

Women as Sex Objects in Azizi Haji Abdullah's Novel *Bila Hujan Malam: A Critical Appraisal*¹

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Abstract

This article analyses Azizi Haji Abdullah's novel *Bila Hujan Malam* to determine critical claims of its literary merit. Using the analytical framework *Persuratan Baru* advanced by the local writer and critic, Mohd Affandi Hassan, that distinguishes between story and knowledge, the article unpacks "women as sex objects" as the novel's main perception, which Azizi structures into the story by means of four narrative strategies. The strategies centre round firstly, using selected aspects of the "unexplained antecedent" technique, secondly, making molestation that strips women of control and agency as the only form of sexual union available, thirdly, providing a context conducive to sexual exploitation, and fourthly, denying a role for women other than that of a sex object. The article argues that, contrary to claims of its literary merit, the novel prioritises iniquity as a valid aesthetic and literary expression, at the same time as it makes discourse/ knowledge irrelevant to its structuring. In so doing, it operates as a novel only on the level of story and story making. This article thus concludes that *Bila Hujan Malam* is no more than an erotic novel. It also calls into question several literary conventions regarded as mainstream in Malay literature.

Abstract in Malay

Makalah ini menganalisis novel Azizi Haji Abdullah *Bila Hujan Malam* untuk menentukan kesahihan dakwaan tingginya nilai sastera novel tersebut. Dengan menggunakan *Persuratan Baru* sebagai kerangka analisis, yakni gagasan yang membezakan antara ilmu dan cerita, hasil cetusan penulis dan pengkritik tempatan Mohd. Affandi Hassan, makalah ini merungkai persepsi utama novel ini yang memaparkan wanita sebagai objek seks melalui empat strategi naratif. Pertama, strategi menggunakan teknik "asal mula yang tidak dijelaskan"; kedua, menjadikan perkosaan yang menafikan keberdayaan wanita sebagai satu-satunya hubungan seks yang disediakan; ketiga, mewujudkan konteks yang cukup kondusif kepada eksploitasi seks:

¹ This is a revised version of the Malay original titled "Wanita Sebagai Objek Seks: Persepsi dan Pengungkapannya dalam novel *Bila Hujan Malam* oleh Azizi Haji Abdullah," presented at the SEBUMI 3 2010 Seminar, jointly organised by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universitas Indonesia, 12-13 October 2010, at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi.

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dan keempat, meniadakan peranan selain daripada objek seks bagi wanita. Makalah ini menyanggah dakwaan tingginya nilai sastera novel ini; sebaliknya makalah ini menghujahkan novel ini memprioritikan kebejatan sebagai pengucapan sastera dan estetik yang sah, sekali gus menjadikan wacana/ ilmu tidak relevan. Dengan berbuat demikian, novel ini berlegar pada tahap cerita dan membikin-cerita. Justeru, makalah ini menghujahkan bahawa *Bila Hujan Malam* tidak lebih daripada sebuah novel erotik; ia juga mempertikaikan beberapa konvensi sastera yang dianggap arus perdana dalam kesusasteraan Melayu.

Keywords

Persuratan Baru, discourse, story, sex object, erotic novel

Keywords in Malay

Persuratan Baru, wacana, cerita, objek seks, novel erotik

Introduction

Since the 1960's, with the publication of his first novel, Azizi has established himself as a rather prolific writer having penned hundreds of short stories, besides numerous novels, dramas, literary essays and articles. He is also a well-known blogger. A number of his works have won awards, and his novel *Senja Belum Berakhir*, having won the 1971 Literary Award, was once a prescribed school textbook for literature. The Malaysian literary community is, thus, aware of both his literary output and standing in the field. With this status, it was no surprise, therefore, that he was chosen in 1988 to represent Malaysia as the recipient of the SEA Write Award.

When a writer is both prolific and award winning, with the added label "established" often attributed to him by the Malay literary community, his works certainly call for some critical scrutiny. Such an exercise that aims at a scrupulous examination of his strengths (and shortcomings, if any) has obvious merits: either they are highlighted as accomplishments worthy of emulation or alternatively as models to be avoided. An assessment of this nature appears to have added urgency when one takes note that the Malay literary public is rather hesitant to discuss and evaluate works of writers who have won official "recognition." This, then, sometimes result in such recognition being left without further affirmation of its merit. Alternatively, if the recognition is misplaced, then it results in such indefensible recognition being unfairly perpetuated. Thus, in contributing to our assessment of the position of Azizi in the Malay literary world, this article analyses one of his early novels *Bila Hujan Malam* (When it Rains at Night), first published in 1976, to determine his perception of women and his expression of this perception in creative form. It also seeks to draw attention to the admissibility of several literary conventions

regarded as mainstream in Malay literature. For the purpose of this analysis, Persuratan Baru, an analytical framework advanced by the local scholar, critic and creative writer, Mohd. Affandi Hassan will be utilised as the tool.

