Islam and Modernity in the Works of Two Contemporary Malay Anglophone Writers: Che Husna Azhari's "Mariah" and Karim Raslan's "Neighbors"

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What is This?
Abstract
Literature written in the English language remains a contested terrain in Malaysia, especially amongst Malay writers who must carefully negotiate between their identities as Malays (symbiotically yoked with Islam) and as individuals living in a modern and increasingly globalized world. This essay explores the strategic compromises writers have to make when writing about sexuality, religion and identity. Its focus is on the issue of polygamy in “Mariah” by Che Husna Azhari and homosexuality and middle-class values in “Neighbors” by Karim Raslan. I argue that these writers have to deploy irony in their narratives in order to introduce taboo issues without seeming to endorse them overtly.

Keywords
Islam, modernity, Che Husna Azhari, Karim Raslan, polygamy, homosexuality, irony

Malaysia can broadly be defined as a modern Islamic nation, following William Shepard’s definition that such a nation “insists that Islam does provide an adequate ideological base for public life [...]. This Islamist position is, however, qualified by a very strong tendency to emphasize
the flexibility of Islam in the public sphere and to use this flexibility to interpret Islam in terms congruent with, or at least in very positive dialogue with, one or more Western ideologies”. For historian Joel S. Kahn, modernity for independent Malaysia was propelled by the New Economic Policy (NEP) that was introduced in the early 1970s as a corrective response to the racial riots of 1969. Indeed, as Kahn puts it, the “economic developments and ‘structuring’ that followed from the early 1970s were to have a very significant impact especially on the Malay villages, which up to then had been considered […] the *locus classicus* of Malay society and culture”. One of the more startling transformations generated by this period was “a substantial increase in the relative size of what sociologists are wont to call (problematically) “the new middle class” across all ethnic groups, but most significantly amongst the Malay community. But such a transformation also injected a sense of ambivalence into the community, especially with regard to its religious adherence. This is because modernity is extensively interrelated with Westernization, and as such, although desirable, can potentially result in a “loss of cultural, moral, and spiritual values among most ‘ethnic’ Malays”. Kahn is, however, careful not to see this as foreclosing “on the ways in which these experiences have been construed by those who identify themselves as Malay”, preferring instead to keep it an open question as to whether or not modernity has marked the end of Malay-Muslim exceptionalism, “the triumph of ‘Anglo-Saxon capitalism’, or the (continued) uniqueness of Malay life despite (or even because of) modernization”. In his analysis of Malay popular culture, Kahn seems to suggest that Malay-Muslim exceptionalism and modernity can exist together, but in tension, so as to problematize any collapse into simplistic, uncritical categories. In other words, while Malay-Muslim exceptionalism continues to prevail, its confrontation with modernity has resulted in a radical shift from insularity and traditionalism to a more global and flexible approach.

Along with its manifestations in popular culture, this tension between Islam and modernity is often reflected in literature. Malay writers, especially those who have benefited from the NEP policies and have had the privilege of a Western education, often depict an identity crisis that results from an embrace of modernity that is tempered by the imperatives of Islamic traditionalism. This tension is, perhaps, especially evident in the works of Anglophone Malay writers who, in choosing to write in the English language, already imply their ambivalent adherence to their Muslim identity and heritage. According to the Malaysian Constitution, one of the signifiers of Malayness is that the individual primarily uses the Malay language, which since 1967 has been legitimized as the National Language. For Malays to write in a language other than the National
Language is tantamount to a compromise of their ethnic identity and by extension their religious identity as well. This is because religion and race are powerfully and symbiotically yoked in Malaysia, and to be Malay is to be Muslim. This symbiosis guarantees certain economic and social privileges and rights which many are, of course, reluctant to renounce. Thus religion and race are complementary components that situate the individual in the complex socio-ideological landscape of the nation, each reinforcing the other. It is therefore unsurprising that there are very few Malay Anglophone writers. Those who do write in English are often upper middle-class, Western-educated Malays (and therefore more critical of the nation’s existing socio-political ideologies), a group whom critic Khoo Gaik Cheng terms “bumigeois”. One such writer is Salleh ben Joned, for whom writing in English is an act of defiance, as is obvious in his pithy pieces directed against Malay supremacy and political corruption, as well as his scatological and irreverent verses. 

