

**STATES OF MALAY POWERLESSNESS IN THE WORKS OF CHE HUSNA  
AZHARI**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background and Purpose:** The development of scholarship on Malaysian Literature in English (MLiE) continuously receives attention, especially on one particular direction, which is the studies of the Malays. Inspired by the Malay proverb “*Diluah mati mak, ditelan mati bapa*” (Malay for ‘between the devil and the deep sea), this study looked into local literature in relation to powerlessness and its social complexity where we argue that the Malays are often caught in-between entanglements that prohibit individualism, as due to societal prejudice.

**Methodology:** This study employed thematic analysis where upon familiarizing with Azhari’s short stories, namely *Mariah* and *of Bunga Telur and Bally shoes*, the researchers identified themes that help understand the types and causes of powerlessness as illustrated in the short stories before associating the Malays’ state of powerlessness and their emotional suppression.

**Findings:** Findings revealed that both genders suffer from the Malay prejudice and their own lack of emotional strength, causing both to be powerless captives in different contexts, unlike the Western societies where similar situations might lead to alienation.

**Contributions:** The study contributed towards the understanding of social phenomenon, namely issues regarding powerlessness among the Malays. Such contribution is significant at developing potentials within building national talent, especially those regarding family and spiritual values.

**Keywords:** Che Husna Azhari, emotional suppression, Malays, Malaysian literature in English, powerlessness.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysian literature in English (MLiE) are traceable as early as the 1940s when university students in Singapore promoted for its relevance to inculcate unity within the nation (Quayyum, 2008). Given the time, local literary writers developed it into different genres, focusing on ranges of themes. At the same time, it receives many scholarly attentions, especially within the last two decades where it is scrutinized in different research. Quayyum (2003, 2008), for example, looks into its development and challenges while Hashim, Mohd Yusof, Mohd Mydin, and Ho (2011) trace on its literary realities and surprisingly, both Kaur and Mahmor (2013) as well as Suliman and Md. Yunus (2013) comment on its educational role as due to fall of reading habits (e.g. Lian, 2019). This, of course, is related to other aspects like readerability and reader's attitude (Ghazali, 2008). Of course, MLiE also serves as a platform to discuss relevant issues such as nationalism (Lee Kok Liang's 'Ronggeng Ronggeng'), hardship in life (Saffura Chinniah's 'The Tamarind Tree'), including those about the Malays as represented within MLiE.

While some argue that literary portrayals may not represent social realities, it is a known fact that the Malay society encourages self-restrain when it comes to airing laundry in public. To the Malays, domestic qualms are better kept as secrets, which thus, shows the society's preference for keeping face – a common practice among Asians. However, with the recent social media uproar concerning ill-practices of polygamy in Malaysia among the pious (e.g. Zulkipli, 2019), it stages an act of voicing out, unlike the long-cultured practice of keeping silence among any Malay second wife. Similarly, queries on hiked dowries begin to catch public attention when it is priced according to the bride's qualification (e.g. Abu Hassan, 2019). Both incidents are examples of brow-raising sociocultural topics.

Within the last three decades, Malaysia has extensively achieved many milestones in its sociocultural progress, including those that concern women's welfare (i.e. educational awareness and working opportunities, even gender equality). However, the *raison d'être* of this

research is to evaluate synchronously in order to trace developments over past practices that affect present lifestyles, specifically on the Malays' sociological and anthropological aspects as presented in literary texts. Based on two of Azahari's short stories which are compiled in her *Melor in Perspective* (1993), this article problematizes issues of powerlessness by exploring its ranges as portrayed in 'Mariah' and 'Of Bunga Telur and Bally Shoes' (henceforth, 'Bunga Telur') based on Seeman (1966). The Imam, Cik Yam and Mariah from 'Mariah' and Jamal from 'Bunga Telur' are the Malays under examination where they are answerable to the latter's perception. All of them are social players within a community in the east coast where their socioeconomic background differs from one another. While characters in 'Mariah' are described to be residents of a remote village, those in 'Bunga Telur' are made up of selected privileged Malays, depicted through their more modern selections of lifestyle and preference. Although both short stories are affiliated with Kelantan – a state located in the eastern region of Malaysia which is known for either its remote locality or common lexical range (e.g. *pitis* meaning money) (Azhari, 1993b) in order to suggest the Malay laidback surroundings and its strong cultural traditions. Meanwhile, Jamal the apt son allows his womenfolk into arranging him a marriage and later, accommodates to their proposal for an expensive wedding ceremony by selling his personal items, including his priced Bally shoes. This paper argues that both genders experience states of powerless in different situations where their voices are devalued. While some may question the validity of character representations, Malay readers are most likely able to associate themselves with these characters, hence reducing such doubt. Unlike other research on Malays or MLiE, this paper aims to answer fundamental questions on powerlessness among the Malays as portrayed in MLiE, such as: What are the ranges of powerlessness among the Malay portrayals and what are its causes? To what extent, is there a link between their state of powerlessness and emotional suppression?