Gagasan Persuratan Baru: A Short Introduction

There is a considerable volume of literature on Persuratan Baru produced either by Mohd. Affandi Hassan himself or its practitioners.³ Hence, a detailed account of Persuratan Baru is deemed redundant. However, a few salient points would be underlined to bring clarity to this discussion.

Persuratan Baru is based on the complete conviction of the unity of God and His might as the single most powerful *Creator* on the one hand, and man as the *created*, on the other. With this as its take-off point, Persuratan Baru then elaborates on the three main principles that govern its pronouncements, and they are the nature of man or *insan*, the nature of knowledge and action, and the nature and function of literature. The nature of *insan*, sealed through the covenant to worship none other than Him, places man as His servant and His vicegerent on earth. Cemented in the concept of *taklif*, this refers to man's responsibility and accountability to abide by His commands and to avoid that which He prohibits. This indeed is the nature of man upon which Persuratan Baru is based. Premised on this concept of *taklif*, and with regard to the nature of knowledge, Persuratan Baru contends that revealed knowledge is true and definitive, and it alone enables man to know his Creator, and that which does not, is not true knowledge. Concomitant with this, action that is not premised on true knowledge renders the said action as futile. And this includes literary activities. Persuratan Baru draws attention to the Qur'anic chapter al-Alaq that clearly links the pen (*Qalam*) with knowledge. Thus, it is established that the act of writing calls for discharging the responsibility to convey true knowledge. Any work that does not fulfil this responsibility renders the effort futile. This contention that literature must convey knowledge finds support in Rahmah who writes:

In Islam, it is the purpose of literature to convey true knowledge... literature functions as an effective means to convey knowledge. Thus, knowledge occupies the exalted position... literature that is devoid of knowledge renders it of little use to society... literary aesthetics devoid of knowledge is similarly useless. (77-78)

At the practical level, Persuratan Baru makes a distinction between knowledge and story (Ungku Maimunah, *Dinamika Pemikiran Sastera Melayu*). This distinction is indeed a paradigm shift, which the Malay literary world has

³ See, for example, Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 1992; Mohd. Affandi Hassan et al, 2008; Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 2007, 2009, and Mohd Zariat A Rani, 2004.

failed to recognise. Further, Persuratan Baru accords a higher position to knowledge because it conveys arguments, ideas, thoughts and viewpoints. And to body forth these arguments and ideas, Persuratan Baru introduces the concept of discourse. It is pertinent to note that “discourse” however does not refer to the mere inclusion of information that is of little relevance. Discourse, on the other hand, is information that has been subject to reasoning and synthesis that then crystallises as coherent, useful ideas.

Story, on the other hand, creates the possibilities for discourse to be voiced naturally and subtly. By manipulating narrative elements such as characters, plot and events appropriately, story makes it possible for discourse to be expressed as required throughout the narrative. In short, story is the platform for conveying knowledge. Such being its function, story is thus necessarily inferior to knowledge.

Based on the above distinction, works that prioritise knowledge and knowledge-disseminating are categorised as *karya persuratan*, whilst those that prioritise story and story-making are *karya sastra*. In addition, Mohd. Affandi Hassan categorises as *karya picisan* works that make exploitation of sex as their principal thematic preoccupation. Mohd. Affandi Hassan explains the three categories as follows:

Persuratan Baru proposes three categories so as to facilitate evaluation and fair ranking of works. First, *karya persuratan*, works that comply with the principles laid down by Persuratan Baru; second, *karya sastra*, works produced by writers who exploit unlimited freedom and unbridled emotions; third, *karya picisan* or erotic and popular works that give undue focus to both base sexual relationships and the story *per se*. (*Gagasan Persuratan Baru* 65)

Mohd. Affandi Hassan further defines *karya picisan* as follows:

A work is categorised as *picisan* when it makes iniquity as its principal value, such as when illicit sex is presented as “acceptable” and portrayed as an inevitable consequence of a tragedy, exploitation, injustice, and deception, thus elevating illicit sex to an exalted symbol in the work. (*Gagasan Persuratan Baru* 62)⁴

Persuratan Baru's distinction between knowledge and story serves to extend our understanding of literature and literary criticism. Knowledge and story therefore serve different functions and objectives, in line with their

⁴ According to Persuratan Baru, *picisan* is not limited to creative works only but also other forms of writing including academic writings that are not argued out objectively and coherently, based on true knowledge.

respective positions and roles. Further, Persuratan Baru is very critical of *karya picians* which makes sex its narrative axis and focus, at the same time that it pilots the development of the story, replete with the use of erotically-nuanced language and explicit sexual episodes. This firm stance challenges and questions many of the cherished literary practices and aesthetic ideology of Malay writers and critics. It is in this context that Persuratan Baru stands as a clear paradigm shift, one that extends our understanding of literature and literary criticism, and thus calls for our appreciation.