But the period since the 1990s has seen the emergence of a new breed of young Malay writers who privilege English as their creative medium for varied reasons. While writers like Rehman Rashid, Dina Zaman, Amir Muhammad and Karim Raslan continued in the vein of Salleh ben Joned’s attack on the status quo, there was an additional sense that they chose English also because of an unstated commitment towards modernity which made them more amenable to writing outside their ethnic-linguistic borders in order to reach a more global audience. Yet, this attempt to negotiate between modernity and Malay-Muslim exceptionalism in their narratives is sometimes fraught with a sense of schizophrenic panic that is either humorously or ironically recast to offset overt criticism. For example, while Karim Raslan could write in an essay that “faith is vital, religious practices do not prevent us from addressing the challenges of everyday life. We must equip ourselves with contemporary knowledge – with science, economics and technology – in order to defend our way of life”, his stories, by contrast, evince a certain level of hesitation in pushing his strategy of deconstructing Malay-Muslim identity so far as to actually dissolve and potentially free it to become something else. The same can be said of Che Husna Azhari, another Anglophone Malay writer whose narratives (which centre on her hometown of Melor, Kelantan) often employ irony to reduce textual censure of the tightly interrelated systems of patriarchy and Islamic parochialism. Although her narrative strategy seems to function in a diametrically opposite way to Karim Raslan’s in that her fidelity to a Muslim-Malay identity attempts to diminish the implications of modernity, so that she hardly gestures towards “the modern” in her stories, her steadfast reiteration of a Kelantanese way of life, which is traditional despite representations of women who are obviously products...
of modernity, generates an ideological tension. Indeed, the narratives of both writers demonstrate that rapprochement between Islam and modernity makes for an unstable alliance; the Malay who adopts this stance inhabits a hyphenated position which necessitates a persistent redrawing of identity that is nevertheless already always ruptured.

This essay explores the negotiation between Islam and modernity in two narratives, “Mariah” by Che Husna Azhari and “Neighbors” by Karim Raslan. In the former Islam is metonymically represented by the practice of polygamy, while in the latter homosexuality functions as a narrative pretext to eloquently stage Islamic liberalism. Both stories are, however, ironic, suggesting the difficult relationship between the more modern and centrifugal perspective on Islam that these writers attempt to formulate and a persistent conservatism, which is still rife within certain powerful Muslim circles in Malaysia and which resists any pronouncements of liberalism. In the case of “Mariah”, it is possible to read the story as both abetting and criticizing polygamy, while in “Neighbors”, an instance of narrative bad faith seems evident: the text introduces an argument for Islamic liberalism in order to tranquillize a more troubling representation of homosexuality at the story’s conclusion. That is, liberal Islam is advocated because the narrative wishes to exculpate the homosexual. However, such a strategy shows up the tension between modernity and Islam: the two ideologies must inevitably be involved with each other in order to coexist; and yet, despite this, such a coexistence remains fraught with rupture and inconsistencies, which indicate that an endeavour toward cohesion can, at best, only be ambivalently achieved.

