim suggests using “exchange theory” (chapter 4) in the content analysis of Malay narratives. Exchange theory, from anthropological and sociological tradition, explains the interdependence of social relations and acts of exchange. In Malay court narratives, exchange is portrayed as a highly significant activity, whereby both material objects (in the form of people or animals) and immaterial notions (in the form of greetings and sentiments) are exchanged as acts of power, apology, appeasement, to gain favor or simply to enhance good relations between individuals and social groups. The basic premise on which exchange theory functions is in its nature of reciprocity, i.e. the “moral compulsion to return a favor” (p. 72). Further, a gift transacted between two parties makes a statement about the relationship between giver and receiver. In traditional Malay society, the most common form of gift-giving came in the form of garments (“robes of honor”), titles and women. In the case of the latter, high court officials would marry their daughters off to the ruler. In these instances, the ruler was not obligated to do the same, so the type of reciprocity was unbalanced in the Malay court. Ruzy Suliza Hashim’s analysis of women in Malay narratives illuminates the motivations behind the exchange of women. These motivations are primarily directed at creating bonds between men. According to the author’s rationale, “the fact that women are used to create bonds between men proves that they do not live in the periphery of male existence after all” (p. 90).

Third, Ruzy Suliza Hashim uses the analogy of looking through the “lens of Islamic theology” (chapter 5), as a tool for interpreting Malay court narratives.

This is appropriate for two reasons. Firstly, Malay court narratives were set within an Islamic milieu, during a period of Malay history when Islam was spreading rapidly across the region. It is therefore logically necessary to set one's analysis within Islamic parameters. Secondly, Islam has always been attacked as an oppressive religion when it comes to the treatment of women. Some of the reasons given are the permission for men to practice polygamy, the compulsion to wear the *hijab* and unfair inheritance laws. Therefore, the author is correct in saying that an evaluation of the representation of women's roles in Malay court narratives has to be carried out within the context of Islam.

In the second half of the book, Ruzy Suliza Hashim proceeds to apply these three theories in her analysis of female personalities in traditional Malay historical writings. She groups them (i.e. the women) according to how they are represented by the court writers. There are three categories, namely the silent ones, the consenting voices and the dissenters. Among the silent ones, Ruzy Suliza Hashim writes of Tun Kudu, the Chinese princess Hang Li Po, Dang Bunga and Dang Bibah, Tun Bayajid's wife, Encik Apung and Tun Iram Sendari. Their roles as depicted by the male scribe are silent, i.e. they are not mentioned, merely reduced to passive and powerless roles. The narrative discourse that proceeds in the writings involve only the men, i.e. the ruler and his court officials. Women are in the background, spoken of, but not spoken to. Using the three theories, Ruzy Suliza Hashim suggests that these silent women are indeed significant because they are not mentioned; significant because they are exchanged as gifts to rulers, so that they may benefit from the union to produce an heir; significant because these women are mentioned in obviously Islamic texts, many of which had inspirational anecdotes of Islamic roots.

Among the consenting voices, these women are allowed speech in the narratives. The author says, "their utterances conform to patriarchal prescription" (p. 161), which make them consenting. Princess Syahrul Bariyah, Raja Budak Rasul, the Queen Dowager of Perak, Puteri Tunjung Buih and Tengku Tengah are women who are represented in the Malay narratives as wanting to be heard against all odds. Every time they try to speak, they are constrained by strict gender roles defined by the Malay *adat*. Here again, using the three theoretical frameworks, Ruzy Suliza Hashim suggests that the depiction of the women by these Malay chroniclers is totally negated when read through the lens of the three theories. This is obvious when one closely scrutinizes what the women said and the contexts in which they were said.

Finally, the dissenters are women who speak but "do not conform to the patriarchal idea of female submissiveness" (p. 194) These women with their dissenting voices, expose the chaotic bickering, court politics and messy, indiscreet and unsettling male authority. Ruzy Suliza Hashim gives examples of Raja Tua, Tun Senaja, Princess Gunung Ledang, Tun Fatimah, Siti Sarah and Princess Saadung. The main points made here are that these speaking women are shrewd and reveal the fact that male power can become so intolerable that they (the

women) have to destroy it. This demonstrates the recognition of the Malay court scribe that a woman's wrath could be detrimental to the ruler's position of power.

Ruzy Suliza Hashim's volume is a valuable contribution to both the study of Malay court narratives, as well as to Womens' Studies in Southeast Asia. It represents a departure from the uni-dimensional analysis of Malay historical works, and encourages a more holistic approach to interpreting historical documents.

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