What makes Persuratan Baru a preferred analytical framework compared to Western and other local theories is that it is superior in terms of its relevance and applicability to our needs. Persuratan Baru is clearly a comprehensive framework, encompassing both theoretical and practical aspects. At the theoretical level, it proposes a firm conviction as its premise, as exemplified by the concept of *taklif*. This is not to deny that there are other local theories such as Takmilah that are similarly grounded in a firm belief in Allah the Almighty. However, unlike Takmilah or other local theories, Persuratan Baru provides for a comprehensive framework that integrates both the theoretical and practical aspects in a coherent manner. In synthesising the three components of the nature of man, the nature of knowledge and action, and the nature and function of literature, Persuratan Baru delineates the responsibility attendant upon being a writer. In so doing, Persuratan Baru underscores clearly a writer's responsibility towards his Creator, and how this responsibility cannot be denied, avoided, or sidelined. At the practical level, Persuratan Baru distinguishes between knowledge and story thereby facilitating the distinction between a literary work that makes story-making its main organising principal, and thus allowing for the manipulation of narrative components to dominate its narrative space, or otherwise. This then determines the dominant pursuit of the writer: either to make and develop a story or to build and convey his ideas and discourse. It is in this context that Persuratan Baru is dissimilar to or at odds with other local theories. By prioritising true knowledge as an important criterion, a concern that concurs with the reality and practice of knowledge from the Islamic perspective, Persuratan Baru not only makes possible the analysis of a text but ensures that the evaluation is grounded on criteria that are correct, accurate and relevant. Working on these lines, Persuratan Baru resolves a major dilemma that has been plaguing the Malay literary establishment – the question of evaluation.⁵

⁵ Mohd. Affandi Hassan, for example, sees as a “literary scandal” the choice of Azizi’s novel *Kawin-kawin* as a winning entry of a competition (Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 2003). See also his comments on the national literary award, 2010.) See also the reference to the *Hadiah Sastra Perdana Malaysia* (Premier Literary Award of Malaysia) as no longer “perdana” (premier) because the criteria used are considered invalid and unacceptable (Rozais, 2010).

When contrasted against Western theories, Persuratan Baru, which is anchored in *taklif*, clearly distinguishes itself from those theories that reject the existence of the Almighty God. In the Western paradigm, reality in terms of the transcendental or spiritual neither exists nor is relevant. This rejection means that its interpretation and understanding of knowledge, truth and reality is limited to only the physical reality. Situated against such a background, it would not be out of place to raise the following questions: should we continue to use these Western theories without interrogating them?

It should not be forgotten that among Malaysian Malay-Muslim writers, there is strong belief in the existence and oneness of God. Thus, what justification would there be for these same writers to hold on dearly to Western notions of knowledge and truth which, as asserted earlier, ignores His presence? Would this not contradict the Islamic teachings? Should we, therefore, not interrogate these Western theories intelligently, thus adopting only elements that are suitable and tenable to the Islamic belief and conviction? What this calls for then is caution and wisdom as opposed to uncritical and indiscriminate adoption of Western theories. Thus, Persuratan Baru makes it pertinent for Western theories, if they are to be used at all, to be contested or interrogated. This means that Persuratan Baru offers a set of evaluation criteria that is correct, accurate and relevant, and in accordance with our beliefs and values.

Given the strengths offered by Persuratan Baru when compared to other theories, both local and Western, this paper adopts Persuratan Baru as its framework for analysing *Bila Hujan Malam*, in particular Azizi's perception of women.

Bila Hujan Malam: A Critical Analysis

In seeking to analyse Azizi's text *Bila Hujan Malam*, the use of Persuratan Baru as the critical framework calls attention to two pertinent points. Whilst it is possible to apply Persuratan Baru to analyse a text produced by a non-Muslim writer, in the case of *Bila Hujan Malam*, a text produced by a Muslim who is also an *ustaz* (an Islamic religious teacher), the application of Persuratan Baru appears to be most apt and valid, thus quickly silencing any attempt to contest its use. In short, the use of Persuratan Baru would in no way be an anomaly. Secondly, and consistent with the above mentioned, questioning or sidelining Western theories for the purpose of assessing this novel is not inappropriate either.

This article proposes to highlight Azizi's dominant perception of women in *Bila Hujan Malam*. By examining four aspects of the novel's structuring, this article argues that the writer portrays women merely as sex objects. He realises this through the mode of story-making.

