



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**A 'THIRD WORLD FEMINIST' READING OF SELECTED MALAYSIAN  
NOVELS IN ENGLISH**

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**By  
TEH CHEE SENG**

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Feminist studies in the field of literary studies are still at its infancy in Malaysia, as represented by the marginalization of women and their issues from literary criticism. This study aims to charter new terrains in literary studies by looking at the representations of women as they are presented in six selected Malaysian novels in English. Women characters as they are portrayed in the novels are studied within the Third World Feminist theoretical framework. Third World feminist theory contest perceptions of women as they are observed by Western feminism which tends to universalize the experiences of women without considering the conjugation of feminism and various other factors such as race, culture and class. The purpose of this study is primarily to advocate the observation of women in literary discussion.

The study reveals that women are represented in some of the novels as suppressed and dominated by men through marriage, attire, motherhood and other domains. A resultant from marriage is motherhood which inevitably leads to domestic responsibilities such as providing food. In addition, women are represented as victims of male aggression in which they become the recipients of violent acts such as rape and verbal abuse.

Viewing women solely as victims of patriarchal aggression will result in the projection of monolithic images of women-as-victims. This study also indicates that women can concurrently be strong, powerful and decisive. They are not always the passive victims for they can be initiators, decision-makers or controllers of men and their circumstances.

Finally, this study recommends that further studies are justified so as to add more knowledge to feminist studies which will be a means of empowering women and contesting patriarchal suppression.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah.

**PEMBACAAN NOVEL-NOVEL MALAYSIA DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS  
YANG TERPILIH DARI SUDUT 'FEMINIS DUNIA KETIGA'**

**Oleh**

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**Julai 2003**

**Pengerusi:       Profesor Mohammad A. Quayum Abdus Salam, Ph.D.**

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Kajian feminis dalam bidang kesusasteraan di Malaysia belum cukup diterokai, seperti yang digambarkan oleh pengasingan wanita dan isu berkaitan daripada kritikan kesusasteraan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menerokai bidang baru dalam kajian kesusasteraan dengan memerhatikan gambaran wanita yang disampaikan dalam enam novel Malaysia berbahasa Inggeris yang terpilih. Perwatakan wanita seperti yang digambarkan dalam novel tersebut dikaji dalam lingkungan ranka teori Feminis Dunia Ketiga. Teori Feminis Dunia Ketiga menentang persepsi wanita secara am tanpa mengambil kira pengubahan feminisme dan pelbagai factor yang lain seperti kaum, budaya dan kelas. Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk mewujudkan pemerhatian wanita dalam perbincangan sastera.

Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa dalam sesetengah novel, wanita digambarkan sebagai ditindas dan dikuasai oleh lelaki melalui perkahwinan, pakaian (tudung), keibuan dan bidang-bidang yang lain. Perkahwinan membawa kepada sikap keibuan dan terikat kepada tanggungjawab rumahtangga seperti membekalkan keperluan makanan. Tambahan pula, wanita digambarkan sebagai mangsa serangan lelaki dan 'penerima' perbuatan kejam kaum lelaki seperti rogol dan deraan secara lisan.

Pertimbangan wanita hanya sebagai mangsa serangan lelaki akan menyebabkan gambaran 'monolitik' imej wanita sebagai mangsa. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa wanita adalah kuat, berkuasa dan tegas pada masa yang sama. Mereka bukanlah mangsa yang selalu pasif kerana mereka boleh menjadi pelaku utama, pembuat keputusan atau pengawal kepada lelaki dan keadaan ayng menimpa diri mereka.

Akhirkata, kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa kajian selanjutnya adalah wajar untuk menambahkan kefahama dalam kajian feminis yang boleh digunakan untuk memberi kuasa kepada wanita dan menentang penindasan oleh kaum lelaki.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Preamble

Studies on feminism and women have been a part of various fields of the academia such as economics, law, religion and politics. Feminist studies have also gained much interest in literature and literary criticism, which “to a large extent is due to the feminist movement” that spread rapidly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bertens 94). Feminist studies in literature (or its synonyms “feminist literary criticism” and “feminist literary studies”) have “contributed the most” in the feminist movement (Ghoshal v). Maggie Humm similarly postulates that feminist criticism and the growth of the feminist movement are “inseparable,” meaning that both these constituents—feminist criticism and the feminist movements—share a reciprocated relationship (*Reader's* 3). Elaine Showalter also agrees to the symbiotic relationship of feminist criticism and feminist movement when she writes that “while feminist criticism could not have existed without the galvanizing ideology and power of the women’s movement, the women’s movement would not have occurred without a generation of women who liked books” (“Women’s” 35).

