

Between Tradition and Modernity: Women Characters in A. Samad Said's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines changes in the roles and statuses of women characters in selected novels by A. Samad Said. Using an approach which examines various factors in the production of the novels, the paper argues that there exists a clear correlation between women's educational achievement and changes in their roles and statuses. It further suggests that traditional women who are uneducated and are therefore economically dependent are more susceptible to victimisation especially in situations where familial protection is absent. On the other hand, modern women who are educated and are therefore independent are not subject to familial dictates, are able to chart their own lives and are free to determine their own fortunes based on their own decisions. They are also receptive to social and religious norms.

ABSTRAK

Rencana ini membincangkan perubahan peranan dan status watak-watak wanita dalam novel-novel pilihan karya A. Samad Said. Dengan mengkaji beberapa faktor mengenai produksi novel ini, dapat dilihat dengan jelas antara pencapaian wanita dalam bidang pendidikan dengan perubahan peranan dan status mereka. Rencana ini juga memperlihatkan bahawa wanita tradisional yang tidak berpendidikan selalunya bergantung ekonomi kepada orang lain dan selalu menjadi mangsa keadaan terutama jika tiada perlindungan keluarga. Sebaliknya wanita moden tidak sangat bergantung kepada kehendak keluarga, mampu dan bebas menentukan hidup mereka sendiri. Mereka juga terdedah kepada norma sosial dan agama.

Sasterawan Negara (National Laureate) A. Samad Said is a well-established literary figure in Malaysia and has not laid his pen down since he started writing in 1953. Although he writes poems, short stories, essays, plays and novels, it is the novel that is closest to his heart. According to him novels offer him the whole world and it is in novels that plots and characters have a chance to develop (*Dewan Sastera* June 1987: 27). In this essay, I intend to focus on his novels.

Compared with other genres, the novels present many characters which evolve to convey the thoughts of the author on certain issues. By

using socio-historical settings, the novels highlight the opinion of the author concerning issues pertaining to education, culture, religion and many other fields. This essay will concentrate on the roles and status of women characters in A. Samad Said's novels. By studying some of his novels throughout the years, I find that some of his women characters are illuminating and are closely linked to the eras in which they are located in the novels.

I

A. Samad Said has produced eleven novels, and the time span of about 43 years, between 1953 and 1996, provides a wide range of roles and different statuses for female characters in his novels. This is an interesting subject to examine. Concomittantly, the author consciously selected certain historical eras to be highlighted as the time setting in his creative works. The 1930s, the years prior to the Second World War, the three and a half years of Japanese Occupation, and the period after the Japanese Occupation right up to the achievement of Malaysian Independence in 1957 are those given prominence by A. Samad Said in his works.

The novels selected to be analysed in this essay using the above time frame are *Adik Datang* (The Coming of the Sibling) 1989, *Di Hadapan Pulau* (In Front of the Island) 1978, *Langit Petang* (The Evening Sky) 1980 and *Hujan Pagi* (The Morning Post) 1987. These novels are also chosen because they illuminate certain problems faced by women in traditional and modern Malay society.

All the novels mentioned above were written and published long after the end of the era of "unspeakable horror" (the Japanese Occupation) in 1945. The time setting in earlier novels are the brink and the break of the war, while the latter ones focus on the post-Independence era. The time setting also provides a clear guide in understanding the changes in inter-racial relationships and statuses of women characters in the novels. At the same time, the development in social, economic and political fields affect changes in women's roles and status as well. Women's achievement in education is one of the main factors attributed to the change.

As an author, A. Samad Said uses his life experiences as the core of his novels. He was brought up in Singapore and he received his secondary education there and later worked as a reporter in several Singapore publications. After his marriage in Singapore, he migrated to Kuala Lumpur with his family. Hardships and experiences in general sharpened his observation and enabled him to create plausible characters (A. Samad Said 1979: 26). It is obvious that without such experiences an author is

unable to portray his characters realistically. It was with this concept in mind that he wrote *Salina*, his first novel, in 1958, when he was 23 years old. "Salina is part of my own experiences" (A.M. Thani (ed.) 1984: 33). I do not include *Salina* in this paper as it has been discussed in many papers and books. Furthermore, I consider Salina as a character in *Salina* as a woman of the transitional era.

As he grew up in the turmoil of the Second World War he realised and accepted the changing roles and statuses of women in the society around him. The Second World War had a profound impact on the lives of women in his novels as well as in his mind. Shortage of food, familial breaks ups, shattered lives, traumas of life and death around him left a special impact on his writings up to 1980. Long after the war had ended he still wrote about the war in his novels of miseries or "*novel derita*". Naturally the miseries or war remain in his mind and do not vanish from his writings.