As alluded to earlier, Azizi is recognised and accepted as an “important figure” in the Malay literary circle, and his standing was further enhanced when a seminar titled “Seminar on the Thoughts of Azizi Haji Abdullah” was held on 3 August 2010 specifically to celebrate his works. Earlier to the above mentioned seminar, there certainly have been essays published to honour his creative talent. One such piece is A. Rahim Abdullah’s “Pemikiran Azizi Haji Abdullah dalam Karya Cereka” (Azizi Haji Abdullah’s Thoughts in his Fiction). Though A. Rahim made no reference to *Bila Hujan Malam*, the said essay served as an overall assessment of Azizi’s achievements as a writer, and this must naturally include *Bila Hujan Malam*. Taking off from A. Rahim’s claims, this article would thus try to establish if A. Rahim’s assertions are indeed justified and objective. Concomitant with that, the focus again would be on Azizi’s portrayal of women.

A. Rahim writes:

... some works merely aim at telling a story and presenting issues, as a storyteller would. However, there are works that raise issues as well as invite the audience to resolve the issues raised. Azizi’s works, his short stories, novels, and socio-political discourses clearly aim at raising and resolving issues. (16)

A. Rahim’s statement presupposes the presence of two types of literary productions in Malay literature (and in other literatures as well). The statement also acknowledges the existence of a hierarchy; firstly, works that merely narrate and present issues, which occupy an inferior position (the use of “merely” to describe such works attests to this), and secondly, works that problematise issues and invite readers to figure out how to solve the issues. The latter kind is considered superior.

A. Rahim’s classification reminds us of *Persuratan Baru*, which, long before 2005, had advanced the idea of hierarchy, labelling works as *karya persuratan*, *karya sastera* and *karya picisan*. *Persuratan Baru* that distinguishes between “knowledge” and “story” had long accorded a much lower status to works that merely tell a story. One can, of course, be forgiven for venturing to believe that A. Rahim has been influenced by *Persuratan Baru*. However, a closer reading would indicate that apart from acknowledging two types of writings, one inferior to the other, A. Rahim’s essay does not reflect the core ideas or influence of *Persuratan Baru*. On the contrary, A. Rahim’s assessment of Azizi’s works is obviously grounded on a scheme that is totally at odds with that propagated by *Persuratan Baru*.

However, the assertion that Azizi’s works stand fit to be categorised as those that “propose solutions,” as opposed to those that “merely tell a story” is important and needs to be examined critically. Indeed, based on *Bila Hujan Malam*, this analysis would show that Azizi turns out to be a mere storyteller,

and not one who invites readers to think up of plausible solutions. In short, *Bila Hujan Malam* fails to go beyond “telling a story,” thereby firmly situating it at the lower level.

Bila Hujan Malam centres on Tengku Yunus, an elderly but rich man who lives with his attractive adopted daughter, Hayati. Tengku Yunus lusts after his adopted daughter and his urges appear to heighten when it rains in the midst of the night. Hayati who is given drugs supposedly for health reasons falls prey to Tengku Yunus' sexual desires as he violates her when she is unconscious. Hayati, meanwhile, falls for Zahid, a bachelor who works for Tengku Yunus. A victim of the continued usage of the drug given by Tengku Yunus, Hayati has sex with Zahid. When this comes to the knowledge of the adopted father, he orders Zahid killed. Subsequent to Zahid's death, Hayati decides to end her life through suicide.

That *Bila Hujan Malam* merely tells a story becomes evident when one identifies the narrative axis that Azizi employs. On rainy nights, the female character is sexually assaulted, and this serves as the dominant activity in the novel. In short, the entire story-making and plot-development is centred on Hayati's repeated rape. By focusing on this predominant “activity” perpetuated on Hayati, the central female character, Azizi's perception of women as sex objects becomes clear. We will now examine the four aspects of storytelling that Azizi structures into the novel to portray women as sex objects.

The first is the employment of the “unexplained antecedent” technique, in which the story teller conceals certain information from the reader when the plot takes off midway, or pertinent information is not divulged fully or is deliberately withheld. This technique makes it possible for the concealed information to be used subsequently to develop the plot in terms of introducing complications or new twists when the concealed information is revealed. The concealed information thus has a role to play as the story unfolds. This technique is often seen in romances, folk tales and adventure stories. An example would be the origins or background of a protagonist being kept a secret, and when he is revealed a prince, the plot takes on an unexpected turn in synch with what has been revealed.

This technique is employed in *Bila Hujan Malam* in respect to Hayati, the moving force behind the novel. Readers first get to meet Hayati, the adopted daughter of Tengku Yunus, as a young, bewitching and desirable girl. The only information provided is that Tengku Yunus adopted her when she was nine. Beyond this little is told, although additional information about Hayati could alter either the storyline or the readers' perception of her or Tengku Yunus. Thus, the possibilities offered by this technique, namely revealing “secrets” or additional information for the purpose of the plot development, are not exploited. Why would this be so? The only plausible explanation is that the

novel only requires the presence of the young woman situated in an environment where she can be easily taken advantage of. All that is necessary, therefore, is a young and attractive woman in a vulnerable position (under the same roof as the male antagonist) for that is the only role assigned to her by the writer.

