MALAYSIAN WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS A MULTIELTHNIC LEGACY OF GENERATIVITY

HASLINA BINTI OMAR

FBMK 2013 7
MALAYSIAN WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS A MULTIETHNIC LEGACY OF GENERATIVITY

By

HASLINA BINTI OMAR

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2013
DEDICATION

To my family
Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

MALAYSIAN WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS A MULTIETHNIC LEGACY OF GENERATIVITY

By

HASLINA BINTI OMAR

January 2013

Chair: Associate Prof. Noritah Omar, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

In light of autobiography scholars like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson working towards redressing inattentiveness towards women’s life writing, and as scholars on women’s autobiography beyond the Western world begin to closely examine collections of works from their own countries, this study merges contemporary studies on women’s autobiographical writings and the literary studies of Shirley Lim, as well as Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf and Muhammad A. Quayum in the area of Malaysian women’s writings. The special focus on the representation of ethnicity in autobiography explains this study’s exploration of a collection of autobiographies of Malaysian women belonging to four different ethnicities—Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. This study attempts to carefully explore the life stories of Sybil Kathigasu in *No Dram of Mercy* (1954), Khatijah Sidek in *Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek* (2001), Angela Yong in *One Thing Good but Not Both* (1998), and Muthammal Palanisamy in *From Shore to Shore* (2002). Women’s autobiographies such as these evidence the assertion that their lives are of interest and value to the
wider society (Borelli, “Telling It Slant” 356). The preponderance of men’s autobiographies in major Malaysian bookstores, however, seems to perpetuate a kind of indifference towards women’s autobiographies. Still, it is the stories of our mothers that we first listen to as children, as mothers around the world assume the biological role of nurturers and caregivers—teaching values and moral codes, as well as telling stories of their ancestors and cultural origins. These women perform an act that is “fundamental to what it is to be human” (Bosak, “What is Legacy?” n.p.), namely, passing on their legacy to their children. Any study that aims to bring attention to Malaysian women’s autobiographies requires a reformulation of thinking and interpretation; as such, this study takes the perspective of a psycho-literary approach to the interpretation of autobiographies by multiethnic Malaysian women. This approach centres on an instinctual drive that Erik Erikson terms generativity, which is an important virtue of adulthood (McAdams The Redemptive Self, 5), and which inclines highly generative adults towards narrating their life stories sequenced in redemptive themes, and towards the desire to leave something positive behind to the community and future generations. This study carefully explores the interaction of multiethnic women’s lives and their writings, their use of literature as a tool to extend their legacy even further, and generate outcomes that can instil wisdom, understanding and a sense of national belonging in a multiethnic community through the fostering of solidarity spurred by the willingness to blur the barriers that may exist between gender, race, class, culture and ethnicity.
Abstrak tesis dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia untuk memenuhi keperluan ijazah Doktor Falsafah

AUTOBIOGRAFI WANITA MALAYSIA SEBAGAI LEGASI MAJMUK GENERATIVITI

Oleh

HASLINA BINTI OMAR

Januari 2013

Pengerusi: Associate Prof. Noritah Omar, PhD

Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Bertitik-tolak daripada kerja-kerja sarjana autobiografi seperti Sidonie Smith dan Julia Watson yang gigih menangani ketidakprihatinan umum kepada penulisan kehidupan wanita, dan juga kebangkitan penelitian sarjana autobiografi wanita dari luar dunia barat ke atas koleksi karya negara sendiri, kajian ini menggabungkan kajian kontemporari yang dijalankan ke atas penulisan autobiografi wanita dan kajian sastera Shirley Lim, serta kajian Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf dan Muhammad A. Quayum dalam bidang penulisan wanita. Dengan fokus khusus kepada representasi etnik dalam autobiografi, kajian ini meneroka koleksi autobiografi wanita Malaysia dari empat kumpulan etnik yang berbeza—Melayu, Cina, India dan Serani (Eurasian). Kajian ini cuba meneroka secara teliti kisah kehidupan Sybil Kathigasu dalam No Dram of Mercy (1954), Khatijah Sidek dalam Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek (2001), Angela Yong dalam One Thing Good but Not Both (1998), dan Muthammal Palanisami dalam From Shore to Shore (2002). Autobiografi wanita seperti ini menjadi bukti bahawa kehidupan mereka mempunyai daya tarik dan nilai kepada
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the start, I was concerned as to whether I would be as passionate about researching on women’s life narratives at the end of my PhD studies as I was at the beginning. I am pleased to say that not only was I able to sustain my interest throughout, but I can now see the potential that lies ahead in my chosen area of study, thanks to the expert guidance of three women scholars I hold in high esteem, at the helm of which is my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr Noritah Omar.