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1 Malay Society, Its Sociocultural Rites and Literary Portrayals***

Identifying the Malays is a subject of many directions. Article 160(2) of the Constitution of Malaysia recognizes this ethnic group as those observing Islam as their religion, besides their ability to speak the Malay language and practicing customs. While its constitutional identity is clear, tracing research on the Malays was standard (Amri Baharuddin, 2001) before it became more complicated. In the beginning, the Malays were traced during the Melaka period where Amri Baharuddin (2001) identified the race-then-nation as possessing two major characteristics – they are both associated with lines of kingship and series of Melaka diaspora elements, such

as customs, language and trade practices. Colonization in Malaya then brought about documented descriptions of the Malays where they were either biasedly described or silenced (Amri Baharuddin, 2001). The Malays were subjects of anthropological or historical discoveries where often, they were associated with their political, geographical or spiritual origins. Post-colonial period later brought about another series of racial conceptualization when such silencing was questioned. Besides the rise of local intellectuals like Al-Attas (1977), early Malaysian English writers explored different issues of identity, gender and politics through their literary penmanship (Ismail & Barani, 2018). Other interesting research directions also involved the study of respect, which is a common topic of interest, especially on the Asian community (Mehta, 1997) where respect, according to Mehta, is a changing and shifting concept that covers the dimension of courtesy, politeness and kindness, instead of mere obedience as according to the older generation. Research on Malays also look into the concept of nationhood and its building towards forming a single concept of Malay-nation (e.g. Embong, 2000).

When discussing gender dynamics among the Malays, Bahiyah, Mohd Subakir, Kesumawati, Yuen, and Azhar (2008) point out the unfair distribution of power between the genders, citing men's power possession as compared to women, albeit its present existing struggle over power. Despite that, Hirschman (2017) highlighted that there is empirical evidence at present in creating gender equality, despite partial existence of patriarchy within the Malay society. He further cites Malay women's active roles at keeping balance, particularly in both agricultural and trading sector, where Kelantan – an east-coast state in Malaysia, known for its cultural richness, if not for its wealth of fishery products, is seen most obvious.

While the political and historical aspects of the Malays excite common understanding of the race, literature also finds the subject as a source of imagination. 'Mariah' for example, is criticized from numerous perspectives, including issues regarding the author's conscious self that shapes gender and identity (Baharum, 2007) to the character's victimization (Quayyum, 2008). Interestingly, Ng, Yee, Chong, Lee, and Ahmad Tarmizi (2013) highlight the presence of patriarchal hints within male literary representations in the required Malaysian reading syllabus in schools. These men, they argue, are portrayed as "strong, powerful, crook and creative characters" (p. 121). Of course, Hashim et al. (2011) suggest that the victimized one is Cik Yam, the unsuspecting wife who falls for her husband's "excuses" (Azhari, 1993a, p. 395). Manaf (2000), for example, points out on the clash between the "attractive Malay divorcee" and the "saintly man", resulting in his loss to lust in order to satirize the abuse of polygamy (p. 234).

On a larger scale, there is limited literature on Malays in relation to powerlessness. While there are studies on other local ethnicities and their state of powerlessness in Malaysia (e.g. Lumayang, 2004), others look at areas ranging from student politics and the freedom of speech (Weiss, 2012) to local attitude on cyber loafing (Ahmad & Jamaluddin, 2009) and teachers' dilemma (Boey, 2010). The closest examination on powerlessness was also done on the study of passivity (Hamdan & Md. Radzi, 2014) but again, passive does not equate the state of powerlessness where one surrenders himself to a condition of inability to do anything. To add, Hamdan and Md. Radzi's (2014) research focuses on Malay literature, which provides an interesting direction for research at the most basic level, asking for existence of Malay state of powerlessness within the sociocultural setting as portrayed in local English literary texts.

## ***2.2 Seeman's Concept of Alienation and Powerlessness***

Firstly, this research requires an understanding of alienation as a concept, which roots from its theoretical forefathers like Marx and Engels (1848) and Weber (1976). In his explanation of how people work within society within the capitalism framework, Marx (1844) identifies four types of alienation towards destiny – the alienation from the product of labor, the alienation from the activity of labor, the alienation from one's humanity, and the alienation from others where the surrender of control is observed from all four types of alienation. Weber (1976), on the other hand, forwards the theory of rationalization where it is human capacity to rationalize over matters that results in alienation.

Seeman's concept of alienation ranges across a spectrum of settings, from workplace to homes and others (Nakamura, 2017), where he justifies its popularity with modern day issues, arguing that the concept is similar to Islamophobia where the terminology does not represent the already existing phenomenon. He implies that man suffers from social demands, which creates individual stress. Such experience is subjective; one might interpret it differently than others (Geyer & Schweitzer, 1976).

