

Immediate Surroundings as Inspiration: A Semiotic Analysis of Religious Discourse in Norsiah Gapar's *Pengabdian*

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Abstract

This paper analyses semiotic elements in *Pengabdian*, a Malay novel published in 1987 and written by the 2009 SEA award winning Bruneian writer, Norsiah Gapar. Three main themes of semiotics in relation to Islamic principles and values are highlighted in *Pengabdian*: submission to God, attitudes towards worldly affairs, and the issue of rights and possessions in Islam. Besides the inclusion of explicit sermonic discourse in the novel, semiotic elements are foregrounded to support the edification of Islam to the readers. Following the co-existence of semiotic symbols and sermonic discourse, which is in line with the Islamic requisite of *Amar Ma'ruf wa Nahi anil Munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding wrong), this essay raises the potential of *Pengabdian* as a piece of Islamic literature. It offers readers a new way to appreciate *Pengabdian* from a linguistic-literary perspective, as it also suggests the possibility of undertaking further studies on this acclaimed novel.

Keywords

Pengabdian, Islamic literature, semiotic analysis, religious discourse, Islam in Brunei

Introduction

This paper applies a linguistic-pragmatic approach to examine semiotic elements in Bruneian writer Norsiah Gapar's (1952–) *Pengabdian* (1987). Despite being one of the most highly-acclaimed literary works by a female writer in Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) and being used as a coursebook in the national education curriculum, only a few have studied the novel from a linguistic perspective. Several studies have studied *Pengabdian* by focusing on its literary aspects, including its plot and characterisation, and themes such as femininity and

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female empowerment, conflict of race and religion, and morality and didacticism (Magon; Lutfi; Aminah, "Imej Wanita Melayu"; Kathrina, "Articulating Female Citizenship"). Others have reviewed the literary piece from an author-based perspective (Aminah "Cerpensis-Cerpensis Wanita"; Markandi; Nor Faridah). This paper will study the linguistic elements of the novel and their pragmatic representation as part of the religious edification of its readers. The religious sentiment infused in *Pengabdian* is hard to overlook, as it is evident throughout the novel that explicitly promotes Islamic teachings and values. Magon and Aminah ("Imej Wanita Melayu") accordingly highlight this religious aspect of *Pengabdian* as a means of Islamic propagation. This may have potentially shaped *Pengabdian* as a religious novel or a literary fiction imbued with Islamic values.

In this paper, religious discourse refers to the style of language use or linguistic elements that highlight religious issues and values. Meanwhile, semiotics engages the study of signs – basic elements of communication – which involves "their production and communication, their systematic grouping in languages or codes, their social function. It is doubly relevant to the study of literature, for literature uses language, the primary sign system in human culture" (Childs and Fowler 212). In the study of linguistics, words and morphemes are specifically referred to as "linguistic signs" (Matthews 362). The relevance of semiotics to linguistics, literature, and society may also be drawn from its "understanding of literary works as social codes and discourses, inseparable from ideological modes of perception" (Childs and Fowler 138). This suggests that the interpretation of signs within the semiotic tradition is not separated from surrounding cultures, politics, social system and ideologies, or in this case, the author.

By incorporating both frameworks of semiotic study and the principles of Islam, this paper aims to identify implicit semiotic elements in *Pengabdian*, and to analyse their purpose and representation in promoting the teachings of Islam. Although the tradition of semiotics focusing on linguistic elements has been broadly applied in literature, fewer studies have used a similar approach within literary text production in Brunei, particularly in relation to *da'wah* (inviting people to Islam; propagation of Islam). While this paper offers an opportunity for readers to appreciate *Pengabdian* from a linguistic-literary perspective, it also widens its significance by highlighting elements of Islamic *da'wah* through literature in the context of Brunei where Islam is the official religion, as acknowledged in the national philosophy bounded within the concept of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB). This is amid claims that concur with the efficacy of stylistics in literature as a conduit of Islamic *da'wah* (Abdul Karim; Thielmann).

Contextualising *Pengabdian*

Pengabdian is Norsiah Gapar's debut novel and won the first prize in a novel-writing competition organised by Brunei's Language and Literature Bureau (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei*; DBP) in commemoration of Brunei's

independence in 1984. *Pengabdian* has been a coursebook in Brunei's national education curriculum since 2001. DBP categorises *Pengabdian* as literary fiction, and the novel was once adapted into a TV drama and received an enthusiastic response from a local audience. Since its first edition, the 175-page novel has been republished several times.