Much of the feminist discourses that grew out of the feminist movements have been aligned to white and middle-class Western culture and understanding. Ann Russo admits that white feminists like herself tend to be exclusive by not identifying

themselves with the issue of race in feminism as promoted by women of colour or Third World women and denying the powers of mutual respect within the women's movements: "[...] many of us white feminists still do not see racism as our issue, as significantly affecting our lives and survival" (299). Thus, at three major international conferences of women (Mexico City, 1975; Wellesley, 1976; Copenhagen, 1980), "battle lines were often drawn between First and Third World feminists over what constituted a feminist issue, and therefore what were legitimate feminist foci and goals" (Johnson-Odim 317). Third World feminists seek to widen the understanding of feminism by looking at other social factors such as ethnicity, class and racial politics instead of converging on the politics of gender as propagated by Western feminism. This describes the incipient trajectory of Third World Feminism that aims to explain the oppression of women by men in terms of ethnicity, racial politics, class, national identity and colonization. As Johnson-Odim asserts, "if the feminist movement does not address itself [...] to issues of race, class, and imperialism, it cannot be relevant to alleviating the oppression of most of the women of the world" (322).

Malaysia, a rapidly developing Third World country (I will explicate later in another section that the term 'Third World' is used critically with full awareness of its problematical designation), is not left out by the influences of female consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The feminist movement in Malaysia is progressing, as demonstrated by the formation of various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and action groups that champion the liberty of women (such as the National Council of Women's

Organizations, Women's Action Organization and Sisters in Islam). Its culmination is the establishment of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Family Development in 2000, aimed at enforcing policies that will allow women to progress further.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the apparent successes of the women's organizations in Malaysia in championing women's rights and justice, a parallel development in the area of feminist literary criticism has not taken place, as evident by the lack of feminist research and publications on local literature in English. This results in a literary void which provides me the impetus to conduct this study.

There is a distinct difference between "gender studies" (studies that look at both male and female) and "women or feminist studies" (studies on females only). Some scholars prefer to be more specific in championing for "feminist studies" instead of the generic form "gender studies" because of the disadvantage of gender studies which tends to centralize "both women and men as equally oppressed" resulting in the obscuration of the oppression of women in gender relationships (Richardson and Robinson 24).

The insufficiency of local academic scholarship in Malaysia is evident by the exclusion of the word "gender" in most local research. Wazir Jahan argues that because "most research data do not include the topic of gender," there is a lack of

women's representation resulting in an incompleteness of research even though academicians in Malaysia have become "more aware of the issues related to women" (qtd. in Cheah 5). Other sources similarly assert that there remains a "lack of academic literature and references on the study of gender" in Malaysia (Sim 4). There are some scholars who are even more pessimistic by lamenting that writings about women are "too few as compared to writings on other fields of the academia" ("terlalu sedikit berbanding dengan penulisan-penulisan tentang perkara-perkara lain") such as medicine, law and economics (Zaleha Kamaruddin 28). Ruzy Hashim supports this when she writes that "the state of feminist-informed studies in Malaysia is dismal" and while there are scholars who seek to remedy this neglect, "local scholars seem to be disinclined to pursue it" (17).

From my readings, feminist literary criticism in Malaysia can be described as "foetal" as there are not many writings of academic nature that pertains to feminism in Malaysian English novels or any of the other genres except for a few unpublished theses, published articles in journals and a book.<sup>2</sup> Ahila Sambamoorthy, relates similar sentiments when she says that criticism on women's literature in Malaysia is "somewhat thin" (qtd. in Whyte 38).

In light of the above, this study aims to fill the literary chasm created by the lack of feminist studies on Malaysian literary texts in English. Thus, this study hopes to provide the platform for further research on feminist perspectives of Malaysian novels in English, so as to enrich the reading and literary criticisms of these texts.

## Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is on feminist issues, within a Third World backdrop, that emerge in six selected Malaysian novels which are Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993); Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky* (1981), K.S. Maniam's *The Return* (1981) and *In A Far Country* (1993), and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001). Scholarly reviews and criticisms on K.S. Maniam's and Lloyd Fernando's novels are predominantly aligned with the Indian Diaspora, national unity and the search for personal identity in a new land and environment. Critical analysis of *Flowers in the Sky* is understandably focused on the two male protagonists on the binarial structure of spirituality/materialism. Based on my background readings of this study, there are hardly any published writings that approach the novels from a feminist perspective. The exception is *Joss and Gold*, since the writer, Shirley Lim, is a feminist writer.<sup>3</sup> The reviews and criticisms of these novels are given further discussion in Chapter II.