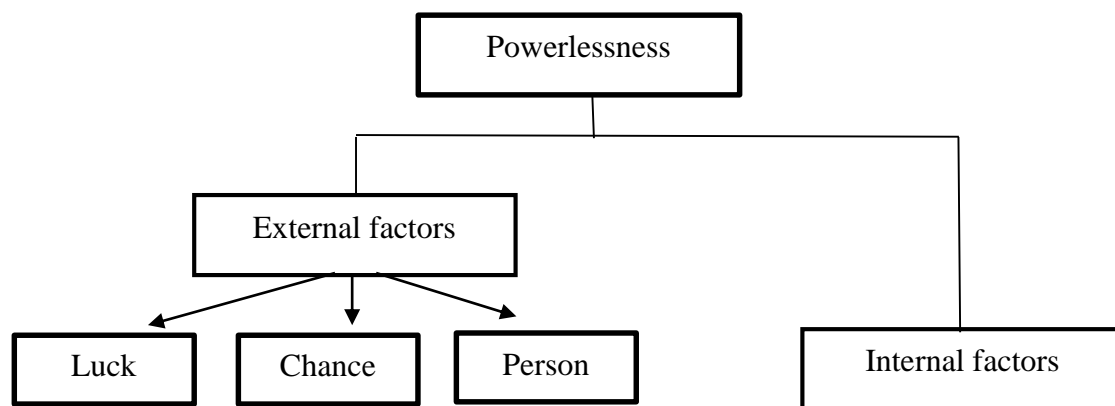


Figure 1: Seeman's (1966) types of control

Based on Marx's alienation, which focuses on the clash between the bourgeoisie and the proletariats, Seeman improves the concept in his effort to understand man's actions upon experiencing the state of powerlessness. Such state is mainly manipulated by two types of control: external and internal controls (see Figure 1). A person's success or failure is measured by his own perception for external causal factors such as "luck, chance, or powerful others, as against success or failure that is seen as the outcome of one's personal skills or characteristics" (Seeman, 1966, p. 355). He argues that such external intervention that embodies power over a person may lead to his dissatisfaction with life, hence creating an immense amount of fear for his failure to control actions around him (Seeman, 1959).

On the other hand, internal control are changes that happen in a person's life without his own realization. During the process, his conscious decision is absent, which thus voids him from becoming the agent of change. Instead, he is doomed to follow nature's pre-destined flow. Of course, the second type of control is different than luck and chance where Seeman argues for the presence of an ultimate force that controls the person's fate, thus explaining for the heightened level of frustration as compared to the first type of control. In such a case, the subject becomes helpless towards his life and surrenders to his destiny. He is destined to the decisions of this ultimate, Supreme Being (which logically reminds us of Godly attribute) that leaves him destitute for His Mercy. Here, the power play between humanly and Godly entities clashes, resulting in the former feeling powerless due to his lack of ability to participate in creating results within the situation, which is coined as "the product". Such term is initiated from Marx's capitalist conception of alienation, which explains how workers contest against one another in order to leverage opportunity in competition. Unlike the internal type of control, the impact of external control leaves a subject wanting to strive in other opportunities, as what is often suggested in common public expressions such as "better luck next time".

### ***2.3 Emotional Suppression***

When Mayer and Salovey (1997) proposed a four-branch model of emotional intelligence (EI) abilities, which consists of four: perceiving emotions, facilitating thought, understanding emotions and managing emotions, it provides an interesting direction to further understand man's ability to hide his emotions, or known as repression of emotion, hence achieving a level of emotional intelligence. It is considered as an "intentional and automatic method by which individuals exert control over the emotions they have, altering factors like when and how the emotions are experienced and express" (Gross, 1989, as cited in Patel, Patel, Ghandhi, & Bhakta, 2019, p. 17). In general, research associates between emotion and man's state of health, mental and well-being (e.g. Patel et al., 2019). Patel et al. (2019) in particular, discuss an existing ability to mask facial and bodily expressions as a means to "conceal a current emotional state" (p. 17). Its effective management of emotion, argue Patel et al. (2019), enables the ability to cope with different ranges of situation. However, its failure (or what is referred to as toxic affect) is detrimental and damaging to both emotional and cognitive health.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This paper explores the ranges of powerlessness within the selected characters based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis (see Table 1). This section provides both a description of each phase along with the researchers' experience in conducting the thematic analysis (TA).

Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed familiarization as the first step that is closely related to close reading where texts are well read and notes are taken down in order to form understanding about the textual content. In the case of analyzing the selected texts, notes were taken down to record specific descriptions (be it regarding events, character description, etc.) and conversations between characters or about characters. Of course, having read the texts for more than once, we initially identified applied concepts and theories in the short stories, which are Seeman's powerlessness and emotional suppression. Reiterating Braun and Clarke (2014), using TA allows us to experience the process of familiarizing with the short stories, its characters and their state of powerlessness before problematizing each situation in order to scrutinize and consider the resemblance between character's experience and application of concepts.

