



## Images of Malay Women in Shahnnon Ahmad's Selected Works

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### Abstract

*Gender discrimination phenomenon not only exists in 'male-centered' literatures where 'double-standard' treatment is apparent in the writings of local male writers, but also can be seen in the twisted yet stereotypical images of the female characters. Such portrayal of female characters seems to come from the male writer's imagination and personal experience, as well as from that of the ideas prevailing in the society in which they live. Their interpretation of characters is shaped by society's customs, traditions, and taboos. By unveiling the social values and practices of the Malay society, only then these misperception and misrepresentation of women characters can be understood. Using sociological and feminist approach, this paper attempts to rectify the three stereotypical images (an 'object', the 'other' and 'being female') of women characters as created by Shahnnon Ahmad in *No Harvest but Thorn* (1972), *Rope of Ash* (1991), *Srengenge* (1974) and *Woman* (1980). These images shall be revealed implicitly through glimpses of the women characters' inner conflicts and explicitly through the development of characters and their relationship within the society.*

Keywords: gender studies, women image, Shahnnon Ahmad, Malay society

### Introduction

The Malays have long been associated with Islamic culture since the arrival of the Arabs to the Malay Archipelago in the fifteenth century (Mohd Taib Osman, 1989: 15). This new religion has brought new values and culture transformation to the Malays whom as recorded by Hall (1960) were earlier influenced by the Indian beliefs, customs and civilization. Customs like '*bersanding*' (married couple posing on dais), '*melenggang perut*' (massaging mother's tummy), to name a few are examples of Hindus influence in the Malay society (Mohd Taib Osman, 1989: 93). Nevertheless, when it comes to define the women's roles, both cultures share a thing or two in determining the



status and conduct of the women, be it in fiction or the real world.

In the real world, Nilufer Narli (1986) has concluded that, the role of women is confined to being a mother, an obedient wife or being supporters of males at the familial and societal levels. Within the *dakwah* (Islam) paradigm, men, are assumed to be taking the primary role as head of the household and in the public domain (Nilufer, Narli 1986). And as for certain traditional Hindu society, the hierarchical and patriarchal systems also leave its women powerlessness, especially in the part of choosing their own spouse, and even worse, they are often married off as children (Coonrod, 1998). In the context of the Malays in Malaysia, the women's way of life has strongly been influenced by the Islamic law (*syarak*) and the Malays' customary law (*adat resam*). Being an important component of the Malays ethnic identity, Islam plays a significant role in determining the individual and the group identity of the Malays (Azizah Kassim, 1985).

In local male writings, women characters have been classified into two roles: good or evil. Incidentally, if she is good, she is portrayed as being a loyal wife, doting mother, or an obedient daughter; if evil, she is the scandalous woman, cruel stepmother or the ungrateful daughter. Shahnnon Ahmad and most other male writers have the tendency to generalize their images of the women characters based on their 'phallogocentric assumptions' (Henderson and Brown, 1997). Based on the ideologies of the patriarchal society, these universally accepted images ranging from a sex object, a second sex to a weak, submissive other. The images are usually stereotypical, whereby the characters are often being mistreated and misjudged (Zawiyah Yahya, 1988).

In dealing with such a situation, the reader may first become a resisting reader rather than an assenting reader (Fetterley, 1977). Gradually, the reader's mind shall reject any lopsided, inaccurate views that have been presented by any male authors and the society at large. This criticism, as argued by Kennedy, Gioia, & Bauerlein (2005), has totally gone against the traditional criticism where art is not just for art's sake, but for the sake of human instead. This approach does not analyze characters in isolation but together with its social elements. As a result, such literary texts are depicted realistically to reflect the active relationship between the characters and society in real human situations. As in the case of Shahnnon Ahmad's selected texts, the



most distinct feature of those texts is the community of the Malays itself. It is apparent that the Malays have lived as extended families in a patriarchal society in differing forms of social organization over its long history (pre-colonial period, during colonization, and post-colonial period).

### **Malay Society In Banggul Derdap, Kedah**

The settings were set in 1960's. Most of the Malays were farmers – paddy planters. At that time, Malay men were known to dominate all aspects of life outside the home, while women were said to spend most of their lives at home. The women were not trusted to do hard, laborious chores, as set by traditions; the women's place is in the kitchen cooking meal for husband and family. They were also entrusted with the task of bearing and nurturing children. At times, the women played dual roles; domestic (full time) and assistant (part time – harvesting paddy). Even though schools had been opened for the girls in 1883, not many enrolled themselves (Rosnah Baharudin, 1979). As depicted by Shahnnon Ahmad, the girls are valued for their practical skills in the rice field, not for their knowledge. In short, the women characters have to adhere to society's expectations on what they should or should not do.