By opting to use the unexplained antecedent technique partially – making available a young woman who is constantly abused sexually – and disregarding the other possible half of the technique, Azizi clearly demonstrates the role he assigns Hayati, and in so doing defines the role of women merely as sex objects.

In the context of Malay/ Islamic society, a young woman sharing a house with a man who is not her *mahram* (that is a person with whom marriage may not be contracted), as portrayed in *Bila Hujan Malam*, is indeed out of the ordinary. However, the writer has neatly presented it as devoid of any oddity by having the villagers voicing no misgivings, “Tengku Yunus is beyond reproach, he is a man of honour” (12). In addition, the young men who work for him look upon Hayati as an adopted daughter who is indeed lucky (12). The story is structured such that Hayati herself harbours no distrust, although the adopted father’s gawk did raise some doubt on occasion:

She was quite aware the way the man whom she considered her father looked was not quite befitting that of a father. However, when she reminded herself that he was her father, although not her biological father, who showers so much love, she decided that it must be to appreciate her beauty. A daughter’s beauty is certainly a source of pride for a father, she reasoned. (10)

Thus, the narrative takes off with all suspicions cleared. In the context of the plot development, Hayati is strategically located so as to be easily abused, paving the way for the realisation of “women are sex objects” as Azizi’s perception that informs the novel.

The second aspect of the narrative-structuring involves Hayati (or women) being raped or engaged in sex in a situation over which they are neither aware nor in control. To bring this to fruition, the novel resorts to the use of drugs. *Bila Hujan Malam* places Hayati in sexual encounters with Tengku Yunus as well as Zahid. Whilst Hayati is raped when she is unconscious because of the drug that Tengku Yunus gives her, she seduces Zahid because of the drug given by Tengku Yunus. In both instances, she is under the influence of drugs, meaning that in both instances Hayati’s actions are beyond her control. On the other hand, both Hayati’s partners are in full control of their acts. *Bila Hujan Malam*, thus, clearly defines Hayati’s role, which is to make her available for abuse by the two men as they please. In fact, even when an occasion arises for Hayati to be conscious of her sexual encounter, it is rejected by Hayati’s male

partner for it is Hayati who needs to be in an unconscious state to facilitate the act:

He [Tengku Yunus] wanted to try out the new pill. The salesman had told him that it would be more effective. More satisfying. And for greater pleasure, he would have to take both the pills together. But he didn't need them. Even without the pills, he had such strong sexual drive. Only Hayati's [unconsciousness] mattered. (80)

However, the ultimate affirmation of Hayati's role and presence as a sex object, and one that is maintained throughout the novel is the fact that she is completely unaware of being raped by her adopted father every time it rains at nightfall. Only at the end does she learn of her predicament. Despite the harrowing ordeal and misery, the novel does not attempt to alter her status as a sex object, a role she "performs perfectly" since she is not aware of her plight.

The third aspect of storytelling that treats women as sex objects lies in creating an environment conducive for Hayati to be treated as such. By locating Hayati, the victim, as the adopted daughter of the lustful Tengku Yunus, the novel easily exploits the situation for the repeated rape to be perpetuated. This conducive situation is reinforced by portraying Tengku Yunus as a respectable and influential character to whom the locals are indebted. Whilst strengthening Tengku Yunus' position, Hayati's is weakened with her having no access to any form of support. In the context of the novel, Hayati's only hope is Zahid, but he is Tengku Yunus' employee who owes his life to his "patron." Tengku Yunus has a son whom Hayati looks upon as a brother, but again she is unable to seek his assistance as the novel distances him abroad pursuing his studies. The novel is thus structured to place Hayati in a helpless situation whilst Tengku Yunus, on the other hand, is all-powerful from every angle. When Hayati's helplessness is matched against Tengku Yunus' insatiable sexual appetite, the novel easily realises its objective of portraying women as sex objects. This is exactly what *Bila Hujan Malam* sets out to achieve, with additional references to sex stimulants, heavy rainfall at night, a huge residence with little human presence and cold nights setting the stage for dastardly acts. Added to this, Tengku Yunus is depicted as gloating over his triumph, "Tengku Yunus often smiled whenever Hayati appeared in front of him or was in his presence. That smile marked a fulfilment of a long desired yearning. She was an *object* to him. Nothing more" (41, emphasis added).

The fourth aspect in the structuring of *Bila Hujan Malam* is to deny Hayati any other role except that of a sex object. Throughout the novel Hayati is depicted as either being raped by Tengku Yunus or having sex with Zahid because of the drugs she is given. Finally, she commits suicide. It must be remembered that Zahid's death, which saddens her greatly, does not trigger the

suicide. She commits suicide only after learning that the drugs Tengku Yunus gives her is a sex stimulant, and that she had been used to satisfy the old man's lusts. Thus, in the last episode when she is offered the stimulant, she does not consume it having become aware of the treachery. Instead, she takes sleeping pills which leads to her death. By not accepting the stimulant offered, she rejects her role as a sex object, and it is for this refusal that the novel kills her off. Indeed, her death comes as no surprise as Hayati, who now rejects her assigned role, has no place in a narrative scheme whose only working formula is to present women as sex objects. And when women refuse to play that role, the novel then has no place for them. Her death thus serves as ample testimony to the fact that the novel allows for no other role for women except as sex objects. This argument gains further credence when one discerns how the novel manipulates its structure to have Hayati's death serve as both the climax and resolution of the story. In merging these two features, deemed as essential components in storytelling, the novel advances the perception of women as sex objects, at the same time that it privileges the said perception as both climax and denouement.

