

# WAYS OF SEEING MALAYSIAN WOMEN: SKETCHES OF WOMEN IN MAGAZINES IN THE GLOBAL AGE

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## **Abstract**

In Malaysia, sporadic efforts have been made to improve the status of women - perhaps through international pressure from the UN. However, despite the many facelifts in the national machinery in an effort to incorporate women in development and improve women's lot, it is clear that efforts and policies are still very much circumscribed within the patriarchal ideology. Writers have pointed out that mass communication networks have done much both to frustrate and to advance women's efforts and feminist objectives (Rhode 1997:8). It is with this purpose in mind that this paper will explore how women are constructed in local women's magazines in this age of globalisation where successful formats have been adapted to boost sales. In these adaptations, it will be examined as to whether local women's magazines provide new ways of seeing and thinking about women and the kind of lifestyle and gender roles these magazines propose to its readers. This paper will also examine whether the messages in the magazines are circumscribed within patriarchal ideology or have successfully shed and rejected the traditional models of what constitute women that would inform and empower them.

## **Abstrak**

Langkah-langkah untuk meningkatkan status wanita di arena antarabangsa mula aktif sejak Deklarasi UN tentang Dekad Wanita (1975-85) dan Persidangan Dunia ke-4 tentang Wanita di Beijing pada tahun 1995. Di Malaysia, akibat tekanan antarabangsa, beberapa langkah-langkah telah diambil, namun, ia masih berasaskan kepada ideologi patriarki. Ramai penulis telah mengkritik rangkaian komunikasi kerana tidak memajukan usaha dan objektif wanita dan golongan feminis (Rhode 1997:8). Maka, berdasarkan kepada dakwaan ini, kertas kerja ini bertujuan melihat bagaimana wanita dipaparkan dalam majalah wanita tempatan. Dalam era globalisasi dan tekanan meningkatkan keuntungan, format tertentu diikuti. Kertas kerja ini hendak melihat sama ada pemaparan dalam format baru memperkasakan wanita atau masih tetap mengetengahkan pendapat tentang wanita berdasarkan ideologi patriarki.

Keywords: women, empower, patriarchal, magazine, globalisation

## Introduction

There are different ways how people see women. Many see women as being subordinated, oppressed and excluded from privileges bestowed upon men. John Stuart Mill for example pointed out that no one has actually seen women in any social state where they are free from any form of subjugation (Okin, 1988:v). But of course, Mill wrote at a time when women had no formal rights in local or national government, right to vote or access to higher education. However, women who saw themselves as being oppressed had begun to raise awareness of their oppression and subordination, and demanded for elimination of all discrimination based on sex in various areas such as in the sphere of marriage, employment, education, policing of sexual morality and participation in the political process. These women include Caroline Norton, Florence Nightingale, Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon who had actively campaigned for women to get their rightful place in the public arena.

After much campaigning which gained women the right to vote, Friedan (1997:15-32) pointed out that twentieth century women particularly in the west, in the post war period of material affluence, began to see themselves in a different light. They saw themselves having to live up to the fairy tale image of a perfect mother, perfect wife in a perfect home all within a materially affluent society. Friedan identified this as the preoccupation with the mystique of feminine fulfillment. The media also highlighted this preoccupation and even questioned why women should be unhappy about their state and why they were unable to deal with this problem. Media commentators found it unthinkable that women should be unhappy since they already had access to education and to vote, and after having achieved all these women should after all be contented to just play the role of wife and mother in the home. It was inconceivable to society then that women having achieved all that emancipation should want a career or want to be a man when they already have gained equality (Friedan, 1997: 24). This desperate housewives syndrome and the preoccupation of fulfilling the feminine mystique, Friedan argued, had blurred women's vision of their state of oppression and this problem had permeated not only in American culture but in other cultures else well.