Since the Malay world is masculine rather than feminine (Winzeler, 1996), Zawiyah Yahya (1988) has further supported this by saying that, "Many local novelists have never taken any serious thoughts in their women character. Malay women usually suffer from under exposure as much in fiction as in reality". One clear example would be the unrealistic portrayal of Jeha by Shahnnon Ahmad in *No Harvest but a Thorn* (1972); from a physically strong and high-spirited woman, she eventually succumbs to insanity soon after the death of her husband, Lahuma. In her review, Zaharah Nawawi (1994) has also grouped Shahnnon together with others from the male-dominant society that fails to understand the women (*Berita Minggu* May 1994: 2). The women, as gathered by Aveling (2000), are being reserved a minor place in the discourse (rural Malay society), where they become incorporated into the masculine identity of the head of the family and sadly to some extent, they cease to be individual persons.

In his research, Aveling (2000) has pointed out that the world is still



an androcentric one, where the man is everything and the woman nothing. This may be due to the high-acclaimed civilization in society as brought by the secularism ideals of civilized Westerners. Hence, universal derogatory labels like ‘*Janda galak*’ (bold widow), ugly old woman, and others that have been placed upon women by the society can be found mostly in Shahnnon’s writing. For instance, the description of an old woman being synonymously likened to a horrible description of an animal can be found in Ungku Maimunah’s (1998) review of Shahnnon Ahmad’s selected novels.

Srengenge stands tall, ugly as Satan.  
 Sometimes ugly as an old woman.  
 At times it strikes one as a fat tapir.  
 (*Srengenge* 1974: 1)

Relatively, Aveling (2000) has also highlighted several incidents where the women characters in Shahnnon Ahmad’s works have to conform to the gendered discourse (male versus female) as well as the rural discourse (the society). In *No Harvest but a Thorn* (1972), Jeha, the wife is defined as physically, emotionally and psychologically weak. “Jeha’s strength is dependent on him (Lahuma) for its existence. It is his duty to guide and instruct her” (71). In the eye of the Headman (representing patriarchal society), Jeha becomes mad due to her incapability of coping with the fact of her husband’s death. “The village, and its children, knows of only this explanation for her madness, that she is a woman. They endlessly elaborate the phrases ‘widow-with-many-children’... Jeha had gone mad because her husband was dead” (*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 114). The whole society has turned their backs on women with oddities and abnormalities situations; where she is taking over the role as the head of the family after the death of her husband.

### Images of Women

Even though both Western and Malay societies are patriarchal, Malay women experience an intense form of private patriarchy than their Western counterparts. The women’s acceptance of such life (being under male domain) also varies. As early as the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the Progressive Era), the women in the West had gained the right to vote and become prominent activists fighting for equality among men (Ooi



Eng Lye, 2005). The Malay women however, are a bit restricted in their movement as a result of a close-knit family upbringing, surrounded by a united society as well as influenced by the teachings of Islam (Roziyah Omar, 1994). Weaving on the themes of a Malay woman's place in her society and how she deals with arranged marriage as well as public generalization, women characters in Shahnnon Ahmad's works could be associated with them being an 'Object', the insignificant 'Other' and the 'Female' with her feminine traits.

### *Woman as 'Object'*

Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (1995) definitions of 'Object':

1. A solid thing that can be seen and touched; e.g. inanimate objects, passive objects, glass objects, a distant object.
2. An object of something, a person or thing to which something is done or towards which a particular feeling or thought is directed; e.g. object of desire/pity/admiration.

From the above definitions, readers are presented with the literal meanings of the word 'object'. Figuratively, the word 'object' has somehow emerged to address women with passivity and enticed us with derogatory details. Such negative connotation, as argued by Millet (1981) is the result of biological and cultural models as preset by the patriarchal society. The biological model looks at the biological facts of women having vagina, womb that represents weaknesses and submissiveness. Men, on the other hand, having 'phallus' and strong physical built are associated with strength and domineering attitudes (Millet, 1981). As such, Beauvoir (1972) concludes that since the woman (female) is not male, she becomes an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the male, who is the dominant being in the society. The women become victims of patriarchal oppression in the form of sexual objects, passive objects and even become the object of discussion especially on false and inaccurate matters.

