

# Depiction of Polygamous Character Traits in Che Husna Azhari's *Mariah*

Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

Devia d/o Kamala Nathan

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

Ahmad Taufik Hidayah Abdullah

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

Isyaku Hassan\*

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

**Abstract**—In Malaysia, literary texts produced in English remain a challenging terrain, especially among Malay writers who must cautiously negotiate between their Malay identity, religion, and cultural globalization. For instance, Che Husna Azhari's literary works, especially her notable short story *Mariah*, have received tremendous scholarly attention recently. *Mariah* has been criticized from several viewpoints, such as the playwright's conscious self that forms identity and gender. Thus, using a context-oriented approach, this analysis aims to explore how the Malaysian author, Che Husna Azhari, depicts polygamous character traits in *Mariah* from a feminist perspective. The feminist rendering employed in this analysis could interestingly reveal how a female writer portrays the issue of polygamy. The analysis revealed that through major characters, Azhari boldly depicts Muslim masculinity, polygamous tendencies, and lust toward women, particularly in the Imam's character. Yet, the narrative tends to mirror patriarchy in Malay society for crediting the use of religion to suppress women. This analysis could advance our understanding of how female characters are represented by a female writer within the socio-cultural and religious contexts of typical Malay society. There is a need, therefore, for modern writers to reassess the narratives of women and polygamy in literary works. This step can guide the reader's understanding of polygamy as a hotly-debated topic as well as enlighten the public about the widespread misconceptions about women's issues in society.

**Index Terms**—character traits, *Mariah*, love, marriage, polygamy

## I. INTRODUCTION

The development of Malaysian literature in English (MLiE) began in the 1940s due to scholars' agitation for its significance in creating national unity (Ismail & Al-Subaihi, 2020; Quayyum, 2008). As such, local playwrights began to produce literary material across different genres with a variety of themes. Che Husna Azhari represents one of the prominent Anglophone female writers in the Kelantan State of Malaysia who "often employ irony to reduce textual censure of the tightly interrelated systems of patriarchy and Islamic parochialism" (Soon Ng, 2019, p. 129). Azhari's literary works, especially her notable short story *Mariah*, have received tremendous scholarly attention in the last few years, focussing on various aspects such as the portrayal of Islam and modernity as well as powerlessness (Ismail & Al-Subaihi, 2020; Soon Ng, 2009). This analysis, thus, considers a rendering of Che Husna Azhari's *Mariah* to reveal how the female playwright portrays the character traits of polygamists from a feminist perspective.

Polygamy, concisely, refers to the practice "whereby a person is married to more than one spouse at the same time" (Zeitzen, 2020, p. 3). Despite being a "hotly contested practice and open to widespread misunderstandings" (Brooks, 2009, p. 109), especially for women, polygamy is legally practiced in various countries, particularly in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (Al-Sharfi et al., 2016). In Malaysia, polygamy is legal but only practiced by Muslims. Nevertheless, even among Malaysian Muslims, polygamy is not widely practiced, perhaps due to certain rules which are stated under Section 23 of the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 1984. According to the section, men must obtain the consent of their first wife (or wives) and permission from the Syariah Court to enter into a polygamous marriage contract. Failure to abide by these rules is an offense under Section 123 of the Act.

The feminist theoretical viewpoint is particularly adapted for this analysis due to its textual and contextual relevance to gender-specific issues. In literature, feminist criticism is concerned with how literary works reinforce or undermine the subjugation of women (Rosenfelt & Newton, 2013; Walker, 1990), particularly how character traits are portrayed

---

\* Correspondenc: [isyaku87@gmail.com](mailto:isyaku87@gmail.com)

from opposite genders (Behnamfar et al., 2012). The analysis deals with the writer's conception of how religion and local culture influence the characters' attitudes toward polygamy. According to DiYanni (2001), characters represent the most essential element in fictional texts. In particular, as pointed out by Soon Ng (2019), polygamy in Azhari's *Mariah* is broached by a female author. As such, the feminist rendering employed in this analysis could interestingly reveal how a woman writer portrays the issue of polygamy.