Despite the lack of consciousness of their state of oppression in the post war years of affluence, the late 1960s saw a wave of protests movements such as the Civil Rights movement, students' movement that pointed out that material affluence did not necessarily bring about greater happiness, justice, freedom and self realization (Mies 1994:21). In the midst of this changing political and social awareness the new women's movement emerged with a more radical edge (Thornham 2001:29). Among issues raised and



campaigns by these movements were equal pay, equal opportunities to education, provision of child-care facilities, free contraception and abortion on demand. Underpinning the campaigns and consciousness raising efforts was the struggle for women to have a voice and autonomy. As the new movement picked up momentum, issues other than elimination of discrimination based on sex were included. While the old women's movement attempted to open up the public sphere to women, the new movement pried open the private sphere as an arena for women's struggle. Women began talking about issues of sexuality, intimate sexual relationships and soon discovered that women's relationships, in their private lives are characterized by violence, humiliation and coercion. The new movement put forward the idea that the personal is political and women's groups soon protested violence against women in the home (domestic violence & conjugal rape), streets and work place (sexual harassment and rape), media (negative portrayals and stereotyped images), and in pornography.

### Seeing Women in Malaysian History

In Malaysia, the women's movement is equally compelling. In her book, *Women and Development in Malaysia*, Jamilah Ariffin (1992:2-5) gives an interesting view of the changing role of women within its historical context *vis-à-vis* the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Of equal importance is Lai's analysis of the women's movement in Malaysia in the 1990s. Jamilah writes that in the pre-colonial period, the role of Malay women was defined by the class they were in, the two major classes being the aristocrats and the peasants. Regardless of class, women then were generally confined to the private sphere, and by and large had no real part to play in the political arena, except perhaps with the exception of women living in Patani and Kelantan, which at that time had a female ruler. While the aristocratic women were seen fundamentally to play the role of preparing the next generation to fit into the social structure of society, peasant women however were actively participating in the economic sector, if not in politics. Many of these peasant women were self-employed, owned land and played a complementary rather than a subordinate role to men.

The complementary role, however, was altered during British colonial period rule which stipulated land laws to enable the ruling elite to acquire land that resulted in peasant men and women to lose their land. Further, the fallacious assumption of the ruling elites that men were the head of the household and full rights to the land caused many peasant women to lose ownership of their land. As for peasant men who had lost their land, they had to sell their labour in exchange for cash to maintain their families. This resulted in

women having to take on a bigger share of the burden of subsistence production as well as management of their households. Policies such as these not only exploited and marginalized the poor but also brought adverse effects on the role and status of women.

Although peasant women were adversely affected by British colonial policies, elite Malay women fared better. They had access to formal education which helped raise their consciousness in terms of their role in the public sphere. During the years preceding Independence, educated elite Malay women were actively involved in politics. Although initially their participation was objected by the Council of Ulamas (Islamic Religious Teachers) the objection was overruled by the president of UMNO at that time (Lai 2003:51). However, Lai points out that Malay women's involvement in politics, through *Kaum Ibu*, remains only as a support for UMNO mainly to oppose the Malayan Union to push for independence rather than to advance Malay women's interest and rights.

This observable fact remains today. Women still see themselves playing the supporting role in political parties to canvass for votes rather than as leaders or electoral candidates (Lai 2003:52). This can be substantiated by empirical evidence (see Table 1). Leaders in UMNO, the main component party in the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, have repeatedly affirmed that women play a major role in Malaysian politics and are an important agent for change, but this is hardly reflected in its structure. Out of the 38 members in its Supreme Council, only four are women.

In the general election of 1999, women were given the opportunity to run for only 32 out of 193 Parliamentary seats. For the election in the State Legislative Assemblies, women were able to run for office for only 8 percent of the total seats (33 out of 394 seats). It should be noted, however, that despite the limited seats available to women, about 62.5 percent of the women who contested for Parliament succeeded in winning the seats. The equivalent percentage for the win at the State Legislative Assembly level was 69.7 percent.

In 2004, out of 218 Parliamentary seats, 23 were won by women, giving it a marginal increase from the previous election. Although the percentage of women Members of Parliament had doubled to 10% since 1982, only three women have been given ministerial posts and another three made deputy ministers. This is not significant considering that Malaysian women's involvement in politics had spanned five decades. Table 1 clearly shows that changes have been slow in this area although women have been active in politics even before attaining independence.