Relatively, the definition of 'object' as according to a cultural model of a patriarchal society, presents an image of a woman being an asset that is meant for owning and selling. A father in a traditional patriarchal family, as exemplified by Millet (1981: 33), has total ownership over his wife or wives and children, including powers of physical abuse and



often even those of murder and sale. In *‘Literature as a Seismograph of Life: Shahnoun Ahmad’* translated by Hawa Abdullah (1994), women are seen ‘exclusively’ as objects of desire. If man is at his weakest when he is at the mercy of his emotions, it is the woman’s fault for tempting him. In our daily lives, rape victims are often condemned and blamed to be at fault of flaunting their half-naked bodies (though fully clothed) in public. Hence, not only these women are deprived of their rights, they are often placed in an inferior state in the eyes of the traditional patriarchal society.

### ***Arranged Marriage and Reproductive Role***

Issues regarding marriage are as important as religion in a Malay society. Since the women are the ‘object’, ‘nonsignificant other’ and ‘female’, the men claim that it has become their responsibility to marry their daughters or sisters off to men of their choice. Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure – or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labour – men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male (Showalter, 1985).

As the socio-cultural construction of a young woman’s role is governed by biology, *adat resam* (customary tradition) and society, Malay girls are taught and groomed with appropriate behaviours as to uphold their family’s names. Being dutiful, they are bound to marrying any man of their father’s choice. Luckily for these women, their religion, Islam has defended their rights in this matter. As stated by Sh. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (2003), the female has the right to accept or reject marriage proposals. Her consent is a prerequisite to the validity of the marital contract, according to the Prophet’s teaching. It follows that if an ‘arranged marriage’ means the marrying of a female without her consent, then such a marriage may be annulled if the female so wishes:

Ibn. Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of Allah, and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice... (between accepting the marriage or invalidating it)

(Shahih Bukhary 2000, Hadith no. 2469)



In *Woman* (1980), patriarchy intrudes oppressively into every sphere of existence; from main issues of arranged marriage till issues like escapism and self-retaliation. Siti, the protagonist has to endure her parents' wish by agreeing to marry an old pious man. To Siti parents, the society's praises and consent are very much anticipated than their own daughter's happiness. Like the famous Malay old saying '*Biar mati anak, jangan sampai mati adat!*' (We would rather sacrifice our daughter rather than giving up on our culture and tradition), any excuses or reasons coming from Siti would be unthinkable. As her voice and opinion go unheard, being invisible, Siti is as good as dead.

"I don't want to. The thundering voice had to stay locked inside her. There was no way for it to get out. There was no way she could speak. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing."

(*Woman* 1980: 5)

No one is going to care whether she agrees or disagrees to the idea of marriage. As 'mere object', she is not expected to voice out any slightest denial, even worse, making her own decisions. Having no where to go and no one to turn to, Siti enters the phase of escapism. She wishes that she had been a small object, small enough so that she "could crawl between the floor boards like a scalded cockroach and down a pillar to the ground" (*Woman* 1980: 3).

Frustrated with her father's decision and her mother's indifference, Siti has lost any interest in living. What is the purpose of being alive and breathing if her voice is not being heard and her well-being being ignored. She would rather share her place with 'all other lifeless things in her house', becoming porcelain teaspoon, metal spoons and ladle. Ironically, she is like a porcelain teaspoon, an expensive, fragile object that has been well-kept in an antique cabinet for admiration. So expensive it is that she is becoming the much-sought after merchandise in business trade. So fragile that she cries with all her heart and wishes that she could escape from her bleak future.

The character Siti as presented by Shahnnon Ahmad is very much similar to K.S. Maniam's Sumathi in *The Sandpit*, whereby Sumathi is 'silenced by the phallogocentric construction of female identity' (Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya 2003). Siti shares the same fate as Sumathi



who reacts against her female silence. As a form of 'resistance to the dominant discourse, this has led her to self-retaliation' (*Woman* 1980). Like a computer that overloads, malfunctioning, Siti self-destructs herself by shoving her index finger into a boiling pot of water and flame of fire.