“Mariah”, like all of Che Husna Azhari’s stories, is set in Melor. In this story, the blissful marriage between a village Imam and his devoted wife, Cik Yam, is disrupted when he decides to take Mariah, a beautiful widow and nasi belauk-seller, as his second wife. The village is taken by surprise, but this development is not unexpected, as its inevitability has been carefully “explained” in a flashback that provides a glimpse into the Imam’s history of unrequited love. Mariah resembles his former teacher’s daughter, whom he had loved deeply, but who was denied him in marriage. In this respect Mariah embodies “a test” (p. 78) from Allah for the Imam, but after Cik Yam’s generously permitting to him to remarry, she becomes God’s “Bounty” (p. 83). “Mariah” is told with a gentle humour and irony that leaves enough room for ambiguity as to its underlying perspective on polygamy in Islam. One critic, Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, reads the narrative as a criticism of the abuse of polygamy, arguing that it “gives a Muslim woman’s [Cik Yam’s] perspective of the matter”, but fails to explain how this is achieved. Close analysis does not support such a view of the story. Cik Yam’s abrupt shift from anger
and hurt to sympathy and agreement, and Mariah’s silence, tell us nothing about the way “sexuality is perceived by Muslim women”\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, the story does provide, as I will demonstrate later, a critical viewpoint on the practice of polygamy (or more aptly, virilocal polygyny), not so much in what it says, but through what it intimates indirectly through irony. This viewpoint also suggests a modern perspective, which sits uncomfortably with established teachings of Islam.

What is modern about “Mariah” are the facts that polygamy is broached at all by a woman writer and its strong feminist approach to this Islamic practice. “Mariah” could only be written by a writer with a feminist sensibility and reflects the writer’s engagement with Western ideas. Despite her dislike for feminism, “because of the implied connotations that it carries”,\textsuperscript{18} it is evident in Che Husna’s stories that her exposure to Western ideologies (including feminism) has led to a critical re-evaluation of her religion and especially its attitudes to women.\textsuperscript{19} The result is narratives that carefully stage dialogues between Western ideas and Islam, although they remain deeply entrenched in Kelantanese culture. Perhaps her stories’ most palpable strength is that they consistently depict a particular way of life with a strong attachment to Islam and yet gesture towards modernity in a manner that reflects a refusal to complacently and uncritically subscribe to such traditionalism. But this gesturing is fundamentally ambiguous. In “Mariah”, for example, it is difficult to detect the critique of polygamy, because the story also seems supportive of the practice.

Before engaging further with the story however, it is useful to consider the situation of Muslim women in contemporary Malaysia in order to provide a context. According to Rashidah Shuib:

As Malaysia has rapidly modernized over the past decade, Muslim women in Malaysia have faced a steady erosion of their rights and freedoms. This has taken place in the spheres of laws, access to justice in the Shari’a system, social rights in the family, dress, public participation, and socialization between the sexes. There is increasing segregation of men and women in the public space. Women have come under tremendous pressure to conform to the dominant Islamic notion of a good Muslim woman, in their roles as wives and mothers and in terms of dress, conduct and behavior at home and in public.\textsuperscript{20}

Shuib sees the contemporary Malaysian Muslim woman’s dilemma as the struggle between two opposing ideologies – modernity (read Western) and tradition (read Islam). While Muslim women, under Malaysia’s various economic and social policies, are encouraged to actively participate in and contribute to the public sphere, they are also at the same time exhorted to conform to their traditional, religiously sanctified female roles of wives and mothers.\textsuperscript{21} A schizophrenic-like situation becomes inevitable in this
complex situation. How can a Malay woman be enterprising and modern and still be Muslim and traditional? In a social context where ideologies predictably collide, which identity should a Malay woman ultimately don in order to attain respectability and desirability – and at what expense? In the case of the family, especially with regard to polygamy, does a wife’s opposition to her husband’s decision to take a second wife signify her un-Islamic, and therefore modern (feminist?), position?22 “Mariah” offers an interesting perspective on these issues.

The narrative’s making the Imam, the religious leader of the village, the “victim” of desire immediately points to an inherent irony, which conforms to Linda Hutcheon’s view that irony “is usually at someone’s [...] expense”.23 Despite the flashback episode that explains the nostalgic origins of the Imam’s lust (pp. 76–7), the lust is undeniable and the focus of gossip and jokes in the village. Cik Yam’s character functions as a necessary foil to her husband’s weaknesses: she is not only a model spouse, but is pious and deeply sympathetic. Yet, for the Imam, “she was not the Sheikh’s daughter” (p. 78). The Imam’s behaviour directly compromises his “correct morality”, which, in the kampong mindset, is an index of one’s piety and leadership.24 For a man, such correct morality includes the role of guardianship “of his sisters’, wife’s and daughters’ virtue. By extension, all village men were responsible for the moral status of all village women. This code of morality was often explained in terms of men’s greater rationality and self-control (akal) and women’s greater susceptibility to animalistic lust (nafsu).”25