TABLE 1. Percentage of Women Representative in Parliament in Malaysia 1955-2004

Year	Men	Women	Percentage of Women
1955	52	1	2.0
1959	101	3	2.9
1964	101	3	2.9
1969	142	2	1.4
1974	149	5	3.3
1978	147	7	4.5
1982	146	8	5.2
1986	170	7	4.0
1990	169	11	6.1
1995	177	15	7.8
1999	193	20	10.4
2004	195	23	11.8

Source: Federal Legislative Elections & Star Online

The low representation of women, in ministerial posts meant that women's input at policy and decision making levels remains small and that women's issues would remain largely invisible. However this in no way signify that women are passive and inactive participants in politics. On the contrary, Lai (2003:48) points out that women have been active participants except that their participation has not been made visible because there is an effort to erase the history of women who have fought valiantly for women's right. She points to the example of the third president of *Kaum Ibu*, Khadijah Sidek who was expelled from the party in 1956. She was responsible in demanding autonomous status for the women's section and greater female representation in decision making bodies in UMNO. That aspect of participation was of course left out of the pages of history text books.

In political parties, most note worthy is that women constitute the majority membership, well over 50% of voters but women's penetration in higher posts within the various parties is dismally small. In the midst of these obstacles and hindrances to women's participation in politics, the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) emerged out of a need to field a woman candidate in the tenth general election in 1999. WCI was conceived by a group of volunteers from NGOs who wanted to move activism into political empowerment (Martinez 2003) since the patriarchal structure of Malaysian society allowed women's participation only to the extent determined by men. WCI attempts to promote an awareness in all Malaysians, especially women, of their rights and power in the

democratic process of elections and parliamentary representation and also to promote a minimum of 30 percent participation of women at all levels of political and policy-making processes (Martinez 2003:90). Although in that election, the WCI candidate, lost to a MCA stalwart, she was able to swing considerable votes to significantly reduce the margin of the MCA candidate (ibid). This was seen as a strategic gain to increase women's participation in the political process.

Realising the importance of women's participation in politics, UMNO, in May 2001, formed the women's youth wing, Puteri UMNO, to woo participation of the young Malay women (*New Straits Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2001). Martinez (2003:94) points out that Wanita UMNO initially wanted Puteri UMNO to remain as a club rather than a full fledge component. This was protested by young Malay women in the party. What this indicates is that young women also face hindrances in political participation by their older sisters and the main objective of drawing them into the party presumably is because they make good voters.

Then in the 2004 general election, political parties fielded more women candidates. Even conservative opposition party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) fielded ten women and of whom two won the Pasir Puteh and Tanjong Mas state seats. Whether these assemblywomen would speak up on issue is hard to ascertain. PAS leadership following strict Quran interpretation considers a woman's voice was *aurat*. Although PAS had increased the number of women in the party's Central Working Committee, its discourses on women reveal a patriarchal perspective of women. In July 1999 (*New Straits Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2001) its leader, Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, discouraged the recruitment of beautiful women in Kelantan government departments as they can easily be married off to rich men. The media reported again that PAS leaders suggested that women should not be allowed to work night shifts so they can perform their conjugal rights at night when the men are at home. Clearly, Muslim women candidates not only have to put up with structural barriers but religious constraints as well. Both can be a source of conflict for women and women's groups.

In the area of sustainable development for women, since the United Nations Declaration of the Women's Decade (1975-85) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, steps were taken to improve the status of women. Whether these were genuine efforts to provide sustainable means to empower women is debatable. In Malaysia, the Third Malaysia Plan (1975-1980), allocated funds for the development of women, through the National Family Planning and Development Board albeit to help women play an effective role basically as housewives and mothers. Women were seen as being in need of social welfare and met by short term relieve



which made women dependent on welfare rather than empower them in the long run. Sustainability is certainly not visible in these early programmes and subsequently no or little mention was made of women in development in the 4<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (1980-1985) and 5<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (1986-1990). The knee jerk response to women's issues certainly was due to international pressure.