Besides the impact of his experiences during the Japanese Occupation, he is strengthened by his own gender ideology which contributes to the portrayal of his women characters. As a Malay and a Muslim, he is fully aware of the norms and practices regarding gender in his society. With respect to "ideology" Olga Kenyon (1988:2) says,

Ideology is inscribed often unconsciously in discourses, myths presentation of how things are. It is not free-floating but embodied in words in thinking and experiencing – the realm of the novel.

As mentioned in the quotation above, an author's perception of gender ideology does influence his portrayal of characters, in this context his women characters. In the novels, experiences are well blended with imagination to make evident certain implicit meanings. In addition, the author also presents his own interpretations of his social experiences based on his own sensitivities.

A reflection of his own experience can be gleaned from the characters that people his works. They are ordinary people like the labourers, sailors, fishermen, housewives, teachers and others, characters with whom he is familiar because he comes from the same class as them. In turn, they form the crux of his novels.

A. Samad Said's father was a bus driver, a romeo and drunkard seldom at home. He spent most of his free time with friends and always abused his wife (A. Samad Said 1989). Once A. Samad Said's mother delivered her baby in the midst of heavy bombardment during the Second World War without her husband around. This particular moment left a profound impact on A Samad Said's mind as a boy. He has a beautiful memory of his mother. She was always an angel to him. She was very understanding and encouraged him to write when she recognised the

talent in her third son. Even though she was illiterate, she realised that her son has this talent in writing. This serves as concrete evidence of his use of his own experience in his works. A. Samad Said's love for his mother is reflected in the portrayals of most his traditional women characters in some of his novels which I will discuss later. Based on his experiences and his own reactions to them as discussed above, Samad creates his characters. A mixture of his experiences and reactions peoples his narrative with credible and realistic fictive figures.

A. Samad creates his characters out of the depth of his own conscience, a mixture of his own reactions to the characters (*Dewan Sastera* Jun 1987:30). This is not an easy task since conscience is something very abstract and illusive. But he succeeds in projecting his women characters by ascribing to them certain positions and roles in the plot of the story. This process of characterisation is in line with the theory conceived of by D.B. Schmidts. She believes that male authors are motivated by three factors when creating their women characters. They are:

1. the character is derivative in the sense that the writer makes use of a common model;
2. the characters is a product of social conditioning, an ideal or counter ideal of the prevailing values of the society; and,
3. the characters is a symbolic fulfillment of the writers' need of a mythical being invented to give solace in an otherwise terrifying situation (Josephine Donovan ed. 1975: 5).

Based on these factors, we proceed to examine how A. Samad Said creates his women characters.

II

The rapid changes occurring in Malaysian society, from traditionality to modernity, simultaneously affect women's position in the rural areas. This particular setting is very important because it serves as the background of the women characters. The majority of rural women are uneducated, dependent on their father if they are single and on their husband if they are married. The village is often described as calm and peaceful. The traditional values are still upheld and practised by members of the community. They know each other closely and social intraction is based on a strong feeling of esprit de corps. By using this setting the author implicitly determines the characters' social life. In the community, members of each family play an important role in giving moral support to its members during their moments of crisis. Material wealth is not a subject of importance compared to sacrifice, love and

responsibility towards family members in time of need.

In *Adik Datang* and *Di Hadapan Pulau*, the author provides certain background in order to justify the thought, morals and expectations of the characters. Criteria such as “poverty”, “the village setting”, “absence of formal education” define the Malays during the pre-war period. During this time the majority of Malays lived in villages. The women folk hardly went to school and only learned how to recite the Quran and received a measure of Islamic knowledge. With this knowledge, the women were expected to be good homemakers and housewives, managing the household chores such as cooking, sewing and looking after the children. Their aim in life was to be good homemakers and these chores ensured that they were prepared for the role. They knew their place well – the women’s place was in the home, while the men’s was outside it in the larger arena. The way of life of the village folk did have a special impact on the roles and statuses of women in the community. The village took it upon itself to ensure their well-being and they were well looked after and supported.

The women characters are placed in situations of familial problems and their roles are manifested through the ways they face or solve these problems. In this so-called calm and harmonious background of the village, the women’s inner conflict becomes the focus of the novel. The women characters are always victims of arranged marriages and are always unfortunate in married life. They are depicted as wives and sisters with full traditional characteristics such as uneducated, emotional, static, domestically dependent on *adat*, and loyal to familial and religious values.