Table 1: Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis

Steps	Phase
1	Familiarization
2	Developing initial codes
3	Searching for themes
4	Thematic review
5	Thematic definition
6	Write-up

While the phase of familiarization takes place, Braun and Clarke proposed for a process of developing initial coding where the first phase might suggest relevant data that helps shape certain thematic patterns. The development of initial coding is crucial because it will not only be “applied to the entire dataset” but also provide sound support to claim for reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2014, p. 96), which leads to the third phase – searching for themes. We observed that while mentally recording patterns of powerlessness, we attempted to trace answers (which are scattered across the short stories) that provided understanding to the causes of such state of powerlessness. The process of taking down specific lines from both short stories sparked similarities of ideas or phenomena that exist within the lines, which occurred mentally where patterns were identified in order to formulate themes (or reiterate pre-supposed) themes. Of course, Braun and Clarke suggested for data collation that enables the re-examination of data for each theme, thus establishing the fourth phase. Similarly, the journey of this research also experienced a reconsideration of thematic selection where we had to weigh the realities that influenced the situations featured in the short stories. Our cultural and social background enabled such review. Braun and Clarke specified the need to improve the logical aspect of the thematic selection with a level of filtration for sensibility where themes are either split, combined or omitted.

Finally, the fifth phase requires further filtration to be carried out in order to prove each theme where themes and their scopes are scrutinized for suitability. Finally, a draft was written where a synergy between specific lines (as provided in phase 1), analytic narrative (as provided in phase 3 and 4) and contextualizing the analysis was formulated in order to build an argument (in phase 5).

#### 4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Characters from Azhari's selected short stories evidently experience states of powerlessness. While 'Mariah' provides different insights of powerlessness in relation to polygamy (the Imam, who is subjugated by desire, asks Cik Yam – his first wife, to marry Mariah, who is then weakened by God's destiny, to be his second wife), 'Bunga Telur' also sets a tale of a submissive son who finds ways to finance his own wedding. As such, these fictional men and women experience different types of powerlessness, which substantiate Seeman's types of control. It is in the second half of this section where two underlying themes that posit the causes of powerless Malays are discussed. Finally, this paper engages further onto connecting between the Malays' states of powerlessness to their emotional suppression.

##### *A. Types of Powerless Malays*

'Mariah' presents powerlessness as experienced by both genders. On the male counterpart, such dilemma is experienced by the Imam who is publicly portrayed as powerful and strong – common portrayals of Malay patriarchy (Ng et al., 2013). On the professional level, he is respected by his fellow congregants for his piety, having trained in Pattani under the supervision of a Sheikh. In private, he is married to a woman who is "a well-turned-out ... hot *tepung* [Malay for fritters] and fragrant surrounding" (Azhari, 1993a, p. 73) that his society validates her merits, claiming that there is "not a living man in Molo who did not envy him for having such a devoted wife" (Azhari, 1993a, p. 75). Yet, the only drawback in this relationship is their lack of children. As such, it is this void that benefits him in his rationale for sexual prowess, equating him to other Malay men whose lust and urgency to procreate would commonly find attraction within beautiful widows or divorced women.

In many instances, the Imam experiences different types of powerlessness that are caused by external parties, both as an adolescent and adult. As a teenager, the Imam was held captive by his father's dreams to complete scholarship in religion. The son, however, was reluctant, fearing for his insufficiency to perform academically, which fell onto deaf ears. As a young man, the Imam reluctantly went on with the family arrangements, despite his gathered misery while abroad. During the initiation of this scholarship, he experienced an emotional tug between accepting what has been decided for him and his desire to learn for the sake of knowledge, which provides an example of an external control that compels the younger Imam to accept and surrender, that later appeared in the form of silent protest. Another episode of powerlessness continued when he fell in love with the Sheikh's daughter, who fuelled his excitement to continue his vocation. This infatuation was kept as a secret. Her sight while

bathing that revealed her *awrah* (an Arabic word for parts of the body that need to be covered, including their private parts) excites him, causing him to be “trembling, panting and breathless” (Azhari, 1993a, p. 77). Such excitement led to his developed fever – another state of powerlessness. Such emotional suppression that affects his physical state of being, is exactly what Patel et al. (2019) described to be the factors of powerlessness. Sadly, nothing was materialized; the Sheikh’s daughter was married to another.