Pengabdian tells the story of a Bruneian woman, Siti Nur, who comes from a middle-class family and has a strong heart and a firm belief in the religion of Islam. The novel narrates her journey and struggles, from her difficult childhood to becoming a respected medical doctor and creating a better life and future for herself, her family, society, and her country, Brunei. Although Siti Nur received medical education overseas in the United Kingdom and was exposed to what is portrayed in the novel as a hedonistic Western world, she returns to Brunei with strong Islamic values and Malay cultural practices that have remained intact. *Pengabdian*, which can also be translated as submission, describes Siti Nur as an ideal character and true embodiment of a Bruneian Malay Muslim woman with a good moral compass, who makes sacrifices for the good of the people around her and for the nation. The role of religion and the status and positioning of woman in Brunei society are amongst the central issues highlighted in this novel.

Norsiah Gapar, the author of *Pengabdian*, was born in Seria, Brunei on 24 April 1952. She graduated with a BSc in Biochemistry and an MSc in Clinical Chemistry from Southampton and Surrey Universities in the United Kingdom, respectively. She returned to Brunei and worked as the Acting Assistant Director of the Scientific Division at the Ministry of Health. She was one of the most prolific local literary authors in the 1970s and remains the first and only female Bruneian to win the prestigious Southeast Asian Writers Award in 2009. She mostly writes about the status and the contribution of women to national development and female empowerment in Brunei and has successfully created a devoted female nationalist through the character of Siti Nur in *Pengabdian*. *Pengabdian* was inspired by Norsiah's immediate surroundings, and the novel has autobiographical elements (Aminah, "Imej Wanita Melayu"; Norsiah; Nor Faridah; Kathrina, "Articulating Female Citizenship").

Theoretical frameworks

This paper utilises the Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model, highlighting the triadic signs of representamen, referent, and interpretant (Peirce). The representamen/signifier, known as the symbol, refers to a form of sign of a material or non-material entity. The sign can be words, sounds, images, objects, ideologies or acts without any intrinsic meaning until they are inferred with meaning. The referent/object highlights the representation of the studied sign, which requires understanding of the meaning behind the sign. The object stands as a reference to a sort of idea or even ideology (Peirce; Chandler; Merrell). The interpretant "[m]ediates between the representamen and the semiotic object in

such a way as to bring about an interrelation between them at the same time and in the same way that it brings itself into interrelation with them” (Merrell 28). The Peircean semiotic model (see Figure 1) is used due to its efficacy in deciphering literary discourse, relations, and meanings (Mohammad; Santaella).

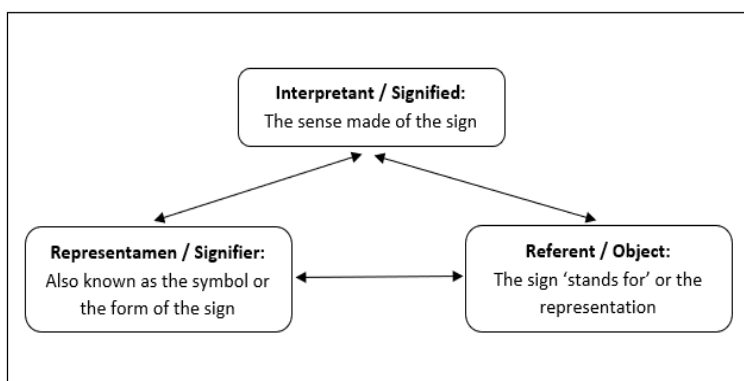


Figure 1 The Peircean Semiotic Model

Using componential analysis, the study of the symbol analysed in *Pengabdian* focuses upon linguistic elements including grammatical features and nouns, while the referent engages the semantic understanding or ideologies behind the symbol. Both the representamen and the referent emphasise the comprehension of the interpretant that highlights the pragmatic functions of the linguistic symbol and its representation in devising a specific discourse, focuses on the religious discourse of Islamic values.

Although the reference and the interpretation of the triadic components can be infinite as Peirce believes that “our [the interpreter] knowledge is never absolute” (Merrell 28), particularly when dealing with fiction that is open to multiple interpretations, this paper focuses on interpreting these three components by utilising textual analysis of sequential events and literary aspects surrounding the signs to deliberate on the analytical findings. This is to ensure that all three semiotic components integrate sensibly to form a meaningful linguistic sign.