In most of his novels, Samad does not highlight a central character. The women characters are generally supporting characters. In *Adik Datang*, for examples, Suhaidah and Rasimah are supporting characters. With little education and self-awareness, these two characters are preoccupied with meeting their basic roles in life. Suhaidah is a widow (her husband, Hamid, dies at the beginning of the story) and pregnant with her second child. Another woman in focus is Rasimah, a battered wife whose husband Shamsuri is seldom at home. Both women are pictured as morally well-behaved despite their lack of formal education and having to struggle to survive.

Their female bonding has been well-preserved since they were young and Suhaidah’s home is their rendezvous where they exchange news and gossip. They can only support each other psychologically since they are materially incapable of lending financial support. Suhaidah can only be a good listener. Suhaidah is the more fortunate of the two. Even though her husband is dead, Mokhsen, her elder brother, willingly sacrifices his career as a sailor to look after her and her daughter. There is nobody else she can depend on since her own father, also a sailor, has been missing

for nearly three years. To make ends meet, Mokhsen does odd jobs around the village.

Through flashbacks, the novel makes it clear that the two women's respective families arranged for them to be married off when they were young. Being dutiful daughters and dependent on their families, they were unable to refuse the marriages. For instance, A. Samad Said writes, "*Suhaidah hanya menerima*" (p.71) (Suhaidah merely accepted). However her good fortune in having a responsible, romantic and well behaved husband was shortlived. A few months before he died, Hamid was influenced by a businessman and became involved with several loose women.

Rasimah was equally unlucky when she was forced to enter married life. Her grandfather Wagiman was a nationalist active in the Indonesian movement Sarekat Islam which led to his flight from Indonesia. He never lost hope in contacting his friends and resuming their nationalistic activities. Rasimah's mother is a cripple and Mispan, her father, suffers from a stroke. Dzuklifli her brother, is busy with his project to build a *musala* (prayer house) for the children of their remote village. Thus Rasimah finds herself in the middle of nowhere, with nobody to turn to for help. "*Dah tak ada lagi tempat untuk mengadu. Saya sudah puas melihat keliling. Gelap*" (p.238). (There is no where to turn to. I've looked around. Dark).“ She tried to escape Shamsuri's abuse by returning to her parent's house five times.

Rasimah's fate as a battered wife is shared by Joyah, a woman character in *Di Hadapan Pulau*. The setting of the novel is also a village. Joyah was unfortunate in having married Budin, a drunkard who beats her up and leaves her to fend for herself. Joyah continues to carry the burden of a wage-earner and looks after the household. She shoulders the responsibility and ignores her husband who comes and goes as he pleases.

What is interesting regarding the women characters in these two novels is that all husbands, Hamid, Shamsuri and Budin never exist in the plot. They are either dead or seldom stay at home. The way the author describes Suhaidah, Rasimah and Joyah's reactions to their suffering is very interesting. They are not left completely mute but are given voice to complain about their husbands' irresponsibility. Rasimah's protests are more vocal and sharp when all her family members turn their backs on her problems. Only later her grandfather openly admits that Shamsuri was the wrong choice for Rasimah.

The author uses different techniques to channel the women's protests. Readers know of Suhaidah's suffering through her stream of consciousness. This is suitable in the plot since Hamid is already dead when the story opens. By using this technique the reader can wholly judge the women's marital disputes from their point of views. Implicitly

their voices are clearly heard without being challenged by their husbands. The author allows the women to voice their sufferings and protest their husbands' misbehaviour and irresponsibility. A. Samad Said emphasises their moral virtues. He places them on a pedestal, and their sufferings and sacrifices almost become an image of fullness of life, and their conduct models to emulate.

After Independence in 1957, the change in Samad's perception of his women characters reflects changes in Malaysian society at large. It is noted that change in consciousness go hand in hand with political changes. The changes in the roles and status of women can be traced in *Langit Petang* and *Hujan Pagi*. In both novels, arranged marriages and battered wives are absent. Instead educated, career women are portrayed in the novels. They are professionals such as a public relations officer, an archaeologist, an accountant, a reporter and so on. The women are no longer confined to the house but lead a free life. They travel abroad for further studies and are more exposed. They make their own decisions about friends and spouses. Most of them no longer stay with parents but with friends from multi-ethnic backgrounds. In other words, they are modern women who are independent and are open to influences by western norms as a result of development of science and technology. Not only are they divorced from their cultural values, their hold on religious values is no longer as firm as before. Further, by and large they are single and, as such, married life no longer constitutes the focus of Samad's novels.