To further implement development policies and plans to improve women, the Women's Affairs Division was set in 1978. This division was upgraded in 1990 to the Women's Affairs Department under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development and then later transferred to the Prime Minister's department in 1999 before it became a full fledged Ministry of Women's Affairs. The Ministry was later renamed Ministry of Women and Family Development in 2001 which was subsequently changed to Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in 2004.

The setting up of the Ministry of Woman's Affairs, was criticized by women's non-government organizations as a regressive move. Women's Aid Organization (WAO) executive secretary Ivy Josiah objected to the New Women's Affairs Ministry's emphasis on women's traditional roles. The then newly appointed minister saw the ministry's role to help reinforce the women's basic and traditional function like cooking and caring for the household. Josiah on the other hand pointed out that *"women have worked hard to break the burden of traditional roles and to claim the right take on roles outside of the home. To reinforce traditional roles for women is a step backward as it implies that a woman's primary role is to cook and clean even as they pursue careers and interests outside of the home. Household tasks are no longer a woman's responsibility but a shared responsibility of both men and women. The Ministry should be looking into eliminating discrimination by breaking stereotypes and freeing women from their traditional roles to take her rightful place in the mainstream."*

Despite the many facelifts in the national machinery in an effort to incorporate women in development, women's role within this machinery and in the political process is still very much circumscribed within both the macro policies of development and the dominant patriarchal ideology.

After a long lapse, another step was taken to involve women in the development process through the National Policy on Women which was drawn up in 1989, and incorporated in the 6<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (1991-1996) to ensure equitable sharing in the acquisition of resources, information, opportunities and benefits of development for men and women. Following that, the National Action Plan was prepared to operationalise the National Policy on Women. While efforts were made at the state level for greater involvement of women, a group of women NGOs prepared a Women's Manifesto outlining issues such as women and work, violence against women,

development, health, corruption and democracy and human rights that need to be addressed. Then in 1996 the National Action Plan was reformulated to integrate the Beijing Platform For Action outlining thirteen critical areas of concern that need attention. They are:

1. To strengthen the machinery for advancement of women;
2. To increase public awareness and sensitivity of government bureaucracy to women's issue;
3. To mobilize NGOs to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of socioeconomic programs;
4. To improve women's health status;
5. To increase women's opportunity in education and training;
6. To enhance women's status in the economy;
7. To educate women on their legal rights;
8. To increase women's participation in decision making position;
9. To improve women's participation and portrayal in the media;
10. To enhance women's participation in arts and culture;
11. To expand opportunities for women's involvement in sports;
12. To enhance women's role in the family unit;
13. To enhance women's status in religion.

Three years later, a document, Women's Agenda for Change (WAC), was drawn up outlining more comprehensively eleven areas covering women and development, participatory democracy, culture and religion, violence, land, health services, the law, work, AIDS, the environment and health and sexuality that need to be redressed (Martinez 2003:78-79).

This effort brought women's concerns and interests, which can be very varied, into sharper focus so as to advocate for changes and provide an alternative vision for a more equitable development for all (ibid). Although the WAC materialized only in 1999, NGOs were already active in making visible concerns on violence against women. A Joint Action Group Against Violence Against Women (JAG-VAW) was launched in 1984 by five NGOs and individuals. The NGOs were Women's Aid Organization (WAO), the Association of Women Lawyers (AWL), the University's Women Association (UWA), the MTUC Women's section and the Selangor and Federal Territory Consumers' Association (SFTCA). This initiative later spawn other NGOs like the All Women's Action Society (AWAM), the Women's Crisis Centre (WCC), the Sabah Women's Organization (SAWO) and the Sarawak Women for Women's Society (SWWS) that continued to work on the issue of violence against women. These groups demonstrated, campaigned for reform in rape laws which was amended only after a lapse of five years of lobbying. Among the changes made were the imposition of a minimum mandatory jail



sentence of five years for rape conviction, and repealing of the section which allowed cross-examination of the victim's sexual history.