The locus of this study is on the representation of feminist issues in the above mentioned novels although some of the writers may have produced many other works. For example, some of K.S. Maniam's short stories, as reviewed by Peter Wicks, provide a voice for women who "must dwell in the cages of domesticity and convention" (294). However, these short stories are not given comparative analysis in the discussion of the six novels. Similarly, Shirley Lim is well known for her poems, Fernando has edited and compiled anthologies of short stories and dramas and Lee

Kok Liang has written several short stories. Although these literary productions are read for background knowledge so as to have an overview of the themes that these writers write about, they do not constitute as primary sources to fulfill the intentions of this study since that is focused on the novels.

### **Conceptual Theory**

In the West, the study of feminism in literature has its roots in the “‘women’s movement’ of the 1960s” which is “literary from the start” because it has always been “crucially concerned with books and literature” and their representations of women (Barry 121). Feminist criticism relates to the “development and movement of critical theory and in the evaluation of literature” with the objective of describing, interpreting and reinterpreting women’s experience “as depicted in various kinds of literature—especially the novel” (Cuddon 338). The aims of this feminist criticism are to “describe and combat sexism in texts” (Mills, “Working” 209). Similarly, Peter Barry explains that the project of feminist criticism is basically to expose the “mechanisms of patriarchy” that perpetuates “sexual inequality” (122). In short, feminist literary criticism is an academic exercise that brings to the consciousness of readers the representation of women in literary texts in the light of patriarchal suppression and male-defined oppressive social conventions.

There are different facets to the literary theories of feminism in terms of “character, tone and application” (Elliot and Mandell 3). The French feminists tend to



have a heavy focus on post-structuralist and psychoanalytical criticisms, the Americans tend to centralize on “traditional critical concepts of theme, motif and characterization” and the English feminist critics seem to be more inclined to materials or Marxist feminism (Barry 124). This inter-disciplinary characteristic of feminist scholarship, in which other disciplines such as Marxist criticism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction are employed in practical application, is discussed in Chapter II. The hybrids of feminist discourse are unified by the common struggles of the feminist movement, namely to contest against male oppression and making the feminine identity of women profound. In this study, one of the hybrids of feminist criticism, the Third World feminist framework, is employed. According to Maggie Humm, “Third World feminist criticism draws on a wide spread of disciplines and techniques” (*Practising* 179). In this study, I apply mainly three literary theories (deconstruction, psychoanalysis and Marxist criticism) as supporting tools to analyse feminist issues in the selected novels for this study as they can, in my opinion, effectively describe and explain the conditions of women that emerge in the novels used in this study.

According to Ishani Ghoshal, feminist criticism deals with raising the consciousness of women to be the “New Woman” (vi) who articulates against the injustices of patriarchy, champions the emancipation of women and challenges the norms dictated by a “male-centric” system of authority. For example, Elaine Showalter’s seminal work *A Literature of Their Own* reconstructs literary history “with minimal dependence on, even minimal reference to, male authorities”

("Women's Time" 40). This reconstruction is on the belief that women's literary enterprise deserves primary mention so as to exert women's identity and femininity.

Feminist criticism also embarks on the "analyses of the image of woman as she appears in" literature (Spencer 158). In studying women's stereotyped characterization in the literary productions, the feminist scholar would address questions such as "How do the women characters relate to the men characters?" "How are the women characters consistently portrayed in the texts?" and "How real is the representation of women in the texts?" The answers to these questions that promote and freeze male perspectives of women in the literary texts are then contested and re-defined.

One area of Third World feminist criticism which is employed in this study is the imbrication of patriarchy and imperialism. Subsequently, Third World feminists have a dual task of challenging patriarchy and imperialism. While patriarchy defines the male authority that women are subjected to, imperialism defines the colonization of cultures that women are subservient to. Maggie Humm writes that in Third World feminist criticism, "the binary opposition between colonized peoples and white exploiters, and the literary representations of that opposition in contrasts of Black/White static/progressive time, are seen to depend crucially on the repression of women" (*Practising* 179).

Jane Freedman adds that the imperialist or colonized thought tends to eroticize Third World women as subservient or unemancipated sex objects for Western men who concurrently requires “the protection and civilizing influence of Western men” (83). Leela Gandhi also acknowledges that Third World women tend to be viewed as “victims of imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies” (83). Consequently, Third World feminist scholarship is essentially an examination of the “representation of patriarchal authority, or the loss of authority, in colonial settings, as well as problematizing traditional literary settings” (Humm, *Practising* 185).