As in the case of Semaun in *Rope of Ash* (1991), even though he is notorious for being a trouble-maker and his family an outcast, still he worries over his sister's future, "Will there be young men asking for her hand of marriage?". Similarly in *No Harvest but a Thorn* (1972), Lahuma only thinks of only one future for his girls: 'marriage'. Since their junior years, Lahuma's daughters have shown their likings towards games or activities that are related to domestic roles. They seem to enjoy playing 'masak-masak' (role play) where each of them will be taking turns acting like a mother, daughter, son and father in a mock family. Explicitly, the message of how the issues of domestic roles and reproductive capacity being placed upon Shahnnon Ahmad's women characters has been revealed in a monologue by Lahuma. He knows that the girls 'would all marry and have children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren' (*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 2).

The term 'female' itself is derogatory because it imprisons a woman in her sex (Beauvoir 1972). Much worse, the term 'female' is associated with the woman's reproductive role (Ussher 1991). Beauvoir (1972) and many other Western feminists like Millet (1981) and Showalter (1979) share their disapproving views on this matter. Motherhood only means to constrict, confine and deny the self-realization of women. For example, during the ancient patriarchal restraints in Russia, women were not regarded as a productive force (working and having a career); instead, she was for man a sexual partner, an erotic object and a reproducer (conceiving and having babies) (*The Second Sex* 1972: 240).

Another example of how these women are being exploited ceaselessly as objects of desire and reproduction would be in the scene where Lahuma has commented on Jeha's hair. Jeha who has been ridiculed by her own husband retaliates with pride of her reproductive capacity, "What are those seven over there? This hair may stink, but still you are all over me night and day. This hair may stink, but still you have begotten seven children" (*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 7). In *Srengenge* (1974), the women of the village are considered dirty,



bringing misfortune whenever they are having their menses (121). It is a taboo for them to offer propitiatory offerings onto the mountain, fish with a line in the lake, hunt deer in the forest, or even (at certain times) accompany funeral processions (Mohd Taib Osman 1989). As highlighted by Aveling (2000: 133), the female body is subordinate to the male body because it is inferior; it is dirty and suitable only for reproduction. "Women only have children. Women only follow". Women are supposed to be submissive objects, following orders and pleasing their men.

They will gain a little respect if they bear children for their husbands. In *Rope of Ash* (1991), the term infertile woman is degrading as well as a funny subject. As in the case of Jusoh's wife, she has become the centre of discussion where Dogol and Pak Senik make fun and liken her to Jusoh's cow as to being sterile, not able to produce offspring. "Jusoh had been married for ten years and still had no offspring" (*Rope of Ash* 1991: 58). Any traces of impotency or problems with procreation are entirely placed upon the women.

Not only women's rights and voices in marriage are being silenced, even their reproduction capacity has also been exploited and ridiculed in the literary works. As depicted in *No Harvest but a Thorn* (1972), Lahuma has seven children, '*kesemuanya betina*' (all girls); Sanah, Semek, Jenab, Milah, Liah, Lebar and Kiah. Shanon's use of the word '*betina*' (degrading word, usually associated with animals) instead of '*anak perempuan*' (much proper word that means daughters) in narrating has further emphasized on the lack of respect men have on women. In this case, the women's reproductive capacity has taken a similar reference to animals like cows' propagating activity.

### ***Woman as 'the Other'***

"He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – She is the Other.

*The Second Sex* (1972)

As a feminist like Lindsey (1996) asserts that Western societies are patriarchal, totally controlled by man, man becomes the dominating 'subject' who is assumed to represent humanity in general. Undoubtedly, the female just have to play a secondary role in major institutions of her society. Either consciously or unconsciously, men



have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in giving opinions or responses. In writings, men have suppressed the female, defined what it means to be feminine, and thereby devalued, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman (Showalter, 1985). Men have made women the ‘nonsignificant other’ (Beauvoir, 1972: 83). The ‘other’ can also implicitly mean the secondary or the invisible sex. Giving opinions or involving in important discussion with the males is certainly prohibited. The women have no say in family and of course, official matters. They cannot refuse or protest against what have been in stored for them.