Moreover, as pointed out by Soon Ng (2009), literary texts produced in English remain "a contested terrain in Malaysia, especially amongst Malay writers who must carefully negotiate between their identities as Malays (symbiotically yoked with Islam) and as individuals living in a modern and increasingly globalized world" (p. 127). Azhari's *Mariah* has been criticized from several viewpoints, such as the playwright's conscious self that forms identity and gender as well as the victimization of characters (Baharum, 2017; Quayyum, 2008). This analysis, therefore, aims to explore the dominant themes of polygamy and how polygamous character traits are depicted in Azhari's *Mariah* from a feminist perspective.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *Che Husna Azhari's Mariah*

Polygamy represents a major theme in *Mariah*, surprisingly, written by a female author. According to Soon Ng (2019), *Mariah* reveals the author's exposure to western ideologies, which, perhaps, leads to a critical reexamination of men's attitudes toward women. The narrative continually describes a certain way of polygamous life with a strong link to religion "and yet gesture towards modernity in a manner that reflects a refusal to complacently and uncritically subscribe to such traditionalism" (p. 131). As mentioned by Baharum (2012), Azhari's loyalty to a Muslim-Malay identity and replication of the Kelantanese way of life seems to diminish her inclination toward modernity. Her inherent personality "of being a Kelantanese and Malay are strengthened through her choice of the local setting, characters, language and various literary forms which have brought particularity to her writings" (p. 6). *Mariah*, being one of Azhari's most widely literary works, was considered "as one of the course readings in Malaysian Literature in English for most of the Malaysian universities" (Mee & Seng, 2014, p. 24) and secondary schools when the Malaysian government integrated the literature component into English language syllabus in 2000 (Atek et al., 2020).

### B. *Setting and Characterization*

The narrative of Azhari's *Mariah* is set in a small village called Melor. According to the narrative, Melor is located at "the main trunk road from Pasir Puteh to Kota Bharu" (Azhari, 1993, p. 3). Both Pasir Puteh and Kota Bharu are places in Kelantan, Malaysia. Therefore, the story portrays a typical Malaysian setting. Even though the main setting is in Melor, several events that happened throughout the story are scattered across the city. Also, Pattani, which represents a city in Thailand, is mentioned in a flashback. The story starts by mentioning Kedai Merpati (Pigeon Shop) in the village square, which is owned by *Mariah*, one of the protagonists in the story. *Mariah's* Kedai Merpati sets the whole story into motion. Every morning, village men gather at *Mariah's* Kedai Merpati to enjoy a variety of breakfasts.

One day, the village Imam (a Muslim religious leader), who has been living with his wife Cik Yam for 15 years, went to *Mariah's* Kedai Merpati to have breakfast. When the Imam first sets his eyes on *Mariah*, he falls in love with her. Subsequently, the Imam's peaceful marriage with his obedient wife gets interrupted when he decides to take the beautiful Nasi Berlauk seller, *Mariah*, as a second wife. The village is taken by surprise, although the Imam's background of unrequited love is hinted at in a flashback. Another setting in the story is the Imam's house, which is described as a place of domestic serenity. As described by the author, "quarrelsome couples who called at the Imam's place for arbitration would be sobered by the domestic serenity of the Imam's abode" (Azhari, 1993, p. 5). The Imam's house is where the Imam and his wife (the protagonists) live, and where many significant events happened. The mosque is another setting where the Imam finds refuge and tries hard to control his feeling toward *Mariah*. He keeps praying at the mosque, hoping to find peace.