This paper further incorporates Halstead’s framework of Islamic values and moral education to deliberate on the types of Islamic *da’wab* in Islamic society. This is to understand the Islamic moral education infused in *Pengabdian*, while further justifying the novel as part of religious discourse in Brunei. Using the Qur’an and Hadith as the authoritative reference in Islam, Halstead’s framework emphasises three dimensions of Islamic morality:

- (a) *akblaq* – the duties and responsibilities set out in the shari’ah and in Islamic teaching[s] generally; (b) *adab* – the manners associated with

good breeding; and (c) the qualities of character possessed by a good Muslim, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. (283)

Both Peirce's and Halstead's frameworks are fully utilised to understand the representation of Islamic values and principles based on semiotic elements deciphered through linguistic constituents used in *Pengabdian*. Thematic content analysis is used to discuss the representation of the three dimensions of Islamic values and moral education theorised by Halstead. As supplementary justifications, this paper also draws Islamic scriptures of the Noble Qur'an and Hadith that are embraced as the rules of daily life, human relationships, and *da'wahism* for the Muslims.

Semiotic elements and religious discourse in *Pengabdian*

Three recurring linguistic symbols and significant themes related to Islamic *da'wah* are found in *Pengabdian*: the significance of submission to God, attitudes and judgement towards worldly matters, and the issue of rights and possessions in Islam.

Theme 1: Submission to God

Islamic values and moral education commonly emphasise the good qualities of character in every Muslim and the importance of emulating the characteristics of Prophet Muhammad as an exemplary figure in Islam (Halstead). In *Pengabdian*, this is interpreted through the representamen of Siti Nur. As the main character, Siti Nur is a moral compass, religious figure, and a role model to others (Aminah, "Imej Wanita Melayu"; Kathrina, "Articulating Female Citizenship"). The author foregrounds Siti Nur as a symbol for a referential semantic of undivided and unconditional submission to God.

Siti Nur as a symbolism of an ideal Muslim is emphasised through the juxtaposition of her personality with other characters, specifically her younger siblings, Zul and Hannah, her sister-in-law, Marina, and Samuel's father, Peter. This is represented through the internal and external conflicts between these characters. For instance, Zul and Hannah who are initially depicted as having more wayward personalities influenced by Western cultures, are seen to have disagreements of thoughts and principles with Siti Nur. However, they later become obedient in their responsibilities as Muslims, explicitly following the example of Siti Nur. This can also be seen through indirect comparison between Siti Nur and Peter where the latter is depicted as materialistic and an opportunist, but later converts to Islam. A similar sentiment is shown between Siti Nur and Marina, the latter who lacks religious education, leading to adulterous behaviour. Like other characters, Marina seeks advice from Siti Nur. Furthermore, Siti Nur is capable of inspiring Sam, an atheist, to convert to Islam, and is able to counsel her uncle, Khalid from remaining a national terrorist. The prominence of Siti Nur as a leading character, who constantly provides advice, guidance, and kindness to

others, demonstrates her qualities as an inspiration further providing evidence that this representamen aims to inspire readers in the process.

Siti Nur resembles a candle that brightens the people around her, although it is burning herself for the betterment of others. (Norsiah 85) (Hindon, Siti Nur's housekeeper, describes Siti Nur's kindness to others)²

The representamen of Siti Nur is also related to the title of *Pengabdian*, translates as 'Submission.' Every word and action of Siti Nur, and her unconditional devotion to God are concurrent with the core belief of Islam as it "is first and foremost the religion of submission (the literal meaning of Islam is 'submission')" (Halstead 289). This shows the pragmatic purpose (interpretant) of using Siti Nur to encourage readers to emulate her traits and attitudes in life and her devotion to family, religion, and nation, in line with the Islamic principle that urges its followers to obey the decrees of God and His messenger.

It is not for a believing man or a believing woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter, that they should [thereafter] have any choice about their affair. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger has certainly strayed into clear error. (Qur'an 33:36)

Here, the representation of Siti Nur encourages every Muslim to focus on the rewards of the afterlife. This is implied through the sincerity of Siti Nur who continuously helps others without expecting any return, extending the helping hand of continuous charity to local children and the nation (Kathrina, "Articulating Female Citizenship" 49). Thus, the core narrative of *Pengabdian* is related to a characteristic of Islamic literature which is stylistically presented through a beautiful expression of a religious figure and their traits, identity, experience, emotion, or intentions (Arif Kharkhi; Hasan) – all these highlight the Islamic component of *da'mah* in the novel.