Even in religious writing, the inequality continues. From the Hebrew, Bible and Greek philosophy to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference as an insignificant “Other”. Hough (2003) in his revolutionary statement criticized Christianity as a patriarchal religion through the high status of men in the infamous trinity of ‘God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. Eve who represents the women, on the other hand, is accused of being the temptress that leads Adam to original sin. In contrast to Christianity, Islam (Arabic for ‘the mercy of Allah upon the Muslims’) is meant for all mankind and makes no preference to sex. As interpreted by Sh. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (2003), both men and women have a calling and place in nature. Neither has a greater value, nor is one of greater importance. Both are subject to Divine Retribution which is equal for the capacity of each. The Noble Quran honours the woman as a human being, as a feminine being, as a daughter, wife, mother and, no less, as a full member of her society.

In a patriarchal Malay society that is very much linked with Islam, certain interpretations of the Holy Quran have been manipulated by ignorant men. Gender inequality is very much unavoidable. The society has spelled out that, ‘a wife’s loyalty to her husband was no different from a servant’s loyalty to God’ (*Srengenge* 1974: 5). In this ascending order, a wife is placed under the responsibility of her husband where her domestic roles are defined; any such attempts of disobedience are considered as sinful.

In *Srengenge* (1974: 19), Haji Munah, the wife of a prominent man in the society, certainly awares of her place at home and within the society. Whenever her husband, Imam Hamad returns home and lashes his anger at her, she quickly withdraws, admitting: “she was



only Imam Hamad's wife... She was only the wife who had given birth to Jantan" (*Srengenge* 1974: 58). The society has also associated her with her domestic roles; she has to comply with whatever her husband wishes. If he demands coffee, she has to make coffee for him. No questions asked. No excuses allowed. No such thing as an ideal, equal relationship as in the husband is like a coffee and the wife, the creamer. The reality of their relationship is that, 'she was a wife and the coffee was for her man' (*Srengenge* 1974: 59).

Furthermore, women are not allowed to join in any serious discussion between men. Annoyed by Keghesum's interruption during a serious discussion between him and Imam Hamad on clearing Srengenge, Awang Che Teh has boldly instructed his wife and the Imam's wife to adjourn to the kitchen. In light with the fact that "a woman's place is in the kitchen", he has clearly expressed his wish of not welcoming the two 'ignorant' less important women into their discussion (*Srengenge* 1974: 75-98).

Even though school was available at the time, Lahuma and the majority of these paddy planters disproved of their children going to school. They would rather have their children at home helping them with agricultural and domestic work. Even Shannon's woman character, Jeha is portrayed as a wife who blindly agrees with her husband's decision on such matter. "Girls needn't know how to read. It doesn't change the market value. I never even went to school." (*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 17). Hence, when Lahuma is paralyzed (infected by 'nibung' thorn) and no man was around to do laborious work at the rice-fields, Jeha orders her elder daughter, Sanah to quit school and encourages the rest of her daughters to sometimes skip school.

As women's role is being placed minimally in this society, happiness and contentment are being associated with the presence of men. Men are supposed to be the shelter, sole provider. According to Hirschon (1978), "A woman's position in society depends upon her husband and family, and so she is in a sense 'indebted' to them for social existence". Alas, the women are known as not being able to survive without men in their lives. As portrayed in *No Harvest but a Thorn* (1972), Jeha acts only as an assistant, helper to her husband, Lahuma. When Lahuma dies, Jeha finds it difficult to bear all the responsibilities in upbringing all of her seven daughters. During harvesting season, Jeha and her



children face obstacles from birds (*burung tiak*), crabs as well as those caused by nature; flood, drought. All these and without her husband (a man) by her side, have driven Jeha to be in the state of distress and later, madness.

“Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure— or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labour—men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male”.

(Rich, 1983)

Rich (1983), a radical feminist, argues over the idea of men having the patriarchal power in determining relationship in a society. This power, as concluded by K. Bhopal (1997) is not just confined to the public worlds of economic and political activity, but characterizes all relationships between the sexes. Thus, male power is everywhere in the public world of politics and paid employment and in the private world of the family and sexuality.

Cultural expectations and traditions are very much linked to the identity of the Asian community. Most definitions and concepts of arranged marriage as collected by K. Bhopal (1997) have repeatedly emphasized on the importance of sticking to culture and traditions. Dutiful daughters are expected to obey their parent’s wisdom and authority in marrying a destined suitor. Arranged marriage functions as an agreement, a contract, and a business arrangement between two families rather than between two individuals.

As an Asian family is very closely knit, agreeing to the marriage has somehow proven the ultimate respect and loyalty of a daughter to her parents’ decision. These young girls’ minds have been implanted with ideas that their marriages would work based on previous similar instances or close example of the ‘so-called’ happy marriage of their parents. Going against the marriage would mean dishonouring their family’s pride, honour and reputation. They risk being outcast by their family members and society. In order to avoid any forms of immense pressure from the community, they have no other choice but to comply.