As my strongest critic, Assoc. Prof. Dr Noritah Omar was and still is my strongest motivator in the way she understands and nurtures her students towards their highest potential in line with her level of expectation. Her focus in placing importance in the strength and the presence of refreshing ideas in a research has helped me develop a keen interest in researching women’s life narratives. I would also like to thank the two other members of my committee: Assoc. Prof. Dr Washima Che Dan for her invaluable comments during the initial drafting of the thesis and support throughout the length of my studies; and Dr Arbaayah Ali Termizi for her succinct suggestions and encouragement in the course of my research.

Lastly, I would like to sincerely thank my friends and lecturers at UPM, particularly in the literature department of the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, for the illuminating ideas they so generously shared, their lively intellectual discussions, their moral support and willingness to lend their ears.
I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 17 January 2013 to conduct the final examination of Haslina Binti Omar on her thesis entitled “Malaysian Women’s Autobiographies as a Multiethnic Legacy of Generativity” in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106], 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

**Shamala a/p Paramasivam, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairperson)

**Rosli b Talif, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal examiner)

**Mardziah Hayati bt Abdullah, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal examiner)

**John McLaren, PhD**  
Emeritus Professor  
School of Communication, Culture and Language  
Footscray Park Campus  
Victoria University  
Victoria 8001 Melbourne  
Australia  
(External examiner)

_________________________  
SEOW HENG FANG, PhD  
Professor and Deputy Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 16 May 2013
This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

**Noritah Omar, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**Washima Che Dan, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**Arbaayah Ali Termizi, PhD**  
Senior Lecturer  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

---

**Bujang Kim Huat, PhD**  
Professor and Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date:
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

HASLINA BINTI OMAR

Date: 17 January 2013
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**DEDICATION** ii
**ABSTRACT** iii
**ABSTRAK** v
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** vii
**APPROVAL** viii
**DECLARATION** x

## CHAPTER

1 **INTRODUCTION** 1
   1.1 Overview 1
   1.2 Background of the Study 4
      1.2.1 The authors and their autobiographies 4
      1.2.2 Autobiography 8
         1.2.2.1 The gender of autobiography 11
         1.2.2.2 Representing ethnicity in autobiography 13
      1.2.3 Generativity 15
      1.2.4 Malaysia’s Multiethnic Community 16
   1.3 Rationale of the Study 19
   1.4 Scope of the Study 25
   1.5 Conceptual Framework 27
      1.5.1 The generative adult: At the intersection between humanities and science 27
      1.5.2 Generativity – Its Multidimensional Features 27
      1.5.3 Personality Psychology 30
      1.5.4 Generative Outcomes 31
      1.5.5 The role of the life story as a generative legacy 32
      1.5.6 Psycho-literary themes sequenced in the life stories of highly generative adults 35
   1.6 Research Objectives 37
   1.7 Significance of the Study 38
   1.8 Methodology 40
   1.9 Organisation of the Thesis 43
   1.10 Conclusion 44

2 **LITERATURE REVIEW** 46
   2.1 Overview 46
   2.2 Tracing the Development of Women’s Autobiographies 47
      2.2.1 United States, North America and Europe 47
      2.2.2 Reformulating and rethinking reading approaches to women’s autobiography in Malaysia 52
   2.3 Developing a Conceptual Framework 54
      2.3.1 Generativity: an instinctual drive 54
      2.3.2 Generativity and life stories 55
      2.3.3 Women with different personalities guiding the next generation 58
2.3.4 Tapping women’s wisdom autobiographically 61
2.3.5 Culture and personality in narrative themes 62
2.3.6 Generative outcomes from positive legacies 65
2.3.7 Highly generative adults and the kind of stories they tell 67
2.4 Conclusion 68