The Imam’s third experience of powerlessness appears when he is later reminded of his lost love after visiting Mariah’s eatery for breakfast. Here, Azhari flashes back into the past, providing an exposition of the Imam’s younger days in Pattani, Thailand. The sight of lust again causes his captivity for the desire to possess another woman. His first and only visit to Mariah’s eatery causes him to smile “dreamily to himself!”. For once, his affection for Cik Yam seems bleak in comparison to Mariah – “What a woman she is!”. His sighing aside, “Oh Mariah ...” validates his state of powerlessness (Azhari, 1993a, p. 76). He becomes a captive to the doings of another, thus experiencing again an external control. Despite his attempts to repel Satan by cleansing himself and restraining visits to Mariah’s eatery, he is weakened by temptation and succumbs on the pretext of accompanying Cik Gu Leh for breakfast. He later delays his leave, making excuses that he is enjoying his after-meal coffee to catch “lingering glances at Mariah” (Azhari, 1993a, p. 80). He acknowledges his defeat to Mariah, believing that it is fated and part of Godly design (which is fast becoming the common reason for polygamy). This, thus, affirms his justification for pursuing polygamy as his fate is controlled by another Supreme Being and that is out of his control. It is an exhibition of (believed) powerlessness. Either way, the Imam is a victim of (his created) situations. On the surface, the Imam might justify his act as religious but on another level, he falls within the palimpsest of common men in their trails of lust and desire.

On the female counterpart, both Cik Yam and Mariah are examples of powerless women in a shared situation. They are both victims of polygamy. Despite Cik Yam’s years of labour and servitude while minding herself from wild gossips, she is stunned when the Imam expresses his intentions to recover from his “pain and longing” for a lost love (‘Mariah’, p. 80) and marry Mariah as his second wife. Cik Yam tries to resist as she sees her newly, shifted position of given attention. Figure 2 illustrates her *cri de cœur*, which are made up of three stages – surprise, disbelief and distancing. The night stands still as Azhari portrays a wife’s ordeal at receiving this revelation, that it “struck” her “like a bolt of lightning” (Azhari, 1993a, p. 81). This drives her frantic with many disbeliefs – the second stage of resistance. She is at the threshold of questioning over her many years of devotion and fidelity for the Imam. The

signature question, which any victim would utter “Why me?” – is repeatedly uttered to express disbelief that keeps racing through her mind in order to logically analyze (and accept) the matter. Like a keen researcher, questions are raised to further understand this new-found knowledge of her infidel husband. These questions form acts of resistance against the situation that disheartens any capable Malay wife.

This continuous mental doubt later leads to a climatic episode of Cik Yam’s act of throwing herself onto the bed and crying, which Azhari (1993a, p. 81) describes it as “piteously”. This is the final form of resistance – (physical) distancing. On one level, this appears to be her effort to resist from accepting the revelation. On another level, it serves as the final emblematic cry for pity, which women often use in order to shake away their husbands’ intentions for going astray in the hopes of changing their minds over the new passion. The bed is after all, the stage for many communions and (re)conquest of love. The exposition of news leaves Cik Yam powerless that it further weakens her against his many coaxes for acceptance and pledge of love. Like a true magician, he mesmerizes her with lines of persuasion and acts of devotion, reiterating his eternal loyalty and love for her. Besides his countless kisses on her forehead, it is within his prostration to Cik Yam’s feet that manifests an act of submission, acknowledging her as a priority in devotion. It reassures her that nothing has changed, despite there being a third person in the marriage and so, the following morning witnesses her emotional suppression, thus allowing herself to become powerless over this new state of marriage when she said ‘Yes’ to his request for permission (Azhari, 1993a, p. 81). She allows herself to be consumed by his love as she allows him to feed her ‘*nasi berlauk*’ – a common practice during Malay wedding reception where the groom spoons a mouthful to the bride, which symbolizes surrender and conquest.

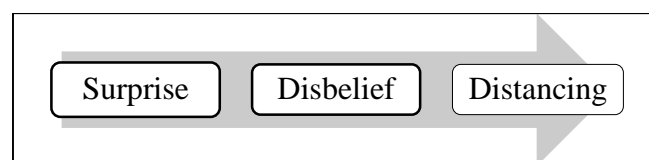


Figure 2: Cik Yam’s resistance

Mariah the *nasi* seller similarly experiences being powerless. Yet, hers is incomparable to that experienced by Cik Yam. For one, Mariah is devoid of her voice to opinions, despite the overwhelming given attention to her (both, as the title of the short story and the author’s elaborate physical description, which suggests the significance of her existence). Like a painted