In essence, there are three major characters in Azhari's *Mariah*, namely: The Imam, Cik Yam, and *Mariah*. The Imam is the protagonist in the story as he plays a major role as a dynamic character. As opposed to static characters, dynamic characters undergo changes, sometimes drastic or little, in characteristics, personality, or outlook as the story goes by (DiYanni, 2001). In this case, the Imam first practiced monogamy and finally entered into a polygamous marriage. He also creates a conflict of feeling towards his first love, the Sheikh's daughter, and *Mariah*. Another protagonist in the story is the Imam's wife, Cik Yam. She plays an important role as a secondary character whose actions affect the main character. The Imam is the village's religious leader and Cik Yam is the epitome of a perfect housewife. Cik Yam can also be classified as a major character since she centers around the theme of polygamy in the story. In the case of *Mariah*, Cik Yam's decision to allow the Imam to marry a second wife makes her a decision-maker in the story. Azhari describes *Mariah* as the Nasi Berlauk seller and a widow "...without a husband. Note that I didn't say either divorced or widowed. It would not have mattered either way in Kelantan" (Azhari, 1993, p. 4).

Besides the main characters, there are several supporting and minor characters in the story. One of the supporting characters is Cik Gu Nab who can be considered a simple and supporting character. This is because her presence and emotions in the story do not affect the storyline. This character was there to support the characters in the development

of the theme. Cik Gu Nab is the wife of Cik Gu Leh. She is a teacher at a local primary school and loves to gossip. She is the one who tells Cik Yam about her husband having breakfast at Mariah's Kedai Merpati. These negative characteristics make Cik Gu Nab rather a villain character in the story. Another minor character is Cik Gu Leh, the husband of Cik Gu Nab. He can also be considered a flat character, whose presence and emotions did not play an important role in the story. Cik Gu Leh is the person who persuades the Imam to have breakfast at Mariah's Kedai Merpati. Besides, he became the Imam's emissary when the Imam finally asks for Mariah's hand in marriage.

The third supporting character is the Sheikh, who is also portrayed as a simple character whose emotions and presence do not affect the plot or theme of the story. The Sheikh appears in a flashback by the Imam when he was in the turmoil of his feelings toward Mariah. The Sheikh lives in Pattani, a city in Thailand where he owns a mosque. The Imam was under the Sheikh's tutelage when he was in Pattani. The Imam tries hard to impress the Sheikh after falling in love with his daughter, but the Sheikh only wants the Imam to succeed him. The last minor character is the Sheikh's daughter, whose name is not mentioned in the story. Nevertheless, she is the Imam's first love. Just like her father, the Sheikh's daughter is only mentioned in a flashback to when the Imam was in his youth. She represents a flat character, and there is no interaction between her and the Imam.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on textual analysis, in which a context-oriented approach was used to investigate the issue of polygamy in Che Husna Azhari's *Mariah*. Burns and Grove (2003) noted that text is considered a rich source of data. Additionally, the context-oriented approach looks at the social, historical, and political aspects beyond the text being analyzed (Abubakar et al., 2021; Alshwayyat et al., 2021; Klarer, 2004). This is because the context itself could be used to interpret reality and obtain a clear understanding of how people make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2003). A good procedure to grasp the dominant themes in the selected short story is to relate the text to its historical and cultural settings since polygamy is a social issue. To ensure a detailed and accurate description of the novel, only the original copy was analyzed. Any translated copy of materials is not included in this study. The analysis was performed by an in-depth reading of the text to extract the dominant themes of polygamy as well as polygamous character traits by how the characters are portrayed before and after entering into the polygamous marriage.