Langit Petang portrays Zakiah, a public relations officer, as one of the central characters of the novel. There are several women in *Hujan Pagi* such as Norisah, an archaeologist, Wendy, an accountant, Norisah, a reporter, and Niram, a MARA Institute of Technology student. They are city dwellers. Norisah stays with her parents while the others are single women staying with friends. This situation is beyond the expectations of Suhaidah or Rasimah of the village novels. These women are free to chart and determine their own lives.

Zakiah, once a beauty queen, is trapped by a syndicate which tricks her into prostitution. Ignorant of the hustle and bustle of the cruel world, she dreams of having a beautiful relationship with a man without knowing that he is already married. She is a victim of her own innocence and has to terminate a pregnancy with an abortion. After the bitter experience she tries to retaliate by avenging every man who comes close to her. She is described as follows: "after being cheated several times Zakiah is braver, confident and tough in facing life" (p.38). Inevitably, these relationships make her more prejudiced against men and marriage because she keeps making the same mistake of getting involved mostly with married men. A. Samad Said writes that nine out of ten men who have a relationship with her are married men. Without considering her

immorality, her impression of marriage is worsened by her sister's miserable life as a wife.

Zakiah gets fair treatment from A. Samad Said for he is not judgemental about her. He puts her back on the right track when she is advised by Hafiz, her true and respected friend. Hafiz urges her to love her life better rather than to get involved again with men. Hafiz points out to her that although men fall for her beauty, ultimately she is the victim of her own vengeance, "*wanita dikalahkan oleh umur dan dalam dendamnya kepada lelaki wanitalah yang binasa*" (p.135).

Judging from the phrase above, we can conclude that the author believes that only beauty counts for women while her financial and economic stability, wisdom, ability and self-reliance take a back seat. Furthermore, through Hafiz, the reader is urged to be fair to Zakiah and understand her reactions right from the beginning (p. 137). Obviously A. Samad Said suggests that Zakiah is not to be blamed for her misconduct but that she must be advised and guided with love and understanding.

Another woman character to be discussed is Niram in *Hujan Pagi*. No other woman has her dynamic and special perception towards society. She not only focuses on herself but has her own stand in current political situations. She participates in students' demonstrations and has been detained by the police. But this character is not well developed and gets dropped out of the plot without trace.

III

The examination of the portrayal of women characters in four novels by A. Samad Said, shows a clear shift from traditional to modern values. The traditional women who are uneducated and are therefore economically dependent on the men are more susceptible to victimisation, especially where familial protection is absent. On the other hand, modern women who are educated and are therefore independent are not subject to familial dictatorship. They are able to chart their own lives and determine their own fortunes. They are also responsible for the mistakes they make. They are also portrayed as successful in improving their social status to the extent that they are confident enough to jettison some cultural values and social norms. At the same time, they are also portrayed as characters whose hold on religious values is no longer firm.

The novels studied here also highlight the fact that the author presents the women characters in a fair way. He always gives them a second chance to absolve themselves and be on the right track. There is a light at the end of the tunnel and the story ends in optimism.

LIST OF NOVELS BY A. SAMAD SAID

1. *Cinta Fansuri* (1994). Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.
2. *Adik Datang* (1989). Shah Alam: Marwill's Publishers.
3. *Hujan Pagi* (1987). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
4. *Daerah Zeni* (1985). Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.
5. *Langit Petang* (1980). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
6. *Keledang* (1979). Kuala Lumpur: Macmillan.
7. *Di Hadapan Pulau* (1978). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
8. *Sungai Mengalir Lesu* (1967). Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Gunung Tahan.
9. *Bulan Tak Bermadu di Fatehfur Sikri* (1966). Melaka: Pustaka Abas Bandung.
10. *Ke Mana Terbangnya* (1966). Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Melayu Baru.
11. *Salina* (1961). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

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- _____. "Sesi dengan Penulis Muda; Media dan Iklim Mencipta". *Dewan Sastera*, Februari 1986: 42-45.
- _____. "Manusia Besar Kerana Berani Menghadapi Rintangan", *Dewan Siswa*, Januari 1991: 46-47.
- _____. "Seni Hidup Kembali Kepada Teka-Teki", *Dewan Sastera*, Ogos 1986: 3-4.
- _____. "Pidato Penerimaan Anugerah Sastera Negara IV", *Dewan Sastera*, Mac 1986: 44-46.
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