doll, she appears beautiful yet is given a limited voice which fails to distinguish her as an individual, as if her opinions are void of use. Unlike Cik Yam, whose opinions are consulted upon and valued by her fellow female circle, Mariah's lines are limited to those that express her state of powerlessness when the Imam offers her a hand in marriage. Between his proposal for her hand in marriage and the day of marriage, she acts indifferently – “She continued, serenely unaffected, with her *nasi berlauk* selling” (Azhari, 1993a, p. 82), almost suggesting that the marriage is another ritual, instead of affection. This is after all, her second marriage. It was until the first night together that she has a glimpse of the Imam in a different light – he is “physically attractive” in height, built and poise (Azhari, 1993a, p. 83). Indirectly, Azhari maintains a reputable figure of a second wife whose affections are limited within closed doors; a “saintly” representation (Manaf, 2000). Her silence indirectly indicates the author's purposive craft against the possible social comments against polygamy as it reiterates society's rejection of such practice. Mariah is portrayed to be devoid of opinions, as a means to protect her image and to suit the community's expectation and treatment since polygamy in Kelantan, like most parts in Malaysia, continuously receives social slurs, where often its female counterpart is ousted or belittled. As such, when “Guests streamed into the house compound from sunrise till sundown” with congratulatory follows, it is enough for Mariah to accept her new status. In fact, it is a blessing. “Well, at least they harbour no ill feelings towards me” (Azhari, 1993a, p. 83) – an expression that conveys relief for social acceptance of her newly-established status, which further validates the weight of Malay prejudice if Mariah had played the wrong card. In the end, Mariah is overwhelmed by society's attitude and perception towards her, leaving her powerless over matters that are beyond her control. It is, after all, “...all Allah's decree” (Azhari, 1993a, p. 82).

Another type of powerlessness is suggested through Jamal as an apt son who prepares for his wedding in three months' time on a specific budget. Instead of lacing the wedding preparation with romance and excitement that suggests a celebration of communion and social togetherness, the short story is heavily filled with transactional reporting on expected expenditures for the wedding suggesting the commercialization of wedding, which is ironic. The narrative is meant to criticize society's shallow emphasis over appearance vis-a-vis wedding preparation and choosing brides, instead of its philosophy that the narrative dictates Jamal's worries over budgeting over the eight-page long story. This emphasis for social acceptance is seen in several layers. While Jamal portrays the doting son in his acceptance of his mother's suggestion for a suitable candidate, his mother and sister also engage in acts that illustrate such acceptance.

At first, Jamal is indifferent towards the wedding as due to its arrangement. His mother has earlier sought carefully for an apt candidate with specific criteria for her choice of a daughter-in-law based on the latter's appearance, level of education, family background, which are standard expectations for future mongering about daughters-in-law to others. As a dutiful son and brother, Jamal seems to have given up his freedom to choose one of his life directions when he allows his mother to find him a questionable "suitable choice" (Azhari, 1993b, p. 92), which thus provides an example of external control over powerlessness. Yet, on another level, it provides an amount of freedom within his mind over future decisions. Within the following three months, Jamal works at improving a functional budget that fits his pocket since celebrating a wedding with a feast is a common practice among the Malays where guests are fed with the extraordinary in return for their well wishes in the new adventure. The issue of sufficiency is a basic need that concerns Malay men. Malay men see a weakness in their inability to provide that injures the ego (Ismail & Barani, 2018). In his relentless effort to accommodate to the hoped budget, Jamal refuses to leave any stone unturned. Despite being given an easier solution, which is a bank loan, he exhibits an exemplary model of a future responsible husband and father that resists states of powerlessness. The first situation sees him re-negotiating the wedding items where he is left with the remaining RM430 unachieved collection over providing the budget for *bunga telur*. Traditionally, such practice of giving away *bunga telur* is meant to represent a token of appreciation from the bride and groom to the guests in return for their well-wishes and marital bliss, not to mention fertility. At present, *bunga telur* is fashioned in many decorative ways to serve its primary purpose that its concept is now commercialized. At this point, a tug between Jamal and his sister decides on its winner where the sister finally threatens a cancelled wedding. Of course, the sister's logical defence for insisting on the *bunga telur* would be to keep face. This is a "kick in his belly", since his excitement over the prospect of being married has already worked up upon. With the sign of a stomach upset, it is a sure defeat in the negotiation that Jamal "retired to a corner" (Azhari, 1993b, p. 96). He thus feels powerless and suppresses his emotion against his sister's threat. This, however, is momentary since Jamal is able to pick up his motivation to re-engineer ideas to find means to provide for the RM430-worth of *bunga telur*. The final stroke of defeat leaves Jamal permanently powerless (or assumed to be) as it is upon his knowledge that he is without proper shoes to be for his own wedding since he has given up his Bally shoes in order to fork out the needed RM430. The ending of the short story leaves a gap for the readers' imagination to wonder about Jamal's appearance on his wedding day. Would he be able to think of a way to replace the missing Bally shoes or resort to going bare-footed? Excluding the ending of the

narrative that invites readers to ponder, would Jamal now become more powerless since he has surrender power to both his mother and sister in the whole endeavour to keep face with the society?