### IV. MEANS OF RESISTANCE TO DOMESTICITY

#### A. Dominant Themes of Polygamy

Azhari portrays the Imam as someone who sets the theme of polygamy by seeking to take Mariah as a second wife. The Imam suffers from an internal conflict to the point where he finally succumbs to his feelings and seeks the Cik Yam's permission to marry a second wife. The first occasion happened on a Thursday night after prayers when the Imam was going to his bedroom. There, his wife was waiting for him when he finally broke down. His hot tears fell on Cik Yam's Sarong. The Imam finally confessed to his unrequited first love and asked for her permission to take Mariah as his second wife. This setting is significant as it portrays the Imam taking a huge leap in life by asking for his wife's permission to marry Mariah. Likewise, Cik Yam's reaction to the Imam's request reveals another significant theme. When the Imam informs Cik Yam about his desire to marry Mariah, she broke down in pitiful sobs. Cik Yam is at first saddened and unhappy with the Imam's decision, but later on, she agrees. This situation reflects the assertion made by Slonim-Nevo and Al-Krenawi (2006) that although painfully, first wives tend to accept second marriages as their fate and unavoidable events. In a similar vein, Hassouneh-Phillips (2010) stated that women typically enter into polygamous marriages unhappily.

Just like Cik Yam, Mariah's presence plays a vital role in revealing the theme of polygamy. Although her presence is not as frequent as the Imam's, Mariah's character develops from being a widow to a polygamous married woman. Nevertheless, Cik Gu Nab's character creates conflict in the Imam's move to a polygamous life. She informs Cik Yam of her husband having breakfast at Mariah's Kedai Merpati, and thus, sets the scene where Cik Yam and her husband have a small quarrel. However, the story ends with the Imam entering a polygamous marriage when he finally marries Mariah after he succeeded in obtaining the Cik Yam's permission to marry a second wife. Another theme relates to the bridal chamber in the Imam's house where the Imam finally spends his first night with Mariah as a married couple. This scene can be seen as the beginning of the Imam's polygamous life. Overall, Azhari attempts to portray the realities of polygamy (Ismail & Al-Subaihi, 2020) in Malay society.

#### B. Polygamous Character Traits

Although the Imam's character starts as a person who is faithful to his wife, as the story goes on, his feelings towards Mariah become irrepressible. Azhari describes Mariah as a beautiful alluring lady who mesmerizes men with "her hips swaying gaily to and fro with the rhythm of the balancing" (Azhari, p. 7). This expression indicates that the Imam's feelings toward Mariah are more to lust than romantic love. In a flashback, likewise, when the Imam sets his eyes on Mariah, he remembered his first love while learning "under the tutelage of a well-known Sheikh" (Azhari, p. 9) in Pattani, Southern Thailand. The Imam, then, "stopped in his tracks, then took full flight. He ran trembling to his hut... 'I love her,' he said to himself. 'I love her and I shall make her mine. I want no one else,' he vowed" (p. 9). He decided

to study harder to impress the Sheikh so that the Sheikh will find him worthy as a son-in-law. The Imam later came back to Kelantan broken-hearted after receiving news of the Sheikh's daughter being married to a cousin. In essence, Azhari depicts the Imam's character as someone whose sexual desire derives him into a polygamous marriage. This outcome echoes Soon Ng's (2019) assertion that despite the flashback that describes the root of the Imam's lust, "the lust is undeniable" (p. 132).

Still, Azhari seems to reveal a connection between religion and polygamy in the village Imam's character who was, in the beginning, depicted as "the guardian of modesty and propriety and enforcer of stringent mores" (Azhari, p. 10). As mentioned by Ismail and Al-Subaihi (2020), the Imam would be devalued in his spiritual leadership, if not, for emotionally abusing his wife. The Imam, according to Hashim et al. (2011), "well respected for religious matters, cannot help falling in love with the Kebaya-clad Nasi Belauk seller" (p. 395). The Imam believes that his love for Mariah is a test "By Allah! It's a test" (p. 10). In this regard, Zulkipli (2019) noted that there has been uproar, especially on social media, regarding polygamy practices in Malaysia amongst religionists. Likewise, Maria's relationship with the Imam is highly important in the narrative. Azhari portrays Mariah as one who respects the Imam due to his religious background. Perhaps, for this reason, Mariah agrees to become his second wife. As mentioned by Azhari, Mariah agreed to marry the Imam because she was untutored in religion and if she were to marry again, the Imam is worth a man and worth marrying after all the years of her self-imposed celibacy. However, Mariah becomes the cause of the Imam's conflict.