...people make you think the arranged marriages are very important...because they come with the culture and so everyone has to have them...they don't want to be the ones who'll be talked about...

(K. Bhopal, 1997: 490)

***Woman as 'the Female' (Biological)***

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

*The Second Sex* (1972: 295)

In her writings, Beauvoir (1972) boldly highlights that a person is not born feminine but becomes so through cultural conditioning. The woman in a patriarchal society has to live with and accept any kinds of feminine situation that have been imposed upon them. As a result, the woman has always been so defined and never been able to set up herself as the essential in turn (Simons, 1995: 171).

“She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential.”

*The Second Sex* (1972: 67)

The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is quite like that of two electrical poles; the men represent both the positive, neutral and privileged roles, the women, on the other hand, get most of the negative and under privileged roles. In *The Second Sex* (1972), Beauvoir has pointed out several unfair male assumptions on the issues of how the women's minds work.

Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands.

*The Second Sex* (1972: 15)

Furthermore, women are universally oppressed and devalued, but it is not their biology per se that determines their status, but the way every culture defines and evaluates female biology (Ortner, 1974). Thus, society is responsible for imposing gender roles to women as



well as in giving false assumptions about women. As a result, radical feminists' movements has risen as a means to counter attack such development where a woman is not being determined biologically, but by and in the interests of men. Greer (1970) further claims that femininity is man's creation of woman in his own interest. In the hands of men, the women's femaleness is associated with the women's identity. Women are being manipulated by men in terms of discourse, economy, psychology, and sexuality. Hence, in the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization, Beauvoir (1972) points out that the male is usually defined as having masculine traits like being active, dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative. The female, however, is described as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional.

### ***Generalizations on Women (Feminine Traits)***

The full extent of the biasness in the perception of the male author is revealed here. One distinct generalization of being feminine as brought against women characters is their frailty. Based on this fact, Shahnon has assigned his characters with specific tasks. The task of preparing the rice field is meant for the men. Women are expected to do lighter jobs, like putting in seeds or chasing *tiaks* (special birds that feed on paddy). He narrates the novel by implanting readers with the idea of how Lahuma has never had any confidence in his wife and children to do laborious work like ploughing the rice field as 'they are only women' (*No Harvest but a Thorn*, 1972: 101-116). Furthermore, Lahuma is portrayed as someone who dares not put high hopes on his daughters' efforts and loyalty to help him as they will soon be married off. When the time comes, they will follow their husbands and live with their in-laws (*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 3).

Physically, Jeha as a woman is weaker than her husband. It is his duty to guide, instruct and protect her. Thus, when Lahuma was first infected by the *nibung* thorn, which he had trodden on in the fields, it was he who took Jeha and the two girls, Sanah and Milah, to the fields. As passive listeners, they are obliged to obey instructions as instructed by the head of the family, as to which of the fields they are to work and how to use their tools (*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 119). Hence, when Lahuma dies, Shahnon has somehow projected the ideas on how a woman should behave according to society's expectation and further



warned readers of the consequences of breaking the norms.

“... it is not right for her (Jeha) to go on with jobs left by her husband. Work left by a man. A woman is not able to bear such heavy burdens. It has become a tradition that it is not fair to allow a woman to bear these heavy burdens.”

(Hawa Abdullah,  
1994: 373)

Women's easy tendency to cry has been associated with being emotionally weak and always in need of support (dependent). Shanon has depicted how miserable lives could be for his woman character (Jeha) without the presence of her husband (Lahuma). In traditional Malay families, usually the father is regarded as the breadwinner. Without him, the family would be less respected by neighbours. Often, the closest neighbours would be prejudiced towards a widow. Thus, when Jeha walks in the village with her odd behaviour and improper clothing, unanimously the Headman and the society judge her as going against the norms. To the villagers, one clear explanation would be because she is a woman.

“Widow - with- many - children” ...” bold - widow with many-children”... “Jeha had gone mad, they said. Jeha had gone mad because her husband was dead. Jeha was bold like a young widow. Jeha was crazy about Tok Penghulu”.