Another linguistic symbol suggesting the Islamic teachings through a desired Muslim quality is reflected through the recurring characters of sick and dying children in the novel, in which the author symbolises the referent of sick and dying children as a lifelong journey of worldly tests. As the world represents a place of trials and tribulations, every Muslim is taught to never give up in facing worldly tests, as they are also part of character building and the essence of becoming a true Muslim. Prophet Muhammad said: "When Allah (SWT) desires good for someone, He tries him with hardships" (Hadith narrated by Sahih al-Bukhari).

This is evident in several episodes highlighting Shamsul, Junaidah, and Azmil exemplifying sick and dying children and Udin who has Down's syndrome. Despite the challenges, their parents never give up on their children's sickness, and Siti Nur continues to treat them unconditionally (Norsiah 3, 6-7, 32-33). This is also highlighted when Siti Nur refuses to compromise Junaidah's treatment for

² English translations of all Malay source texts are mine, unless otherwise stated.

Beta-thalassaemia even when other medical officers question the future of the sick girl (19-20). Siti Nur preaches that the right to take a life should only lie with God and that it does not lie with them as medical professionals and humans, clearly indicating how her profession orients itself in the context of belief, faith, and submission to God. Siti Nur questions the decision to terminate Junaidah's treatment, thus: "Sam, in this life, only Allah [God] is the All-Knowing of His creations. Allah is The Almighty. Let's put our trust in Him" (20).

In a related interpretation, the sick children can be a reminder that death is inevitable for everyone regardless of age, status, occupation, or personal deeds. Besides the obvious narratives of the sick and dying children, death is also inevitable for Siti Nur, who is young with a beloved character, righteous, and possesses the ideal traits of a Muslim woman. The author uses Siti Nur as a paragon of not yielding to adversity, as the main character remains calm and patient when diagnosed with a terminal ovarian cancer, while never gives up on her life, her work and her contribution to society.

By stressing Siti Nur and the sick children as symbols, *Pengabdian* uses religious discourse to emphasise life as a divine gift and also a test. Here, a divine gift and a test mean that every human is granted with many rights, but one should not be complacent and ought to grasp hardship as trial and tribulation and should never succumb to the worldly tests. Such personal qualities in every Muslim can be a form of charity and welfare to oneself and others, and also a symbol of submission to God.

Theme 2: Exposition of worldly affairs

A few recurring linguistic symbols also emphasise the attitudes and judgement towards worldly affairs devised as part of religious discourse highlighting the aspects of *adab*, which is associated with good breeding or courtesy (Halstead). The recurring representaments under this theme are implicitly foregrounded through the juxtaposition of contrastive symbols and characters to denote Islamic morality.

A semiotic element is foregrounded through the representamen of being Medical Doctor (MD) and is attached to the main characters of Siti Nur and Samuel. This representamen indicates the highest level of medical degree, representing a coveted professional achievement. In *Pengabdian*, the author uses MD as a referent to its semantic meaning of social status that emphasises the respect society and the nation holds for the medical profession. The novel repetitively features MD as a benchmark of success among locals. For instance, Fatimah repeatedly compares the success of Siti Nur to her other children and Peter assumes that the success of Samuel would bring more respect and wealth to his new hospital. As Fatimah recalls the success of Siti Nur: "It had been five years since Siti Nur returned with great success from overseas and had since been known all over the country. She was known as a young Malay doctor who was

also intelligent, gracious, and beautiful” (Norsiah 24). Peter coerces Samuel due to the latter’s expertise:

But the new hospital will become the biggest and most modern hospital in this country. It will cater to the rich and important people.... If you lead the management, you will earn power and respect from others. You will be admired. (Norsiah 47)

Pengabdian thus elevates the status of medical doctors in Brunei. The pragmatic purpose to foreground MD as a symbol is essential to highlight the importance of education and social status in the local community. This is devised to encourage the readers to appreciate academic and occupational status while urging them to pursue a meaningful career and charitable work for the benefit of all. This is in accordance with the Islamic values of seeking knowledge, as Islam also elevates the status and the rewards of those who are knowledgeable and help other people to learn. The Qur’an 58:11 states: “God will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees. And God is acquainted with what you do.” Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “Whoever follows a path in pursuit of knowledge, God makes his way easy to paradise” (Bukhari).