Hayati's death raises another question that needs to be answered. Since her death entails an action, which she commits, it draws attention to the concept of agency, a concept very familiar in feminist theories, and employed frequently. This observation is relevant in that in contemporary Malay literature issues related to women are often analysed within the framework of feminism. "Agency" is often translated into Malay as *ikhtiar* (being resourceful) or *keberdayaan* (empowerment). From one point of view, this translation and its connotations may be accepted; however, from another point of view, the translation is unacceptable.

As stated earlier, *Bila Hujan Malam* is structured to present women in a state of helplessness. This is achieved, for example, through situating Hayati and Zahid at a level lower than Tengku Yunus, as well as through denying them any recourse to assistance. Even when engaged in sexual relations, Hayati is denied any control over what transpires since she is either unconscious or under the effect of stimulants. As such, in the text, Hayati is denied access to agency. Clearly, she is degraded: from a human endowed with the capacity for feeling and thought to an object incapable even of enjoying sex, a point which Tengku Yunus himself admits (78). However, in the end, Hayati takes her life. She does so on realising that all those years she had been nothing more than an unthinking object for Tengku Yunus' insatiable lust. On the strength of this realisation, the novel finally furnishes her with what is referred to in feminism as the "agency" to assert herself. By refusing to take the drug given her, Hayati denies Tengku Yunus his sexual pleasure. This act – her utter refusal to be treated as Tengku Yunus's sex object – can be viewed as Hayati's attempt at empowerment.

In the context of Islam, which indeed is both relevant and applicable considering that the novel was written by a Muslim and targeted at a mainly Muslim readership, Hayati's suicide raises certain questions. This is so since Islam, which considers life a singular gift from Almighty Allah, forbids suicide (Al-Qur'an, Chapter on Al-An'am: 151). Viewed from this perspective, it would be insupportable to regard her suicide as *ikhtiar* (empowerment) or *usaha* (being resourceful) as these have positive connotations. In such a situation, a feminist reading would label it as "negative agency." Hence, if one were to resort to feminist interpretation, then Hayati's decision to end her life must be described as resorting to negative agency. Viewed from such a perspective, Hayati's decision must needs be seen in a positive light as it projects empowerment on her part, a categorical refusal to be objectified and exploited by men. However, this reading would be in conflict with Islam, at the same time that it shows up feminism's limitations. It would be more appropriate to view the suicide from Azizi's personal perception of women whom he sees not only as sex objects but as those who despair of God's help (Al-Qur'an, Chapter on Yusuf : 87) and who fail to appreciate life as a special gift from God. It is evident then that Azizi has failed to recognise and appreciate the exalted position Islam has accorded to women (Al-Qur'an, Chapter on Al-Nisa').

The Context, Ideology and Evaluation

A. Rahim Abdullah's claim that Azizi is "not merely a story teller who presents issues" but a writer who "invites readers to resolve issues raised" is certainly open to debate, and the most pertinent question would be: What is the issue that the novel raises and that enjoins the audience to search for a solution? Is women being treated as sex objects an issue? If that is the intended question, then *Bila Hujan Malam* clearly does not intend to look for a resolution, as the novel is not structured to achieve this. On the contrary, the novel is structured to merely present the issue, and it *stops* there.

That the novel merely "presents" the issue is evident in the way it ends the story, which it leaves unresolved. Tengku Yunus, who approaches Hayati to make love to her, finds her lying lifeless. What, then, is the intellectual response elicited from the reader, that is, a response that seeks to find a resolution? In fact, any conceivable attempt to call forth an intellectual response is deliberately shut out. For instance, in a situation where transgressions against God's commands have taken place, the novel does not see the necessity to avenge the injustice or to call attention to the gravity of Tengku Yunus' dastardly deeds. What the readers see is a rapist and murderer free at the end, with the novel showing no indication that he would have to pay for his actions or that he repents. Alternatively, can one read the death of Hayati, the object of his lust, and his impending loneliness, as his retribution? Such a reading is insupportable.