JAG-VAW also agitated for the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) to be enacted. It was passed in 1994, eventually came into force only in 1996. However enactment of DVA did not meet up with the expectations of NGOs as it did not recognize marital rape, and immediate protection for battered women. Even so the DVA finally became law two years later after the women activists demonstrated after handing a memorandum to the Minister of Women's Affairs (Lai 2003:5).

Other legislations that discriminate women were reviewed and amended to eliminate and they include the following:

- Amendments to the Income Tax Act 1967 (revised 1971) to allow wives to opt for separate assessment of their income for tax purposes in 1975. Previously, a wife had to be taxed jointly with her husband;
- Amendments to the Penal Code in 1989 to increase penalties for rape;
- Amendments to the Guardianship of Infants Act 1961 in 1999 to give legal recognition to parental rights of mothers. Previously, only the father of an infant was recognized as the guardian of his/her infant's person and property;
- The abolishment of Immigration Regulations, which discriminate against Malaysian women, married to foreign men. With effect from 2001, foreign men married to Malaysian women are allowed to stay in the country longer (one year as opposed to the previous three months) and their social visit pass can be renewed on a year to year basis until they gain employment; and
- Amendments to the Pension Act 1980, to allow widows to receive their husband's pension even after they remarried, which previously they will if they remarry.

There are still existing practices of civil and Syariah laws which discriminate against women. For instance, a memorandum on "Reform of the Islamic Family Laws and the Administration of justice in the Syariah System in Malaysia" has been submitted to the Prime Minister's office in 1997, but to date not much has been done.

It is undeniable that the Women's Movement in Malaysia has been forceful in advocating equal participation of women in all spheres of life and to diminish gender submission. The struggle has not been easy and uncomplicated. They had to deal with patriarchal structures, be sensitive to ethno-religious-cultural beliefs and practices because gender inequality cuts across race, religion, class lines. However emerging from it all is a picture of women who are

not passive but rather women who have a vision for a more equitable and vibrant society and women who are passionate in their commitment to achieve it despite the barriers, hindrances and obstacles.

### Sketches of Women in Magazines

In reflecting on media coverage of women's movement and women's issues, some writers have argued that the media have the potential to change popular opinion. Hanisberg (1997: 72-83) argues that popular women's magazines that reaches a large women audience can help to advance the cause of progressive movements by providing feminist views in mainstream magazines. She concedes that although women's magazines are generally not known for their radical thoughts, still they are a repository for a significant amount of feminist thinking. She asserts that women's magazines have examined a range of feminist issues including gender discrimination, aging, women's health, women politicians, and sexuality. All these information would otherwise be unavailable to readers who normally would not seek out feminist reading material but would read women's magazines. She surmised that mainstream women's magazines therefore should not be dismissed by feminists.

Rhode (2003:8-21) on the other hand is doubtful that commercial media goes all out to project feminist issues. In her analysis, she points out that the media are hostile to the women's movement and have distanced themselves from the feminist label. Media's caricature of feminist - as unsexed harpies, who follow deviant lifestyles and imagine too much about male domination - frustrates their objectives. According to her, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public consciousness and public policy and contribute to setting political priorities, however, their hostility and marginalization of the movement does not advance feminist objectives. She surmises that marginalizing of women's movement by media professionals is not uncommon as progressive movements essentially demands structural changes to society which invariably challenges even media practitioners group status and worldview.

While Rhode concedes that there has been a significant improvement in the quality and quantity of media representations of women's movement and magazines that provide readers with a steady stream of advice about how to make it in the man's world, how to be a successful manager or a super mom, the media continues to give sketches of women's struggles which may be at odds with struggles by the women's movement and their objectives of social transformation. The breadth and depth of feminist issue is lost in a foray of advice which invariably divert attention from



serious questions of sex based discrimination when magazines focus on personal style rather than on political substance.