## ***B. Causes of Powerlessness***

### *i) The Malay Prejudice*

‘Mariah’ issues a common Malay social perception towards polygamy where both the male and female characters in ‘Mariah’ present a collective attitude towards polygamy and its revulsion among the Malay Muslim society. It is commonly assumed that first wives are victims of their foolish husbands (such as those experienced by Cik Yam) whose desire overwhelms their rational ability to assess sensibility, while second wives (including potential ones) are leeches that crowd married men, despite the fact that there are some who are genuinely victims of situation such as Mariah (Manaf, 2000). Either way, the Malay society views polygamy and its practice as loathsome, especially at accepting its practice, where a majority often sympathizes with the first wives, who are perceived as victims of such situation. In fact, the Malays form a consistent prejudice against the second wives.

Both presumptions can be associated with Malay women’s dilemma in dealing with men in general. Their dynamics is aptly described based on a Malay proverb – “*ibarat mentimun dengan durian*”, which describes the physical interaction between a cucumber and thorny durian, a local fruit, that endangers the former. The proverb expresses the fragility of women as compared to men’s ferocious whims. Like English women in the eighteenth century (e.g. Ismail, 2017), Malay women are expected to carry their domestic roles such as keeping the house clean, preparing square meals to the members of family and maintaining loyalty to their husbands – as those exhibited by Cik Yam for the many years of her marriage. Her household is “spotless”, allowing the commendation among the local public for her exemplary role as a wife to the Imam (Azhari, 1993a, p. 73). In fact, she is compared to a local delicacy for her outstanding achievement as a wife; she is a “hot *tepung*” (Azhari, 1993a, p. 73) that sells out rather quickly once it is served; she is sought-after. Such analogy implies her excellent reputation that gives merit to keeping good impression of her household and good self-conduct. In retrospect, the refusal to comply with social expectations would only result in prejudice, if not an overwhelming amount of life challenges to be handled alone. Prejudice unquestionably seems to be second nature to the Malay society, especially if it concerns spinsters and divorced women who are either a source of exoticism or threat to the harmony of a marriage. Mariah, for example, is likened to a trophy that is eyed by many, where breakfast at home is dissimilar

to the one served at Mariah's that men would "congregate to have breakfast" after their morning prayers at the Molo masjid. Her presence is equated to the first break of dawn that the combination of her "swaying hips" and short, loud *kebaya* seems to mesmerize these men into trance. Her portrayal is kept perfect and refined, both gaining cuisine recognition and flawless physical attraction that leaves "Many a *nasi berlauk* breakfast remained cold and uneaten in the houses" (Azhari, 1993a, p. 71). To add, her status as a divorcee also merits this exoticism since "men seem to want to partake her *nasi* more because of her unmarried state" (Azhari, 1993a, p. 72). Her presence also overwhelms the womenfolk. Her "short and loud *kebaya*" draws attention to a point of distract in the opinions of many women. These rebellious women might not be abused physically, yet abuse may appear in other forms, such as emotions and mind. Marital separation, such as divorce, would only complicate financing a single-parent household, despite its rarity during the 1980s. The more conservative Malays normally refuse to consider separation as an option and rather attempt for family counselling and second chance. The agony of living alone and sustaining a life is portrayed by those experienced by Mariah who has to prepare *nasi berlauk*. Although her hardship is not mentioned, simply because she is not given the opportunity to represent herself, Malay readers can easily guess the elaborate preparation that single women like Mariah have to undergo in order to sell after morning prayers that generally take place around 5:30 to 6:00 in the morning. As a result, Malay women often resort to persistently play their submissive roles in their relationships. Such obedience is expected even when the Imam announces his intentions to wed Mariah as his second wife, her outmost confrontation is seen in a night-long boycott over the matter. While some may see her non-prolonged boycott over the matter as a show of defeat, others might observe her refusal to further be confrontational towards her husband as a common practice among the Malays. In fact, the concept of *mengalah* (Malay for giving in) is encouraged in order to maintain political balance and peace within the society. Similarly, the Imam is also subjugated to deal with the Malay prejudice. His long restraint against desire indicates his awareness of consequences of such act of surrender, which would only invite social repel. He would be devalued of his spiritual leadership, if not, for emotionally abusing his wife. While Azhari dilutes the severity of male misrepresentation through the Imam's polygamous act by portraying him as a negotiating husband, one that respects his obedient wife, the whole impression against polygamy sends away a public dissent. Without doubt, the Malay society finds sympathy for the first wives and only sees husbandry deficiency upon the suggestion of infidelity, albeit its legal status. To the condemning public, polygamy and its practitioners remain blameworthy and troublesome.