Moreover, as stated by Ismail and Al-Subaihi (2020), Azhari dilutes the severity of male misrepresentation through the Imam's polygamous act by portraying him as a negotiating husband when he seeks Cik Yam's permission to marry a second wife. Unlike the Imam's character, Cik Yam, throughout the narrative, is portrayed as a "modest and extremely virtuous" housewife who "had been an obedient and excellent wife" (Azhari, p. 13). According to Soon Ng (2019), Cik Yam's character "functions as a necessary foil to her husband's weaknesses: she is not only a model spouse but is pious and deeply sympathetic" (p. 132). Additionally, Cik Yam's love for the Imam is shown much more clearly, as described by Azhari, "Love and understanding shone through Cik Yam's also tear-filled eyes" (Azhari, p. 13). Her love is to the point where she sacrifices her happiness by allowing her husband to marry Mariah, "even though Cik Yam realizes the disadvantages of the polygamous relationship" (Abdillah et al., 2010, p. 6). Similarly, Hashim et al. (2011) sees Cik Yam as an innocent character who falls for the flimsy excuses used by the village Imam "to rationalise his decision to take on another wife" (p. 395). Nevertheless, according to Ismail and Al-Subaihi (2020), both characters of Cik Yam and Mariah are victims of polygamy. The authors reveal that "polygamy in Kelantan, like most parts in Malaysia, continuously receives social slurs, where often its female counterpart is ousted or belittled" (p. 222).

## V. CONCLUSION

This analysis focused on the depiction of polygamous character traits in Che Husna Azhari's Mariah from a feminist perspective. Through major characters, Azhari describes the reality of polygamy in Malay society. Likewise, the narrative boldly depicts Muslim masculinity, polygamous tendencies, and lust toward women, particularly in the Imam's character. Nevertheless, the narrative tends to mirror patriarchy in Malay society for crediting the use of religion to suppress women. Besides, Azhari seems supportive of polygamy for being hesitant to critique the Imam's decision, depicting Cik Yam as a paragon, and Mariah as "blousy" and "untutored". Exploring the depiction of polygamous character traits in Azhari's Mariah, particularly using the feminist approach, could advance our understanding of how female characters are represented by a female writer within the socio-cultural and religious contexts of typical Malay society. Given this contribution, there is a need, therefore, for modern writers to reconsider the narratives of women and polygamy in literary works. This step can guide the reader's understanding of polygamy as a hotly-debated topic as well as enlighten the public about the widespread misconceptions about women's issues in society. Additionally, this analysis is limited to the issue of polygamy through characters in Azhari's Mariah, specifically focussing on the Malaysian context. Thus, further research may draw a comparison of how different female writers depict the issue of polygamy in contemporary literary works.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Abdillah, N., Muslim, M., & Manaf, N. F. A. (2010). *Representation of women in Malaysian literature in English*. Retrieved March 17, 2020, from <http://umkeprints.umk.edu.my/524/>
- [2] Abubakar, H. A., Hassan, I., & Azmi, M. N. L. (2021). Otherness in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*: A postcolonial rendering. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11, 12, 1534-1539. doi: 10.17507/tpls.1112.04
- [3] Al-Sharfi, M., Pfeffer, K., & Miller, K. A. (2016). The effects of polygamy on children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Journal of Family Studies*, 22, 3, 272-286. doi: 10.1080/13229400.2015.1086405
- [4] Alshwayyat, A. M., Latiff Azmi, M. N., Hassan, I., Hmoud Alamro, K. A., Mohammed, M., & Daghamin, R. A. (2021). Psychological compassion as portrayed in Dorothea in Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Louisa in Dickens' *Hard Times*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11, 10, 1181- 1186. doi: 10.17507/tpls.1110.05
- [5] Atek, E. S. E., Hassan, I., Azmi, M. N. L., Yah, M. H., & Azmi, N. J. (2020). Popular approaches to the teaching of English literature among students in selected Malaysian secondary schools. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 9, 4, 339-348. doi: 10.18488/journal.23.2020.94.339.348
- [6] Azhari, C. H. (1993). Mariah. In *Melor in perspective* (pp. 5-13). Bangi: Furada Publishing House.