Inevitably infused with Islamic teachings and religious discourse to summon the value of education, devising such symbol to elevate the status of MD and education may be natural, as the author herself also received a medical education (Nor Faridah 120). Furthermore, the value of high education in *Pengabdian* should also be parallel to the strong faith and belief in Islam, which can be seen through the depiction of the pious Siti Nur who “embodies the perfect result of the Bruneian scholar returned, able to use the tools and knowledge of the West for national needs, guided by national values” (Kathrina, “Articulating Female Citizenship” 49).

Another religious discourse used to highlight the exposition of worldly affairs is channelled through the representamen of the Western world, due to a common notion that “Western civilization that monopolises a large part of the world today is also a civilization that is not based on religion... and has also chanted secular slogans” in the Malay World (Muhammad Syafi Fauzan et al. 1150). Thus, there is an obligation for the Malays to safeguard their faith and wellbeing as Muslims (Mohd. Shuhaimi and Osman Chuah; Mustafa). While this notion is imbued throughout *Pengabdian*, a particular episode highlighting a debate between the main protagonists of Siti Nur and Sam can be perceived as a religious discourse foregrounding the clash between Western culture and Islam where the latter is perceived essential to every human. Siti Nur preaches following Sam’s doubt about Islam. As the narrator describes:

Sam still remembers the biggest issue in their relationship. Religion. When they were in London, Sam had many White friends who were not religious. Most of them were the children of high society who were

annoyed with their parents' hypocrisy that used Christianity for personal advantage. These people, who were actually atheists, forced themselves to do charity although deep inside they were still prejudiced towards those who had different skin colour and poor people... "Human needs a guideline in life and their action, especially on civility and morality. Human being, who has instincts and manners, requires a mechanism to motivate them to do good and to forbid wrong and is in need of a presence of power to nurture a sense of scare and respect. That power is bestowed by God to humans through religion. (Norsiah 53-54)

In *Pengabdian*, the Western world is symbolised by its referential semantic of hedonism and secularism, which is evident in many episodes (see Appendix A). The symbolisms may have suggested that the Western world is polluted with hedonistic cultures, while signifying the penetration of Western cultures into the Malay-Muslim world.

In relation to refining *adab* in Islam (Halstead), the author stylistically devises the representamen of the Western world as a reminder to Muslims to be aware of the assimilation of negative influences into their faith, religion and culture, further proposes a moral education. While it is a common debate on the disparity of Westernisation vis-à-vis Islamic teachings (Muhammad Syafi Fauzan et al.; Nasr), a proliferation of literature has advocated the importance of Islam as a gatekeeper to preserve Malayness (Kortteinen; Mansurnoor). The discussion of Islamic and Malay values amid modernisation and Westernisation is prevalent in Bruneian literature (Kathrina "Packaging MIB", Kathrina et al.). Other studies have found such religious discourse in a celebrated *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) that is used as didactic production for the Bruneians (Noorashid et al.; Kathrina, "Editorial"). In *Pengabdian*, this is reflected through the depiction of Siti Nur who – though educated in the UK – is able to defend herself from hedonistic influences and secularism. Siti Nur's character has also successfully inspired other characters to do good and change for betterment through her words and exemplary actions. Sam recalls Siti Nur's teaching of Islam, as the quote below shows:

Siti Nur answered that religion was revealed by God in accordance with specific people and civilisation. Islam appeared as the absolute religion revealed by the God to complete and enhance all of the religious teachings that had come before it. That's why Islam had become the only religion approved by God. Siti Nur's words were always treasured in his heart. (Norsiah 54)

Hannah idolises her sister, Siti Nur's success in education and in life. As the narrator puts it:

But Hannah felt that money and wealth could not be measured in today's world. Competence is more important. If competence were accompanied by corresponding effort, one would be able to improve their life. Look

at Kak Siti [Siti Nur]. Kak Siti was once struggling.... Now, because of her competence, Kakak Siti had become a doctor. With a big salary, she is highly respected by people. More respected than a wealthy man. (Norsiah 65)

It is sensible to stylistically use this linguistic symbol with such interpretation, as many studies on faiths and religions have consistently indicated the clash of civilisations and misunderstanding between the West/Westerners and Muslim-majority societies/Muslims (Fox). This is substantiated as Islam is the utmost religion and the pillar of livelihood to be embraced by the Malays across the Malay World (Mohd. Shuhaimi and Osman Chuah), including Brunei where the literary production of *Pengabdian* and the narration is set. Thus, there is a need to defend the Islamic and Malay cultures of the Bruneians. There is a possibility that *Pengabdian* is an ideological mechanism to homogenise the national philosophy of MIB while restraining foreign influences (Kathrina, "Articulating Female Citizenship").