Gauntlett (2002:181-210) concur that representations of women in magazines have changed considerably. Unlike earlier media portrayals, more 'girl power' messages are seen. Twentieth century women are portrayed as assertive, successful in both work and relationships, heroines and people demanding and receiving their rights as compared to earlier portrayals of women as housewives and mothers. This change could be a result of women rejecting gender roles with their much improved lives. Gauntlett observed that while traditional titles continue to flourish, more engaging magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Marie Claire*, *Elle* and *Vogue* are encouraging women to be independent and assertive. Most of these best selling lifestyle magazines for women dwell on issues of sex, relationship, fashion, beauty, health, celebrities and career. These magazines have been hailed by some as empowering women, however, Gauntlett points out that these magazines objectifies men too. The US *Cosmopolitan* for example features "Hunk of the Month" and "Survival of the Sexiest", invites readers to vote for the men they wanted to see strip. *More* features a centerfold with pictures of fit men in underwear or shorts and *New Woman* has a similar page.

With increasing trends in globalisation, foreign magazines have been easily available in Malaysian market. These magazines have also been adapted for the local audience. *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Woman's Weekly* and *Marie Claire* have a Malaysian version which incorporate some local models, celebrities and gossips to make it look indigenous. By and large, the cover still utilizes foreign models and similar advertisements are seen in these magazines. On the other hand, local Malay magazines have also copied the format of these successful foreign magazines that are colorful and glossy with Pan Asian looking cover girls.

It is with this in mind that analysis of local magazines is done to see what sketches local magazines produce of women, women's issues and the women's movement struggles for greater equality and emancipation. Would feminist issues be visible in magazines here just as has been argued for magazines in the west? This analysis does not pretend to be a comprehensive analysis of four popular Malay magazines for the month of August. The objective of the analysis is to see if issues on women that are campaigned and struggled by women's movement are featured. *Jelita*, *Wanita*, *Feminin & Famili* and *Remaja* are analyzed because these are popular magazines commanding a high readership (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Readership and Circulation figure of magazines

Magazine	Publisher	Circulation	Readership
Jelita*	Berita Publishing	85,000	277,000
Wanita*	Utusan media	100,000	368,000
Remaja**	Kumpulan Karangkrif	65,000	-
Feminin&Famili	Life Publisher	60,000	60,000

Source: [http://www.fipp.com/assets/downloads/Malaysia\\_WMT01.pdf](http://www.fipp.com/assets/downloads/Malaysia_WMT01.pdf)

All these lifestyle magazines aimed at young women have long been established in the magazine market particularly, *Jelita* and *Wanita*. The August issue of *Jelita* focused on wedding, giving coverage from preparation stage to how to be a good wife. The different sections in this issue gives advice on wedding dais to bridal suite decoration, hair to nail care for the bride, gifts and dowry. This issue wraps up with a short story called *Menjejaki Syurga*. Since the magazine is targeted at a Malay Muslim audience, the advice invariably relates to the role of women as wives in the context of Islam. This is clearly seen in the short story, relating the struggle of a young wife with a young child who was spurned by the husband. In her self reflection, she thought of her mother who despite being neglected by an alcoholic and abusive husband, had remained faithful and strong. In her predicament she visited her mother in the *kampung*, hoping to receive some advice. She kept silent for the first few days and finally having plucked up enough courage she told her mother that she had to discuss something with her. However her mother was on the way to visit the grave of her husband who had previously been irresponsible to the family. This act depicted her mother's act of love and attitude of faithfulness and her hope that her daughter will also model her. Finally the girl went home without sharing her problem but with fortitude to remain strong and silent in the midst of trials so as not to disappoint her mother's hope of her following in her footsteps as a good wife.

There is a section on wedding couples and from the pictures, it is clear that the magazine not only targets Malay Muslim audience but primarily the middle to upper middle class audience. The weddings featured high profile personalities, married in fairy tale like manner in the midst of affluence. There are other sections that advice women on Muslim inheritance, whether a child of an unwedded mother has a claim and whether a Muslim who abandons her faith for another is eligible to the same inheritance as her other siblings. There is also a feature advising women how to manage their household and funds live in the midst of inflation.