As the leader of the community, the Imam is supposed to be “the guardian of modesty and propriety and enforcer of stringent mores” (p. 72). By succumbing to Mariah’s charm, he is therefore placing the village’s moral equilibrium in jeopardy. His action, to use Douglas Raybeck’s formulation, invites social stress into the community, thus disrupting the seamless relationship between the individuals involved in its consequences and the communal fabric of the village.26 The Imam’s problem can be read as an example of “covert” social stress. He initially seeks redemption through amplified religiosity (pp. 78–9), but in the end, it is his wife’s permission that liberates him.

The feminist perspective in “Mariah” is unmistakable and directly infuses the narrative with modern sensibilities that emerge from a dialogue between Western ideologies and Islam. First, the narrative is fundamentally critical of patriarchy’s tendency to evaluate women’s worth in terms of their biological capacities. That Cik Yam remains childless, thus legitimizing the second marriage, is offset by a hint that the fault may lie with the Imam (p. 75). Although her granting him permission to remarry establishes her as a good Muslim wife in the eyes of the villagers (p. 81), the fact that her worth as a Muslim woman and
wife is compromised because of her childlessness is an undeniable reality many Muslim women face. Second, in looking “after the interests of her husband” and submitting “to his authority in all matters”, Cik Yam not only exposes the misogyny of patriarchally-inflected Islam, but implies that men are often saved from the offences of adultery and divorce through their wives’ generosity. Third, although the socio-cultural reality of the impact of modernity remains muted in “Mariah”, the narrative’s depiction of women is very much in line with Rashidah Shuib’s view of the modern Malay woman’s dilemma. Up to the point of her marriage to the Imam, Mariah is described as assertive and enterprising. Such qualities, as Che Husna Azhari herself affirms, are not untypical of Kelantanese women who, even before colonialism, were considered equal to their menfolk and had considerable socio-political influence and economic independence. But in a patriarchally-inflected Islamic system, they are viewed with suspicion and Mariah becomes a threat to both communal harmony (as husbands are increasingly neglecting their wives’ cooking to taste her nasi) and religious propriety, and thus must be controlled. When she marries the Imam, her “threat” is removed and she also recognizes her own “harlotry” (p. 82) and her straying from Islam, to which she now returns.

Che Husna’s story represents an enterprising woman as metonymically aligned to dangerous eroticism and a lack of religious fervour. The dependent (and by extension, religious) woman, on the other hand, is celebrated. “Mariah”, read from the perspective of the dilemma that contemporary Malaysian Muslim women face, suggests that one’s status as woman is ultimately dependent on conforming to religious exhortations and patriarchal imperatives. Within a social context where different cultural systems operate (Westernization, modernity, tradition and religion), the Malay woman must ultimately don the robe of her faith in order to attain respectability and desirability – even to the point of allowing her husband to be polygamous, as in the case of Cik Yam, or relinquishing her independence, as in the case of Mariah.

Yet, despite the story’s depiction of women’s limited roles and the pressure on them to be malleable, its title places Mariah, not Cik Yam or the Imam, at its narrative centre. In this regard, then, what does “Mariah” – both the story and the character – reveal about contemporary Malaysian Muslim women? On a local level, it perhaps reflects the plight of Kelantanese women in a state increasingly controlled by a patriarchal system that manipulates religious teachings to bolster its workings. If, following Che Husna’s own observation, Kelantanese women have always demonstrated a significant measure of economic autonomy and exercised considerable influence in society, “Mariah” reveals a time
when such freedom and autonomy have become gradually circumscribed. Women can only find prominence within the domestic sphere and enterprising, business-minded women are viewed as suspect. From a broader point of view, however, “Mariah” brings to the fore the issues raised by Rashidah Shuib above. Increasingly pressurized to conform to the notion of the “good Muslim woman”, Mariah has few options but to merge with the image of Cik Yam – that is to be a wife and domestic who carefully guards her dressing, conduct and behaviour both in private and, especially, in public. As such, “Mariah” reveals the increasingly delimited spaces and roles accorded to Malay women in society, as patriarchy, reinforced by village customs and religion, continues to assert socializing pressures that infiltrate every facet of life. In this sense, then, it is arguable that polygamy is not really the point of “Mariah” at all, but merely a metaphor for the constraints encountered by contemporary Malay women within their own ideological, religious and racial identities.