3 TIME AND SPACE 69
3.1 Overview 69
3.2 World War II: Occupation of Malaya by the Japanese Imperial Army (1941-1945) 70
3.2.1 Indonesia under Dutch rule (1800-1942) and Japanese occupation 73
3.2.2 North Borneo under Brooke rule (1841-1941) and Japanese occupation 76
3.2.3 The Indians: Under British rule during World War II 78
3.3 The Little Village of Papan, Ipoh: Mrs K and the Guerrillas 81
3.4 Women’s Political Activism in Asia 82
3.5 Life in Sarawak: The Brookes and Chinese Migration into Sarawak 83
3.6 Life in India: Indian Migration into British Malaya 86
3.7 Multiethnic Women of Southeast Asia and Patriarchy 88
3.8 The Rise of Female Leadership in Colonial Malaya 91
3.9 Conclusion 93

4 NO DRAM OF MERCY, MEMOIRS OF KHTIJAHH SIDEK, ONE THING GOOD BUT NOT BOTH AND FROM SHORE TO SHORE 96
4.0 Overview 96
4.1 Related Themes in the Redemptive Life Stories of Highly Generative Adults 100
4.1.1 The Early Advantage 100
4.1.2 The Suffering of Others 101
4.1.3 Moral Clarity 102
4.1.4 Power versus Love 102
4.1.5 Redemption 103
4.1.6 Future Growth 104
4.2 No Dram of Mercy by Sybil Kathigasu: A Discussion 104
4.2.1 General Background 104
4.2.2 Sybil Kathigasu, the autobiographer (Sybil Medan Daly 1899-1948) 106
4.2.3 No Dram of Mercy, the Memoir 109
4.2.3.1 Kathigasu’s Spiritual Encounter 109
4.2.3.2 Kathigasu’s report: Speaking out for human rights 110
4.2.3.3 Committed to improving the world 113
4.2.3.4 The ultimate sacrifice 119
4.2.3.5 Duty, Sacrifice and Faith 120
4.2.3.6 Conclusion 119
4.3 Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek by Khatijah Sidek: A Discussion
4.3.1 General Background 124
4.3.2 Khatijah Sidek, the autobiographer (1918-1982) 127
4.3.3 Memoirs of Khatijah Sidek, the Life Narrative 130
4.3.3.1 Khatijah’s Blessed Birth 130
4.3.3.2 Khatijah’s strong empathy for the suffering of rural Malay Muslim women 132
4.3.3.3 Patriarchal bargaining 136
4.3.3.4 Making a positive impact 139
4.3.3.5 Perseverance embedded in belief 140
4.3.3.6 Conclusion 143
4.4 One Thing Good but Not Both by Angela Yong: A Discussion
4.4.1 General Background 144
4.4.2 Angela Yong, the autobiographer (b.1926) 145
4.4.3 One Thing Good but Not Both, the Autobiography 146
4.4.3.1 Letting her live 146
4.4.3.2 Yong and the plight of young girls 148
4.4.3.3 Instinctive resistance 149
4.4.3.4 The power of redemption 152
4.4.3.5 Projecting the past into the future 154
4.4.3.6 Conclusion 156
4.5 From Shore to Shore
4.5.1 General Background 156
4.5.2 Muthammal Palanisamy, the autobiographer (b.1933) 157
4.5.3 From Shore to Shore, the Life Story 153
4.5.3.1 Muthammal’s role models: Amma and Apparayan 158
4.5.3.2 Resisting oppression 162
4.5.3.3 Celebrating a Heritage 165
4.5.3.4 Sharing with the world 166
4.5.3.5 Lessons from Malaysian cultural history 167
4.5.3.6 Conclusion 169
4.6 Positive (Generative) Outcomes 169
4.6.1 Forms of Life that Outlive the Self 169
4.6.1.1 How are Positive Outcomes Generated 170
4.6.2 Positive Outcomes from Life Stories of Malaysian Women 172
4.7 Conclusion 177

5 CONCLUSION
5.0 Overview 178
5.1 Summary of Main Findings 178
5.2 Recommendations for Future Research 179
5.3 Concluding Remarks 186

WORKS CITED 188
APPENDICES 202
A1 Online Interview with Philip Hii (Angela Yong’s son and editor of her autobiography) 203
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Email correspondence with Gertrude Hii (Angela Yong’s daughter)</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Interview with Angela Yong</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Interview with Muthammal Palanisamy</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Email correspondence with Professor K.S.Jomo</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Email correspondence with Dr Siobhan Lambert-Hurley - Interest in Autobiographies from Southeast Asia</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>