In an overlapping sentiment, another referent of semantic meaning focusing on worldly affairs can be deciphered from the symbolic usage of linguistic element of luxury cars. While this paper does not deny that luxury is a personal choice and a highly-subjective topic, it does not dismiss the notion of luxury being devised as social criticism towards worldly status and capitalism (Dubois and Patternault; Veblen), as elements such as expensive cars, houses, and shops remain relevant to symbolise luxury and hedonic lifestyle in contemporary literature (Ho 111). This is in line with a claim that elementary subsets such as luxury cars and costumes can represent a semiotic connotation of social class in literary pieces (M Fazmi et al. 135).

In *Pengabdian*, three types of European made luxury cars are highlighted in several episodes in the exposition, the middle, and the climax. This is evident as these episodes primarily suggest: the comparison of spending on and driving a luxurious BMW 7 Series car with practicing selflessness and moderation in life while focusing on charity (Norsiah 38); the admiration towards BMW by a Western-influenced Malay character (94); the juxtaposition of the egocentric rich community driving Rolls Royce with the poor and slum community in the metropolitan UK (89); and the emphasis of Peter who is materialistic driving a specific luxury car of Mercedes 450 SLE (149). The author may have used European-made luxury cars as a satirical symbol of temporary happiness of worldly affairs, as these representamens are attached to the negative side of these juxtapositions.

With relevance to Islamic values and signifying the pragmatic purpose of using luxury cars as symbols, the author implicitly warns against submission to temporary happiness and materialism. Such a notion is highlighted in many verses in the Qur'an that rebuke temporary amusement and diversion while encouraging its followers to embrace the real happiness (rewards) in the Hereafter.

Know that the life of this world is but amusement and diversion and adornment and boasting to one another and competition in increase of wealth and children – like the example of a rain whose [resulting] plant growth pleases the tillers; then it dries and you see it turned yellow; then it becomes [scattered] debris. And in the Hereafter is severe punishment and forgiveness from God and approval. And what is the worldly life except the enjoyment of delusion. (Qur'an 57:20)

And the worldly life is not but amusement and diversion; but the home of the Hereafter is best for those who are conscious of God, so will you not reason? (Qur'an 6:32)

Highlighting semiotic elements to warn readers against pleasure-seeking lifestyles, worldly affairs, and inappropriate Western influences should also become one of the core values infused in *Pengabdian*. As part of an effective medium of Islamic *da'wah*, this notion is created as a way to address the social issues and the stereotypes of the then-community (Nor Faridah 119) and “to articulate the domestication of Western education” (Kathrina, “Articulating Female Citizenship” 48).

Theme 3: Protecting vs. abusing rights

Islam teaches its followers to protect honour and maintain justice of oneself and others, as the religion provides many human rights for Muslims and non-Muslims. This can be seen from a reminder by Prophet Muhammad, which highlights the merit of individuality, property, and integrity. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “Truly your blood, your property, and your honour are inviolable” (Bukhari).

In *Pengabdian*, the issue of rights to own and protect property through Islamic *da'wah* is approached through the representamen of land grant. The issue of land grant has always been a debate between Siti Nur's parents, Maarof, and Fatimah. In recurring episodes, Fatimah and Siti Nur are always against Maarof to lend the family's land (temporary own land) to be used by his opportunist friend, a Chinese man named Peter. Maarof is depicted as a man who is ignorant and always makes hasty decisions. Siti Nur and Fatimah question Maarof renting out their temporary own land to Peter:

“But, what is he attempting to do with the land, Ma?”

“I heard he's planning to build rental houses.”