Yet, despite the narrative’s pointed irony and criticism, its gender politics remain ambiguous, since its plot does not challenge the ideological status quo. Although “Mariah” censures patriarchy for its coercive use of religion to repress women, its refusal to mount a direct attack on the Imam, its representation of Cik Yam as a paragon and Mariah as “untutored” and “blousy” (p. 82) can be read as endorsing polygamy. This ambiguity, I would suggest, is a reflection of the ideological dilemma that many Malay writers face in negotiating between modernity and Islam. To some extent, “Mariah” straddles these disparate ideologies to mount a criticism, albeit an oblique one, of polygamy in patriarchal Islam.

Not all writers are, however, equally deft in their efforts to negotiate between modernity and Islam. Attempts at mediation can result in narrative bad faith, which, in the end, merely reinforces the existing status quo, obscuring the “real, social issues (or dilemmas) that are being represented. An instance of a writer, who in my view falls into this category, is Karim Raslan. Despite overt pronouncements of his commitment towards modernity, his stories consistently offer unsavoury representations of “modern” characters who are mainly drawn from the “bumigeois”. Tradition, on the other hand, is often evoked as a means of restraining modern tendencies towards greed and hypocrisy, as in the case of the short story “The Inheritance”, where polygamy (a metonym for Islam) disrupts the protagonist’s desire for familial control and financial manipulation.30 There seems to be an overt schism in Karim Raslan’s writings, which directly pit his ideological beliefs against his Muslim-Malay identity. He is a modernist who decries contemporary morality and an advocate of Islamic liberation who nevertheless invokes traditionalism to ironize modernity. In “Neighbors”, it seems that liberal
Islam is evoked principally to “excuse” the reference to homosexuality at the end of the story, but the issue of homosexuality is not treated seriously and this, to me, involves narrative bad faith.

It is unclear exactly what function Islam plays in “Neighbors”, as the story shifts the focus of moral culpability from the homosexual character to the protagonist, the busybody and gossip Datin Sarin (whose title identifies her as a “bumigeois”31). Sarina’s excitement over her new neighbour soon turns into curiosity and she begins spying on him from her window. Kassim later pays Sarina and her husband a visit, significantly after *Isyak* (evening prayer), to get acquainted. He is tall, educated, handsome and well-mannered. The next day, again significantly after *Azan* (morning prayer), Sarina resumes her spying (although she half-heartedly tells herself that she should not), chancing, to her delight, on her neighbours’ love-making. Glee turns into shock, however, when she realizes that the woman is actually a *pondan* (transvestite), who at that moment “positioned herself behind Encik Kassim … her handsome Encik Kasim”.32 But any possibility of discussing the polemics of Islam and homosexuality is avoided when the narrative strategically and all too abruptly displaces the issue onto the lesser concern of the moral failings of the Malay middle class. Witnessing Kassim’s homosexual act causes Sarina to slowly become aware:

> of the unnaturalness of what she was doing. Why was she watching? Why did she feel compelled to watch? Was there something wrong with her? Why couldn’t she be like other people and mind her own affair? Somehow she felt that it was her nosiness, her selfish persistence that had brought Encik Kassim to this. (p. 130)

Thus, in “Neighbors”, it is not homosexuality that is “unnatural”, but Sarina’s voyeurism, which is symptomatic of personal worthlessness (“It was all a sham. She was a fat, overweight woman, neglected by her husband, whose emotional life was so thin and insubstantial […]”) which propels her to “find satisfaction in the private lives of others” (p. 131).