Admittedly, the novel does allude to Tengku Yunus's "wrong doing" and his resultant "awareness" but it is speedily killed off by rationalising his deeds as a consequence of his inability to fight his sexual urges. Now, not only are his uncontrollable urges not censured but also they are offered as an acceptable explanation for his wickedness, as seen in the following extract:

It indeed did cross his mind that his actions were wrong. Wrong from both the state laws as well as the religious laws. However, he was helpless; his sexual desires were too strong. (79)

Can such justification be construed as an invitation to "resolve issues"? And how is one to read Hayati's portrayal – a hapless victim who is doubly "punished," a victim of abuse and one who commits suicide, the latter having serious implications for her religious commitments. Can such a presentation be viewed as jogging one's intellectual faculties to arrive at a resolution? What kind of resolution does A. Rahim Abdullah have in mind? Alternatively, is one to read the portrayal of wickedness and depravity that Azizi illustrates with detail, as an invitation to ponder over the possible resolution?

Given this dilemma, and A. Rahim Abdullah's indefensible claims, Azizi's confession in *Kuras-kuras Kreatif* help to shed light on his ideas of writing a novel. He says:

During that period [the 1960's] creative works, bawdy and erotic in nature, were commonplace.... It appeared to me that one has to write on wickedness and depravity if one had any ambition of becoming a writer.... To me, at that time, the creative world demanded that society's immorality needed to be exposed to the public.... Inspiration to me could originate only from dirty places, including toilets.... (8-9)

If this was Azizi's understanding of the demands of a writer, it comes as no surprise that *Bila Hujan Malam* does not render any resolution and neither does it expect readers to work towards it. By presenting *Bila Hujan Malam* as it is, Azizi was convinced that he had attained the status of a writer who had discharged his duties. Thus, his novel is a product of his actualisation or reflection of those ideals – exposing societal immorality to the public.

Against this background, one can certainly be forgiven if one wonders why in 1976, ten years after he had published his debut novel *Garis Lintang Anak Haram* (1968), there was the necessity for him to carry on writing in the same vein. Especially so, since in the context of Malaysian literature, the 1970's was acknowledged as the era of "Islamic literature" and, according to A. Rahim in the same critical piece, Azizi was one of the earliest to be directly engaged in the Islamic literature debate. In addition, A. Rahim argued that Azizi had produced works reflecting this orientation even before Shanon, the proclaimed

pioneer of Islamic literature, and in Azizi's own words his "mentor," had done so. Indeed, A. Rahim declares, "it was his [Azizi's] commitment towards the sanctity of Islam that formed his basis for writing novels" (20). Given this context – the phenomenon of Islamic literature on the one hand, and A. Rahim's claim of Azizi's commitment to Islamic literature on the other – why does *Bila Hujan Malam* pursue the conviction that evil has to be given priority as the axis of the story? The answer, again, might be found in the following statement by the writer:

I'm not to be blamed. The fault lies with the other works and writers who persisted in exposing all these wrong doings, and it gave me the *conviction* that to become a writer it was this world that one had to write about....(9, emphasis added)

Azizi's "conviction" is indeed well placed. The *Laporan Panel Anugerah Sastera Negara*, the nation's premier literary evaluation report, clearly reveals similar "conviction" in its assessment of literary works. As I have argued elsewhere, realism is the favoured aesthetic ideology that the panel seeks in works they claim deserve awards (*Dinamika Pemikiran Sastera Melayu* 25-66). In my earlier work, I had elucidated a number of features that seem to have won the attention, recognition and praise of the panel, all of which point to the preference for realism as the primary aesthetic ideology. These features would include preoccupation with the sordid aspects of life, undignified or ignoble characters, experimental techniques, precise and detailed descriptions especially of dishonourable and offensive things, the absence of a moral closure, and a partiality for Western theories or framework. These features of realism or fiction that favour such an orientation can be easily identified in the works of National Laureates, which have been evaluated and consequently awarded with the highest recognition. Thus, both fiction and the various reports provide evidence that Western theories and framework serve as the "conviction" that informs mainstream Malay literature. In other words, it cannot be denied that realism is the dominant aesthetic ideology that rules Malay literature. Surrounded by such "conviction," it is no surprise that *Bila Hujan Malam* is a faithful translation of that conviction.

Another, equally relevant, question needs to be raised. As is widely accepted, realism and other Western theories including feminism are characterised by the rejection of the Maker.⁶ It rejects the transcendental dimension and acknowledges only the five senses to determine, validate and define reality and truth. This means that it subscribes to the perception of reality and truth that is essentially experiential in nature. In other words, what cannot

⁶ See, for example, Morris and Selden.

be verified by the five senses, therefore, does not exist, and is neither true nor real. In doing so, it denies the existence of realities that cannot be experienced by the senses, for example the existence of God, which, in Islam, is an absolute reality. Against this understanding, shouldn't such a theory and ideology be approached with greater caution and wisdom? Hence, should the detailed descriptions of unsavoury and bawdy events, the absence of a clear moral closure, excessive depiction of the sordid aspects of life, as seen in *Bila Hujan Malam*, be applauded as a choice that is suitable, wise and relevant? Can such a formula be considered superior and thus adopted faithfully? Furthermore, and in no way less significant, is the question how such a formula and its practice be justified when Azizi is claimed to have exhibited his "commitment towards the sanctity of Islam"? Thus A. Rahim Abdullah's claim that Azizi produced Islamic novels in the 1970's can, therefore, be questioned, as *Bila Hujan Malam*, presented as an example of such a work, is closer to realism as understood in the West, than to an Islamic novel.