*Wanita* also offers regular sections on home, fashion, beauty, recipes, health, travel and a liberal dose of advertisements. The magazine opens with a write up of the cover girl, Juhana Johari, a model, who asserts that she values her femininity. Her idea of femininity is linked to beauty, fashion and health. She finds that when one is beautiful one has greater self esteem. The writer points out that the model's slim body makes her look more sexy. Slimness is promoted in the feature and advertisements. Quite prominently, there are not many different variety of body size and shape in this magazine or for that matter other magazines. All models are thin and waif-like and fair. The health section touched on women's health like endometriosis and hemorrhoids. Personalities and celebrities are interviewed. The section on home usually feature a luxurious home of the affluent. Like *Jelita*, the targeted audience is Malay Muslim and hence, a section providing advice to women from the Muslim perspective on household, husband wife relationship and the faith.

*Feminin & Famili* does not carry as many advertisements but advertisements come in the form of advertorials. It publishes features that reflect the fears, successes and struggles of women. The August issue focused on sex on the wedding night. There are lots of advice on how to prepare oneself for the first night of sex for the newly weds. From traditional massage for the men to see through negligee and perfume for the bride to ensure arousal of the sexual instinct, all these articles should not leave anyone groping in the dark. The two pages of advertorials of lingerie with a page on perfumes were featured. There is even a pullout of tips on sex and how to please your spouse. There is an interesting real live feature on abusive husband and how the wife had to put up with the problem. When she no longer could endure the harassment from the abusive husband she demanded for a divorce. However she had to wait for two years because each time the case is called, he failed to turn up. She even threatened to kill herself in front of religious officers if they can't get her husband to turn up in court at the next hearing. She finally got her divorce but when her ex husband fell ill with a stroke, she told the children to take care of him. Such is the goodness of her heart. This story is quite different from the short story in *Jelita*. Both women struggled with abusive husbands. One is silent while the other took action but face further constrains at the Syariah court. Other features in this issue include a female celebrity's - Ziana Zain- fear of being fat, and women who are successful in the business world. This magazine is also targeted to a Malay Muslim audience.

*Remaja* on the other hand is a magazine that targets younger people so understandably the section on cookery and recipes is left out but replaced with a section on where to hangout and eateries. There is an emphasis on film, video, agony aunt page, celebrities and

love relationships. There is even a quiz to find out if one is a seductress. Like the other three magazines, the target audience is Malay Muslim, hence there is a section on Islam. Since Independence Day falls in this month, this is the only magazine analyzed, to have a section on Merdeka linked to the question of freedom.

All these magazines needless to say propagates modern lifestyles. The major themes emphasized in all four magazines are affluence, success, romance, sex and sexual conflict. *Wanita* and *Jelita* emphasizes a lifestyle of affluence and consumerism. These magazines provides for its readers the lifestyles of the affluent by showing their extravagant wedding parties and ostentatious abode. The only way a reader can appropriate of what is promised -that is a good lifestyle – is through consumerism, buy what is advertised in these pages. One reader wrote in to complain that *Wanita* gives too much space to advertisements and too little on features. Another reader pointed out that there is too little coverage of poverty and women who have fought hard during colonial days for independence.

Women in these pages are defined by appearance and glamour. Pretty cover girls are invariably asked the eternal question of marriage or their idea of femininity. *Jelita* cover girl Rozlinda Onn is projected as the demure, good Muslim girl awaiting for her knight in the shining amour to sweep her off her feet. She hopes to have good in-laws that will direct her to be a good wife. Women are seen to play her role circumscribed with the expectations of religion and class.

On the other hand Juhana Johari wants very much to be the feminine woman that is defined by beauty, fashion and looks. These notions of femininity do not occur in a vacuum. They originate from within the social structure. There are sets of rules that govern female behavior, women's appearance and expectations of what a woman should be within a society. Juhana's notion of femininity is also not isolated from messages of advertisers which is seen through advertisements of beauty products. The magazines reinforce and support what are advertised in the pages of the magazines through its features and editorials. They are by and large preoccupied with how a woman should look and dress. As a result the content of magazines rarely poses new questions about women nor directs them into alternative paths and persuasion of who they are.