Inasmuch as the story is suggesting that one should pay attention to one’s own faults before criticizing those of others, its criticism of modern middle-class Malay’s morality is certainly barbed. But what is daring, and *problematic*, in “Neighbors” is its deployment of homosexuality to make this point. Homosexuality, in Malaysia, is both a sinful and criminal act. To use homosexuality to criticize bumigeois hypocrisy is at best controversial and at worst unconvincing. For in the greater social-cultural scheme of things, nosiness and hypocrisy certainly do not carry the gravity of censure and punishment that homosexuality does. What is worse, using homosexuality as a pretext to expose Sarina’s lack of
Homosexuality merely has a textual function; its reality is subordinated to an aesthetic evocation.

Another problem is the story’s perspective on liberal Islam, which foreshadows the displacement of moral culpability from Kassim to Sarina. In Kassim’s discussion of Islam with Sarina’s husband, Datuk Mus, during his inaugural visit, it is clear that both men subscribe to a modern approach to Islam, whereby religion is a personal matter and stress is to be placed on historical context rather than the incontrovertible letter of the law practised by more traditional forms of Islam. Mus, for example, criticizes the ulamas’ rigid assertions of the faith and advocates instead the view that “there are many ways of serving Allah and it is important to allow each individual his right to choose his own way, and his own time within the dictates, as you say, of the Koran and the Hadiths” (p. 123). Kassim believes that “It may be every Muslim’s solemn duty to seek to attain the purest state before the Will of Allah. But that doesn’t empower us to be moral arbiters and judges ourselves” (p. 124). But this dialogue is, as I see it, a strategic “staging” which guides the narrative outcome. It is as if it is set in place to later divest homosexuality of its aberrant connotations under (traditional) Islamic perspectives and to reinscribe aberration onto Sarina instead. (There is a correlation here with Karim’s own criticism of the nation’s obsession with “moral crusades against incest and homosexuality”, while “serious national issues are sidelined and ignored”.

Kassim’s homosexuality is less a religious affront, as he is depicted as an individual who has learned to negotiate between his sexual orientation (which in the end is a private matter) and his faith, while Sarina, in her disregard for others’ privacy, is seen as someone who is truly irreligious, as she fails to adhere to the simple tenet of respect for others. Hence, while Kassim comes through as a “good” Muslim who, after prayer, visits his neighbours to pay his respects, Sarina is the “bad” Muslim who, after prayer, proceeds to spy on her neighbours.

But the deliberate staging of the dialogue on Islam in order to, in the end, criticize Sarina’s empty opulence and lack of moral integrity is in itself a “sham”, which reveals the dilemma a writer like Karim Raslan faces with regard to his negotiation between Islam and modernity. As bold as it may be to portray a Malay male character as a morally upright homosexual in the context of Malaysia, the narrative’s need to stage a kind of apologetics that foreshadows a strategic textual displacement suggests that a modern, liberal outlook continues to exist in an uncomfortable relationship with being Malay-Muslim. In her reading of “Neighbors”, Khoo Gaik Cheng argues that, “As a gay Malay man leading a double life (he informs Darin Sarina that his wife is related to her), unable to escape the religious identity of the Malays, [Kassim’s] only
recourse is to modify or liberalize, if only in his own mind and for himself, the tenets of the religion that he has to live with”. But deploying the homosexual Kassim (and by extension homosexuality) as a device to articulate views on middle-class vices and Islamic liberalism (or liberal Islam), in my view ends up obscuring the “real” context of homosexuality in modern Malaysia, which remains an unspoken and highly volatile issue. The transference of moral culpability to Sarina does not, in the end, resolve Kassim’s own dividedness, which necessitates the staged apologetics in the first place.