In relation to anti-imperialist sentiments, Angela Gilliam analyses that Third World feminism is not divorced from national liberation struggles. She argues that “sexual liberation can be part of national liberation” (229). Paradoxically, Uma Narayan writes that feminism is dismissed by “right-wing fundamentalists” and “at various places in the political spectrum” as an import from the Western world, in which feminism is viewed as an element of imperialism (22). Third World feminists contest this assertion and relate that the liberation for women has existed in many cultures before the entry of Westernization. In the context of this study, the nationalistic agenda in the novels is described in relation to women.

Apart from the nationalistic and imperialistic issues, Third World feminism also coordinates the issue of race with sexual politics. Deborah Madsen recognises that “racialised sexuality” provide the argument for “double consciousness” of identity: being female and being non-White (213). She further explains that “double

consciousness” refer to the “oppression of the individual both as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority” (218). Since the beginnings of Western feminism has little integration with racial politics, Third World feminists aim to challenge the notion that feminism is a Western invention. Uma Narayan adds that Third World feminists need to challenge the insinuation by Western feminists that Third World feminism is “‘inauthentic’ and ‘irrelevant’” (5). Third World feminists argue that feminism is deeply rooted in the Third World and therefore challenges the “Eurocentric” perspective of feminism which ignores the ways in which gender is constructed within localized cultures and experiences or ethnicity (Freedman 84, 85). The “eurocentric” view of feminist issues is exemplified by arguments against the wearing of the veil or purdah for women. Among Western feminists, the wearing of the purdah, forced or voluntary, is assumed to be a form of subjugation to and suppression by male authority. This assumption is challenged by Third World feminists, preferring to view the wearing of the veil as an expression of specific experiential contexts. This is further explained in Chapter III of this study.

Another project of Third World Feminism as a result of imperialism and colonialism is the class struggle where Third World feminists such as Nellie Wong believe that many women in Third World countries have not experienced total liberation because of inequalities due to class oppression: “[...] capitalism and world imperialism, [...] use sexism, racism, colonialism, heterosexism, homophobia, and class oppression to keep us [the oppressed people] down” (292). Similarly, Nayereh Tohidi, drawing on her feminist experience within Islamic cultures pronounces that

true and complete transformation in class oppression can never take place unless the onerous treatment of women is addressed: “Specific demands of women must be incorporated into the national anti-imperialist movement and class struggle right from the beginning” (260).

The study of Third World Feminist criticism is further made complex with the incorporation of issues related to female sexuality such as virginity (and the intrusion of virginity such as rape), lesbianism (and emotional relationships between women) and sexual pleasure. Evelyne Accad argues that female sexuality is a primary and serious element that should be considered in the cause for the revolutionary and liberating women’s movements and hopes to see sexuality grows to be “recognized as an important element, as serious and as essential as food, shelter, jobs, and development in the struggles for revolutionary change” (247). The discussion of female sexuality especially the rape of women is discussed in Chapter IV of this study.

Third World feminists place importance on specific experiential contexts which is the experiences and struggles of Third World women within the locus of their political, social environment or communities and not within the framework of Western feminist ideology and understanding. Feminists should “create a feminist movement which struggles against those things which can clearly be shown to oppress women [such as] race, sex, or class or resulting from imperialism” and not solely embrace a gendered ideology (Johnson-Odim 321). For instance, the different

experiences of Li An, in *Joss and Gold*, in different geographical and political situations should be studied within the differing contexts. Her experiences in Malaysia should be understood differently as compared to her life in Singapore. Similarly, the suppressed married life of Ravi's mother in *The Return* should not be universalized as a representation of marriage as a form of bondage for all women but should be viewed differently in the lives of different women.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty posits that the Third World descriptions and interpretations of female experiences must be “historically specific and dynamic” and “not frozen in time in the form of a spectacle” (6). This alludes to understanding the experiences of the women in *Joss and Gold* in the contexts of the setting they are in and different from the experiences of the women in *The Return* or any of the other novels. In practical application, one should not extrapolate the experiences of the women in one novel to another because each novel places the women in different settings. As Ketu Katrak advises, in Third World feminist scholarship, one must be “vigilant [...] to the different historical, social and cultural conditions that women face” (236).

As mentioned earlier, three literary theories are mainly used to give a further, in-depth reading of women's issues that emerge in the selected novels used in this study. Marxist feminism discusses the plight of women within the capitalist background. For Marxist feminists, women are perceived as “constituting a seriously underprivileged class” (Bertens 102). Susan Watkins explains that Marxism advocates the idea that