“But he already owns many rental houses, Ma. And temporary own land can't be rent out, Ma!” (Norsiah 25)

Here, the author uses the land grant for its referential semantic that refers to the rights of local citizen that should be taken care of. The author stylistically devises this symbol through the long-time friendship between Maarof and Peter, who are Malay and Chinese, respectively, but still there is suspicion about Peter's character, particularly among Maarof's family. *Pengabdian* highlights Peter who

represents the race of Chinese as an opportunist, selfish, and materialistic, as the Chinese race is also depicted as one that one should be aware of (25). The Chinese are portrayed as outsiders in the Brunei community, which Peter himself is aware of (49), providing a possibility of land grant symbol as a reminder to the Malays. This is further shown through a debate between Peter and Samuel where the latter believes that land ownership should be managed by the Malays, not the Chinese (Peter). Samuel is against Peter's exploitation of Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) owned by Maarof, as he states:

“Why should I be concerned? This is their homeland, let them do their businesses. I feel elated to know that the Malays have shown interest in doing businesses. They should have been doing businesses since a long time ago. Perhaps we didn't give them the chance to do so.” (49)

Interpreting the representamen of land grant as the reminder of protecting rights of the local citizen is sensible, as the author uses two characters, Maarof and Zul, to represent the negligence of Malay people and loss of land rights. This is consistent when Zul argues with Fatimah about his unemployed state and neglects his mother's advice to clear out the TOL land to be utilised, inevitably exhibiting Zul's laziness of delaying the claim of land (123). Fatimah also criticises Maarof's indolence for not clearing out the TOL land (13), and later discovers Maarof's intention to illegally rent the land out to Peter (51). The author uses these episodes to highlight the issue of land ownership and local rights stemmed from the Malays themselves, in a way of a critique of the Malay race and stereotype. As Peter who is clearly labelled as an opportunist, a stereotype inherent of the Chinese race, the evidence above also offers a stereotype of the Malays as lazy, in contrast with the Chinese. Thus, the representamen can be understood as urging caution against abuse and protecting land rights as it also critiques loss of land rights for the Malays that may have been caused by their own negligence, amid claim that *Pengabdian* also highlights the issue of race relations in Brunei (Kathrina, “Articulating Female Citizenship”).

The author uses the semiotic element of land grant to highlight its pragmatic purpose of which is concurrent with the Islamic teachings that prohibit humans to mistreat and abuse human rights as highlighted in the Qur'an, providing evidence on the inclusion of religious discourse in the novel.

O you who have believed, do not consume one another's wealth unjustly but only [in lawful] business by mutual consent. And do not kill yourselves [or one another]. Indeed, Allah is to you ever Merciful. (Qur'an 4:29)

And when he goes away, he strives throughout the land to cause corruption therein and destroy crops and animals. And Allah does not like corruption. (Qur'an 2:205)

In a related but different sentiment, the issue of abusing rights and property is also symbolised through the representamen of rental houses and

rooms. While land grant is analysed as a symbol of Malay rights, rental houses and rooms are the referent to the government rights. Based on the sequential contexts and events embedded to this representamen, the author depicts rental houses and rental rooms as a means of government property and national rights that should not be exploited. The apparent debates and conflicts of interest between characters in *Pengabdian* further imply the awareness of using government properties for self-benefit.

Again, the issue of rights in owning and protecting government property is demonstrated through Peter whose character is repetitively portrayed as someone who takes advantage of the government's provision. Peter is narrated to be staying at a government house, despite owning many rental houses, prompting him being questioned by the protagonists Siti Nur and Fatimah, and even by his own son, Samuel. The issue of exploiting government property has always become a debate between Samuel and Peter, where Samuel does not condone the ominous action of his parents as he gradually shows interest in Islam, providing a possibility that Islamic principles may have instilled in Samuel the awareness of enjoining good and avoiding the forbidden action of exploitation of others' property.

In a related interpretation, the representamen of rental houses and rooms may represent the exploitation of Malay land with the pragmatic purpose of urging the local citizens to protect their national rights. This is evident through an episode when Peter proposes a great profitable health institution on a government land – to raise lucrative gains from the rich – to Sam and Siti Nur, who both main protagonists reject to get involved with, as it is against their belief and principle as a rightful citizen in the country (Norsiah 46-48).

The pragmatic purpose of using rental houses and rooms as a warning against exploiting others' rights is in line with Islamic teachings and principles that strictly forbid its followers to misuse others' properties, including the authority's, highlighting the edification of Islam as a religion that promotes equity and protects human rights.

And eat up not one another's property unjustly (in any illegal way e.g. stealing, robbing, deceiving, etc.), nor give bribery to the rulers (judges before presenting your cases) that you may knowingly eat up a part of the property of others sinfully. (Qur'an 2:188)

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: that the Messenger of Allah, said about Makkah: How sweet of a land you are and how dear you are to me, and if it were not that my people expelled me from you, I would not have lived other than you. (Jami' al-Tirmidhi Book: 49, Hadith: 4305)

Under this thematic analysis, the semiotic elements found as reminders to safeguard the MIB, including the national tangible and intangible assets from foreign influences. Addressing such issues, there is no short of the relevance of Islamic teachings in it. Both findings also adhere to the notion of rights and

bestowments upon humans, as highlighted in the teachings of Islam that encompasses the right to peaceful life and living, the right to own, protect and have property protected under Islamic economic jurisprudence (Hayward).