To conclude, I want to deliberate on three related observations. First, it is clear from the two stories that Islam and modernity in Malaysia make uncomfortable bedfellows, although their convergence is inevitable. Malay writers, however liberal and Westernized, continue to tread carefully in their negotiation with, and representation of, the faith, often using irony to criticize parochial practices (which are often also gender-biased) inherent in traditional Islam. Malay writers who represent religion in their works must ensure that their narratives are layered enough to invite multiple, even contradictory, interpretations. For example, in the case of “Neighbors”, the strategic narrative staging of a modern, more liberal approach to Islam and the displacement of moral culpability onto the Malay middle class must be integrated into the story in order for it to gesture towards homosexuality, without at all problematizing the latter in the context of the nation’s legal and religious systems. Similar strategies of shifting the burden of proof from a serious consideration to a lesser, often trivial, one are evident in other stories, such as “The Inheritance” (in which polygamy is used in a gestural way for humour) and “Go East” (where homosexuality serves as a vehicle through which the protagonist reconstitutes his middle-class, Muslim and masculine identity). Yet, it is perhaps inevitable that such strategies have to be deployed by authors, so that taboo issues can be raised at all. In the case of Che Husna’s “Mariah”, despite overt ironic references that make “fun of the men”, the story’s adoption of a conformist stance that supports polygamy injects a pronounced ambiguity. The same polyvalent readings are also evident in Che Husna’s other stories, such as “Mak Teh, the Mak Andam” and “Ustazah Inayah”. Like “Mariah”, these stories portray strong women who struggle to negotiate between their Muslim identity and an autonomous subjectivity. Mak Teh, who has begun her career as a dancer and later marries the Penghulu (village chief), can be compared with Mariah, while Inayah (whose appellation “ustazah” suggests her leadership in Islamic matters) resembles Cik Yam. Like Cik Yam, Inayah assumes respectability and the bearings of a good Muslim, but she has less freedom and agency than Mak Teh (or Mariah). So these three stories seem to endorse the “proper” place of women within Islam, but there is always the ironic possibility that such propriety also compromises
these women’s autonomy – an autonomy that “less” religiously-inscribed women, as Che Husna’s narratives tend to suggest, enjoy.

Second, it is notable that both stories focus on sexuality and the body to make their point about Islam and modernity, as if to suggest that the single most affected entity in modern expressions of religiosity is the sexualized body. In its sexualized configuration the body becomes a highly contested terrain over which modernity and religion battle for control, or through which modernity and religion engage in an uneasy negotiation. “Mariah”, at least in one reading, seems to insinuate that the body’s submission to religious precepts renders the self consistently delimited, while “Neighbors” tends to accord more flexibility to the sexualized body in terms of its relationship to faith. But this accord is ultimately undeveloped beyond pat references to liberalism and to religion as a private matter. “Neighbors” is also problematic in its potentially misogynist leanings, which exonerate the homosexual male at the expense of the stereotypically drawn female.

Finally, despite Che Husna Azhari’s conservative approach to Islam and Karim Raslan’s more liberal, though not more controversial, attitude, the fact that both writers use the English language is already a bold compromise to their status as Malay-Muslims and their disavowal of such exceptionalism. It can therefore be argued that the decision to write in English is testimony to their commitment to modernity. As Che Husna herself asserts, her choice of language has been taken, despite the realization that “the colonial label will be on you if you write in English” and that there is potentially no “bright future” for (Malay) women (and I will add Malay men) writing in English.38 For these writers, English is no longer viewed with derision as a colonial legacy or a Western form of “control”, but as a means by which they can break out from a debilitating insularity to reclaim the critical and dialogical spaces inhabited by those who would otherwise speak for the community, because many members of that community have chosen to ignore the global. This, for me, is a positive step towards reshaping and expanding Malay-Muslim identity, as well as the literary heritage of the nation.