(*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 114)

In this novel, Shanon refuses to champion his women characters' will, strength and courage in helping their men to plough and plant the paddy fields. With the catchy phrase, 'A woman cannot take the place of a man', Shanon has revived the dead character of Lahuma and put him in the form of spirit (restless soul) that is responsible in all the laborious work of paddy planting done physically by Jeha.

“It is not the woman Jeha who is weeding the paddy field. Certainly not. It is not the woman Jeha who is facing the big floods. But Lahuma. Lahuma in the form of Jeha who has taken his place in doing the work. In Jeha's spirit she is Lahuma. Outside, Jeha is still Jeha. Still a woman.”

(*No Harvest but a Thorn* 1972: 374)



So much of her ‘womanly qualities’, Jeha fails to uphold the heavy responsibility placed upon her and resulting in her insanity. As the spirit of her dead husband gradually weakens, her state of mind also deteriorates. It is obvious that Shahnnon Ahmad shares his perception and opinions with other male writers in the sense that women are biologically weak and they are destined only to take up secondary roles. Any challenging tasks would be too much for her frail being.

Jeha would not be able to cope with all the work as he had done. Jeha was only a woman. She could not possibly do all the work. His children were all girls. A woman’s armbone is fragile. A woman’s leg-bone is easily twisted. A woman’s ribs are easily cracked. This Lahuma knew: a woman is weak. Right from the time of Hawa(Eve)and Adam, woman has always been very much the weaker sex.

*(No Harvest but a Thorn 1972: 67-68)*

In *Srengenge* (1974), Haji Munah is portrayed as an unsupportive wife who disapproves of her husband’s (Imam Hamad) extreme interest in hunting birds. When she keeps on ridiculing the activity and of Jebat’s strength (Imam Hamad’s favourite bird) in front of their guests, Imam Hamad simply ignores and curses her silently.

“Women are the same, the whole world over. Give them an inch, they’ll want a mile. Give them a shin and they’ll want a thigh. Give them a thigh and they’d want more. Give them a knobby knee and heaven only knew what other knobs they’d be after.”

*(Srengenge  
1974: 29)*

The traits of ‘being female’ are also associated with someone who loves to nag and gossip (a chatter-box). In *Srengenge* (1974), Keghesum and Haji Munah are portrayed as wives who enjoy nagging at their husbands. To the men, the women and nagging goes hand in hand, so bonded that they are inseparable. These nasty habits like nagging, grumbling and using vulgar words are associated with the women being the ‘ugly old woman’ in their menopause period. For instance, Keghesum’s breasts (old woman’s) have been described as



'hanging loose and flat, like an empty purse' (*Srengenge* 1974: 64-66). To Awang Che Teh, his wife's nagging has become some sort of routine entertainment.

"He let Keghesum grumble. There was no end to it. If he said nothing, she still grumbled. It was only a show. He knew that...He had lived with her nagging since they were raising the boys."

(*Srengenge* 1974: 11)

Apart from being placed in the kitchen, the women are also labeled as timid and materialistic. In one incident, Imam Hamad has accused Haji Munah of being a hypocrite as to when she is with her friends; she loves to criticize and makes fun of her husband. But upon the departure of the guests, Imam Hamad is sure that his wife will go back to be 'as timid as a hen in a plaque, "She wouldn't even touch an ant" (*Srengenge* 1974: 49). He also assumes that his wife and other women share the same traits; they are only brave to speak up when they are together. Imam Hamad's view of his wife and other women of being materialistic is also shared by Awang Che Teh.

### Conclusion

Even though all the above-mentioned images of women as perceived by Shahnnon Ahmad reveal painful truths of such instances that have or have not occurred in our society, it is still unfair and yet not enough proof for us to accuse him of being a misogynist. As every great religion has noble teachings and lofty moral goals, any wrongdoings or lopsided perception should not be put upon the religion but onto the practitioners themselves (Bryant, 1994). Ignorance and pride have led these men into making their own interpretation of Quran and *Hadiths* (Prophet's Tradition); resulting in applying patriarchal laws in most situation in life. In the end, the women end up receiving unjust treatment such as being deprived of their rights to gain knowledge, to work and most importantly, to speak up.

In actuality, it can be concluded that the Malay women in Malaysia, as compiled by Roziyah Omar (1994), have accepted the fact that Allah has created women and men in this world with different physical attributes, roles and responsibilities. They feel that gender



roles and responsibilities should complement each other. Once again, both religion and culture play such an important role in reinforcing this notion.

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