As is widely acknowledged, the realism-novel combination, dubbed as the bequest of the 19th century, played an important role in the Western literary tradition and had a tremendous impact worldwide, including Malaysia, which came under British rule in the same 19th century. Moreover, this realism-novel combination gives priority to storytelling, that is using all the narrative components to initiate, sustain, enhance, develop and end a story. In so doing, all the features that realism, as an aesthetic ideology, prioritises are utilised to the fullest. Against this background, it is thus not surprising that *Bila Hujan Malam* does not "raise issues" but merely "presents." It is, therefore, to be expected that Tengku Yunus remains free without any form of retribution; that Hayati and Zahid are denied recourse to justice; that lovemaking episodes are explicit; that the language used is laden with erotic connotations; that the story moves forward episodically, all of which revolve round the domain of the senses. The heavy emphasis on physical reality necessarily limits the scope for conveying ideas, thoughts, arguments and the like, or makes it irrelevant altogether. In other words, the novel only "presents" and, according to A. Rahim's criteria, this would be an inferior work as it is nothing more than the product of a "storyteller." Turning to Persuratan Baru, the analytical framework used here, *Bila Hujan Malam* would not even be classified as *karya sastera*, the second rung of the hierarchy. Instead, Persuratan Baru would classify *Bila Hujan Malam* as *karya picisan* that totally ignores to raise any serious thoughts or discourse capable of challenging readers' intellect. In short, *Bila Hujan Malam* is a *karya picisan*, pure and simple, and this makes A. Rahim Abdullah's claims and tribute totally inadmissible. On the other hand, this article's assertion that *Bila Hujan Malam* is a *karya picisan* is in line with Mohd. Affandi Hassan's definition that sees *picisan* as "a work that centres on wickedness as the dominant value in the creation of a literary work... by explicitly portraying illicit sex..." (*Gagasan*

Persuratan Baru: Pengenalan dan Penerapan 118). The extract below serves to illustrate the point:

Zahid held on to the back of Hayati's neck. Where he learnt this, he didn't know. The other hand was free – groping. Groping all over. Everywhere. Hayati with droopy eyes was swallowing her saliva. She shut and opened her lips. In addition, when she felt an unusual sensation, she opened her eyes wide. Her mouth was open... Panting....

Hayati opened her thighs and raised her legs – to make it easier for Zahid. Her droopy eyes opened wide occasionally. The hissing sounds heightened his pleasure. And he held on even tighter.

Zahid ventured on. He sweated profusely.
“Darling,” she groaned.

The above lines are but a part of a much longer description. In a novel of 87 pages, Azizi has allocated about 10% of the text to description of sex (see, for example pages 50-54). This is antithetical to the kind of literature that *Persuratan Baru* expounds in which “the writer respects his characters based on the moral teachings of Islam” (*Gagasan Persuratan Baru: Pengenalan dan Penerapan* 118).

Concluding Remarks

By presenting “women as sex objects” as its narrative axis, realism as its chosen aesthetic ideology and realistic novel as its narrative form, *Bila Hujan Malam* is nothing more than a *karya picisan* that recounts the monstrous activities of a wealthy male unable to rein in his lust. It does not raise issues and consequently does not call upon the readers to respond intellectually. Conversely, this paper raises issues that call for redressing some of the ailments in Malay literary world. Amongst them is the confusion over the suitability of Western theories and framework and its resultant implications (such as the indiscriminate and excessive employment of realism and feminism either consciously or otherwise), the evaluation criteria that favour and honour *karya picisan* resulting in the formation of a particular literary culture that has won acceptance (as proven by *Bila Hujan Malam* being accepted as a successful product of the said literary culture), and literary criticism that celebrates religious transgressions but silent on the disrespect accorded to Islam (as shown in A. Rahim Abdullah' essay). Attempts to contest or interrogate those ailments are rejected on the excuse that these would not contribute to but rather destroy Malay literary tradition (for example, the prejudiced view against *Persuratan Baru* and the concerted efforts to hinder its wider application). It needs to be stressed that the growth and nurturing of this particular literary culture, alluded to in this paper, unfortunately has assumed the position of mainstream literary culture. Its

dogged refusal to tolerate alternative views as expounded, for example, by Persuratan Baru, is indeed an unfortunate loss, as it hinders the development of a truly Malay-Muslim literature that takes cognisance of our religious, socio-cultural and literary tradition.

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