While incorporating implicit semiotic elements to channel Islamic *da'wah*, the author uses a more straightforward approach of the inclusion of sermonic discourse in dialogues between characters. The sermonic discourse predominantly demonstrates Islamic ideologies and attitudes towards certain worldly affairs. This can be deciphered from several dialogues explicating religious discourse as they enlighten religious issues and values in Islam (Halstead).

Although Aminah ("Imej Wanita Melayu") and Magon claim the inclusion of Islamic knowledge in *Pengabdian* through Siti Nur's character as part of Islamic propagation, this paper further classifies this approach as the inclusion of sermonic discourse that explicitly highlights the dos and the don'ts in Islam and the relationship between Muslims. While it can be argued that the teaching of good and the avoidance of bad and the use of sermonic discourse to support the edification of the belief system can be associated with any religion, this paper found that the use of semiotic symbols and sermonic discourse in *Pengabdian* are closely represented through the Islamic requisite of *Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Mungkar* (enjoining good and forbidding wrong). These are stylistically devised by the author through the comparison of positive and negative symbols or characters in order to put forward the Islamic principle and ideology. Furthermore, it is clearly implied that the issue of religion, specifically Islam, is the main aspect influencing every conflict and resolution in the relationship between Siti Nur and Samuel (Norsiah 53-55).

Using implicit semiotic elements and explicit sermonic discourse, it is an ideal approach by the author to put forward Islamic ideology and *da'wah* using literary pieces in order to address social problems, including the issues of faith, religion, stereotypes, medical affairs, and lifestyles in the then-community in Brunei. As literature could become a means of Islamic and ethic teachings (Abdul Karim; Thielmann), *Pengabdian* is potentially the author's response to the social problems experienced by all level of generations of the Brunei community back in the 1980s, where the conflict of cultural and national identities and race relations, and the penetration of secularism in Malay culture were prevalent (Muhammad Hadi).

The author's approach of *da'wahism* by infusing religious discourse in *Pengabdian* is in line with Childs' and Fowler's claim on how the inclusion of semiotics in literary production can be inspired from its surrounding ideological modes and forms of society, including the author themselves (138). Thus, while *Pengabdian* is a realistic fiction entailing the life of a successful woman figure in Brunei, it never poses any conflict of interest for the Brunei government to endorse *Pengabdian*, for almost two decades, as part of the national education

curriculum. This is because the novel supports the edification of Islam while putting forward idealism and ideology of Malay culture and lifestyles in accordance with the national aspiration of MIB.

Following Halstead's principles of Islamic values and morality, *Pengabdian* deals with the two main aspects of moral education, as it disseminates "knowledge of what people should or should not do, and motivating them to act in accordance with that knowledge" (Halstead 83), implicating the Islamic principle of *Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Mungkar*. As Islamic literature normally engages the edification of Islam, while inviting readers to appreciate the religion through artistic writing techniques and is written by a Muslim writer (Arif Kharkhi; Hasan), the characteristics of Islamic literature can be found in *Pengabdian*, which has raised the potential of the novel to become part of Islamic literary traditions in Brunei.

Conclusion

While the sermonic discourse used to highlight the Islamic requisite of *Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Mungkar* shows that *Pengabdian* uses an explicit approach of proselytising Islamic principles and values, the semiotic analysis has identified the existence of implicit Islamic signs to disseminate the knowledge, the teachings and moral education in Islam. Therefore, while previous analyses involving Islamic discourse in *Pengabdian* mostly look into the explicit sermonic discourse, in an effort to infuse the Islamic knowledge and support the national ideology of MIB, this paper offers an alternative perspective in looking at a religious discourse in the novel, specifically using semiotics.

Based on the analytical findings, the linguistic elements in the novel have inevitably shaped *Pengabdian* as a religious discourse amid the author's effort to highlight social issues within Brunei society, while supporting the edification of Islam and the aspiration of the nation. While this paper offers readers to appreciate *Pengabdian* using a linguistic-literary perspective, it further opens the possibility of future investigation on *Pengabdian* as part of Islamic literature in the Brunei literary tradition.

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