Unlike magazines in the west like *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *New Woman*, these Malay magazines are not so sexually explicit but are rather more conservative. The local English magazines tend to be more bold and explicit, where more flesh is seen for example cover girls in skimpy swimsuits. In the Malay magazines that were analysed, sex was discussed in the context of marriage relationship. Girls are expected to get married. And, any hardship in a marriage



is to be endured by the women with great fortitude for the sake of the children. In *Jelita*, *Wanita*, and *Feminin & Famili*, the notion of a perfect wife and a perfect mother constantly emerge in its features as well as replies to letters to the editor. This emphasizes the patriarchal notion of the role of woman as wife and the traditional nurturance role of women.

Interestingly, out of four top magazines analyzed only one reflected on Merdeka (Independence) which is celebrated on 31<sup>st</sup> August. The article interviewed three youths, presumably, for preferring to maintain a sub-cultural youth image that is seen as deviant here. The interviewer asked them why they still keep that image despite the society's rebuff of them. The youths replied that as an independent and free nation, citizens are free to exert their rights and freely express themselves. Although this group of youth were given space to voice their perspective, the interviewer's patronizing final question "*The image that you have is not Malay culture but copied from the West. Don't you think you have not become independent and still tied to western culture?*" The answer given by the youth is that it is their choice and they are free to choose. The media often reinforce popular prejudices about youth.

### Conclusion

To go back to Hanisberg's (1997: 72-83) argument, it is difficult to agree with her that popular women's magazines can help to advance the cause of progressive movements by providing feminist views in mainstream magazines. From the analysis of four top magazines in Malaysia, it was concluded that these magazines are generally not known for their radical thoughts nor are they repository for feminist thinking. There is no doubt issues like aging, women's health, women and sexuality were featured. However, they are hardly couched in feminists terms of reference. All these problems women faced is believed can be overcome by consuming the products that are advertised side by side with these articles. There is no denying that some articles may have picked up feminist issues whether deliberately or accidentally and the focus is on how self can be transformed rather than on social transformation. Rhode points out that it is easy for magazines to incorporate feminism as a lifestyle just as easily as one adopts a yuppie lifestyle. But adopting a feminist lifestyle is not the same as political commitment that remains as the passion and commitment of the women's movement.

It is good to read real life story of the woman struggling with her marriage and divorce that is hindered by the Syariah court. Stories like these show a lot of reflexivity on a woman's sense of self and identity but still it has its limitations to change society. People

who read magazines may not read it with the perspective of a feminist but may read it more likely as a voyeur, looking into a personal part another person's life. It is also good to hear responses from youth with regards to their freedom being challenged by the dominant culture, but claiming one's personal rights does not equate to participatory democracy nor collective action. Faludi (in Gauntlett 2003) aptly points out that in modern societies where commercial media proliferates, both men and women have now become victims of the culture of consumerism, appearances and glamour and in such an environment the struggles of the women's movement is lost on the individuals.

From the physical aspect of the magazines, the format that they have adapted are quite similar to that from the west. The theme of beauty, house and fashion have been emphasized through many colourful glossy pages of women's magazines. But unlike western magazines that have cut a radical age like *Ms*, a feminist magazine, mainstream magazines here still maintain conservative ideas and images of femininity and women's role despite vast changes and achievements gained by women activists in the women's movement.

The challenge remains that struggles and achievements of the women's movement has to be made known to as many as possible. The avenues of commercial media continues to push out that voice or incorporate it only if it suits its purposes. There is a need then to identify other avenues where more men and women would be informed of the women's movements and their cause. Existing mainstream media needs continuous monitoring of biases to push the boundaries of coverage of women's concerns and perspectives. If a feminist perspective is to be realized, a greater voice is need not only in the political process but also in the media.

### Note

1. Mies (1994:40-41) interprets autonomy as this innermost subjectivity area of freedom without which human beings are devoid of human essence and dignity. The feminist claim to autonomy in this sense means a rejection of all tendencies to subsume the women's question and the women's movement under some other apparently more general theme or movement.

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