NOTES

1 William Shepard, “Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19, 3 (1987), 311. This is opposed to “Islamic totalism”, which includes both traditionalism and, to a lesser extent, neo-traditionalism (*ibid.*, 317–20). A nation which adopts this position largely resists any correspondence with the West and operates strictly within religious paradigms. Shepard’s reading of modernity is, in my view, somewhat limited by its uncritical collapsing of “modernity” and Westernization, but his premise that an important aspect of Asian modernity is based on its encounter and confrontation with the West is, in my opinion, warranted.

3 *ibid.*


5 *ibid.* This notion of “exceptionalism” was introduced by Ernest Gellner to describe Islam’s tenacious ability to survive the onslaught of the modernist- secularization juggernaut. See Gellner, “Flux and Reflux in the Faith of Men”, in *Muslim Society*, ed. Ernest Gellner, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981, pp. 1–85.


7 Two consequences result: languages other than Malay are relegated to secondary status and “National Literature” is *always* literature written in Malay: literature in other languages is designated sectional, or minority, literature. Writers who persist in working in English must be prepared to have their works marginalized, limited in audience and unrecognized as legitimate creative expressions of national worth. Some writers, having been “thus frustrated”, have chosen “to migrate and live in ‘voluntary exile’” (they include the poets Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim), but arguably, even those who have remained are “metaphorical exiles”, whose loyalty to another language positions them as liminal within their own discursive spaces, as can be seen in the status and works of K.S. Maniam. See Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks, “Introduction”, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks. Petaling Jaya: Pearson, 2001, p. x.


10 This attempt to reach a wider readership has, in my view, an important objective: to remove Malaysian writing and thinking from its insularity. If before, only non-Malay writers’ works, often with non-Malay concerns, could make an international mark on the literary market, the emergence of these young writers gave “Malayness”, as seen from the perspective of everyday Malays (and not academics and researchers specializing in Malay studies who are often Westerners), greater visibility with the corollary of perhaps correcting certain misconceptions about this community and introducing its way of life to more readers.


12 Karim expresses such a personal dilemma in another essay “Our Culture, Ourselves”, where he writes: “Could I be modern and still be Malay? Or had I, in fact, betrayed my roots, my adat and my faith by being so modern?” (*Ceritalah: Malaysia in Transition*, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Times Books, 1996, p. 15). Although he ends with the statement that “A cultural identity is not fixed” (p. 18), it is clear from his stories that Karim has yet to find a resolution to this dilemma.
Kelantan is one of the thirteen states which make up Malaysia and the most adamantly traditional in its Islamism.


A dish popular in Kelantan.


ibid., p. 149.

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, “Kelantan Tales: An Interview with Che Husna Azhari”, New Literatures Review, 31 (1995), 18. Che Husna Azhari’s perspective on feminism is, I feel, rather narrow. By “implied connotations”, she means that before feminism, women were not recognized, and therefore had no rights. Her argument is that as a Muslim, she has rights. Certainly, feminism is not just about the realization of one’s rights as woman, but also a trajectory which motivates the definitions and directions of those rights. Che Husna’s awareness of her Islamic rights is also indirectly a product of her Western experience: she studied for a period of time at Oxford.

By Western ideologies, I mean broadly thought-systems which presuppose a strong emphasis on individualism and personal rights, and celebrate pluralism at the same time.


ibid., p. 189.


Aihwa Ong, “State Versus Islam: Malay Families, Women’s Bodies and the Body Politic in Malaysia” (1991), in Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 165. The concepts of akal and nafsu were originally part of


28 In Islam, divorce is viewed with especial disdain by the Prophet Muhammad. Polygamy is thus seen as a means by which men can escape the censure that it brings, a pattern increasingly adopted by Muslim men in the West, according to Anne Sofie Roald. See her *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001.


31 A Datin is the wife of a Datuk, an honorific title conferred on an individual by the state’s Sultan for contributions made to society or the economy.

32 Karim Raslan, “Neighbors”, in *Heroes and Other Stories*, p. 130. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

33 I am not suggesting that homosexuality is a problem, but that it is viewed as such under current Malaysian civil and religious laws.


37 Both stories are collected in *Melor in Perspective*.

38 Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf. “Kelantan Tales”, p. 18.