- [7] Baharum, N. D. (2012). *Third-world feminism and Che Husna Azhari's tales: Consciousness, identiti(es) and politics*. Paper presented at the 7th Malaysia International Conference on Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- [8] Behnamfar, M., Garmabesofla, H. A., & Fareq, E. (2012). Feminist Criticism of the Story of Homay Chehrzad's Kingdom in Shahnameh. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2. 9, 1980-1986.
- [9] DiYanni, R. (2001). *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. McGraw Hill.
- [10] Hashim, R. S., Yusof, N. M., Mydin, R. M., & Ho-Abdullah, I. (2011). *Literary realities of Malaysian women: Views from Malaysian women short story writers writing in English*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Social Science and Humanity, Singapore.
- [11] Hassouneh-Phillips, D. (2010). Polygamy and wife abuse: A qualitative study of Muslim women in America. *Journal of Health Care for Women International*, 22. 8, 735-748.
- [12] Ismail, H. H., & Al-Subaihi, M. N. (2020). States of Malay powerlessness in the works of Che Husna Azhari. *Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS)*, 5. 1, 211-233. doi: 10.24200/jonus.vol5iss1pp211-233
- [13] Klarer, M. (2004). *An introduction to literary studies*. London & New York: Routledge.
- [14] Mee, T. S., & Seng, T. C. (2014). Whose story? A systemic functional perspective on Mariah. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 134. 1, 23-28. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.220
- [15] Quayyum, M. A. (2008). Interrogating Malaysian literature in English: Its glories, sorrows and thematic trends. *Kunapipi*, 30. 1, 149-168.
- [16] Rosenfelt, D., & Newton, J. (2013). *Feminist Criticism and Social Change (RLE Feminist Theory): Sex, class and race in literature and culture*. London: Routledge.
- [17] Slonim-Nevo V1, Al-Krenawi A. (2006). Success and failure among polygamous families: The experience of wives, husbands, and children. *Family Process*, 45. 3, 311-330.
- [18] Soon Ng, A. H. (2009). Islam and Modernity in the Works of Two Contemporary Malay Anglophone Writers: Che Husna Azhari's "Mariah" and Karim Raslan's "Neighbors". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 44. 3, 127-141. doi: 10.1177/0021989409342160
- [19] Walker, C. (1990). Feminist literary criticism and the author. *Critical Inquiry*, 16. 3, 551-571. doi: 10.1086/448546?journalCode=ci
- [20] Zeitzgen, M. K. (2020). *Polygamy: A cross-cultural analysis*. London: Routledge.
- [21] Zulklipli, N. L. (2019, December 12). Kes da'i Farhan diadu kepada Jais (Da'i Farhan's case complained to JAIS). *Harian Metro*. Retrieved April 19, 2021, from <https://www.hmetro.com.my/utama/2019/12/525910/kes-dai-farhan-diadu-kepada-jais>

**Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi** is an Associate Professor of English at the Center for English Language Studies, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, Malaysia. His areas of research interest include literacy and comparative literature, second language acquisition, and language studies.

**Devia d/o Kamala Nathan** is a postgraduate student at the Center for English Language Studies, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, Malaysia. Her research focuses on literary analysis and feminism, mainly the novel genre.

**Ahmad Taufik Hidayah Abdullah** is a Senior Lecturer at the Center for English Language Studies, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, Malaysia. His areas of research interest include public speaking, language studies, and second language acquisition.

**Isyaku Hassan** is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Center for Modern Languages and Communication, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, Malaysia. His areas of research interest include media linguistics, literary analysis, and language studies.