On another level, family obedience provides good impression and fends away Malay prejudice, as those that are often experienced by Malay sons. Since filial respect plays a predominantly important role in any banal Malay family, including those from the privileged set, both the younger Imam and Jamal demonstrate obedience irrespectively. Despite his reluctance to further his studies, he obeyed his father's wishes while Jamal considers his mother's opinion as valuable in deciding his future happiness. In fact, the amiable relationship between Jamal and his mother is implied through the limited description of her selection criteria when he seeks for her advice and opinion to choose his bride. Despite the author's implied suggestion of Jamal and his family as privileged Malays in Kelantan – his mother's preparation for a daughter-in-law who, both exhibit a typical Malay relationship of a mother-son relationship, which shows son's aptly servitude for his mother. The habit of Malay mothers fussing over the welfare of their sons extends beyond their puberty, including minding over matters of their sons' happiness. In Jamal's case, she carefully appoints criteria of suitability at deciding Jamal's wife. Such doings subject her to a life-long conceit of participating in her son's affairs. For that, Azhari provides an illustration of faith that many Malay sons choose upon when selecting a potential wife and the extent of influence that mothers have on their sons' life choices. The dynamics between Malay mothers and sons is interestingly observable in most patriarchal societies (like Pakistan and Arab) where, in spite of the paternal dominance within the household, mothers seem to have a claw-like influence over their sons. Impertinence is rarely exhibited; acts of disobedience as performed by sons are equated to social ignominy and insolence, hence resulting in failure to enter Paradise. Failure to comply with parental demands will only equate Jamal and the younger Imam as future references of insolent sons. As such, both narratives encourage filial obedience in order to avoid the Malay prejudice that entails badmouthing and future referencing.

*ii) The Malays, Filial Piety and Social Deference*

In hopes of keeping face and maintaining social decorum, the Malay society exercises filial piety as part of its social deference when dealing with older generation (either within immediate or extended families, either within familiar circles or with strangers, etc.), which in the long run, risks the younger Malays to experience states of powerlessness. As Mehta (1997) interestingly points out, respect is an interchangeable concept of courtesy, politeness and kindness (instead of obedience), the Malays in the selected work exhibit, to an extent, heights of respect for others who are categorically older and with assumed respectability (either by age or social ranking, such as husbands and leaders within the society).

Respect in the form of filial piety is demonstrated across the generations where the younger ones adhere to following orders and requests given by the elders in both ‘Mariah’ and ‘Bunga Telur’. The Imam’s act of respecting his father’s wishes for replacing the latter’s unfulfilled dreams of scholarship is an indication of filial piety. As Allah says in *Al-Isra* (23), filial piety, especially for parents are deemed to be children’s incumbent responsibility where filial servitude is next after His Al-Mighty as:

your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as], "uff," and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word.

This verse provides an understanding for the younger Imam’s compliance to his father’s wishes. It is his dutiful right to follow his father’s wishes and keeping in mind of the latter’s feelings, as part of treating the latter well. Failing to comply is an equivalent to insolence that mars his level of piety and fails him in following Allah’s commands, as stipulated in the verse. In fact, such practice is regarded as part of the Malaysian values (Mohd Ali, Yusoff, & Md Saad, 2016). Despite his unwillingness to leave, the younger Imam showed politeness and refused any ill attitude towards his father’s request, which left him half-hearted when embarking on his studies. Nonetheless, the young Imam was blessed with good thoughts when he found an ‘inspiration’ to continue his studies. Jamal’s in ‘Bunga Telur’, similarly display an obedient son’s role in respecting his mother’s wishes and providing a leeway for her choices in determining his future. Since she is his mother who gave birth and raised him, she would have known him best to know his preference and dislikes, which include the woman who will take care of him, after her.

Respect is also shown by the female characters in ‘Mariah’. When discussing Mariah as a possible threat, the fellow female villagers approach Cik Yam as the wife of the Imam for action to be taken. Their intentions are obvious – to have the most senior woman in the village who is known for her good reputation as a wife to a clergy, approach Mariah in order to suggest otherwise for her present business practices that seem to steer husbands away from their breakfasts at home. In order to approach the matter delicately and without creating any conflict, this intermediary act is in line with the Prophet’s (p.b.u.h) recommendation of practice when offering advice. This is because the act of advising should consider aspects of harmony in order

to avoid *tahrisy* (provocation), which is the Devil's constant effort at bringing factions among man, as reported by Jabir ibn Abdullah:

The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Verily, Satan has lost hope that those who pray on the Arabian Peninsula will ever worship him, so instead he incites discord between them."

(Sahih Muslim, no. 2812)

This intermediary approach can also be regarded as a practice of keeping face. Not only it protects Mariah from public humiliation, it is also a practice of respect for an admired public figure. Cik Yam is regarded highly by her community not because of her marital affiliation with the Imam, but also for her ability to maintain her household that is well-scrubbed. Her role as an intermediary would also maintain respect for Mariah's function in the society where she would not find offence if another woman is to advise accordingly, instead of a man.

On another level, respect is also evident at a macro level when Cik Yam accords her willingness to obey to her husband's wishes for polygamy. If she had lost her respect for him as a husband, Azhari would have painted a more colorful and dramatic episode behind closed doors. Instead, readers only see her prolonged emotional haul that lasts a night, followed by an amiable breakfast between the husband and wife. It is also respect that prevents Cik Yam from being empowered and liberal, at the same time. At both points, the absence of respect towards a husband is a defiance within the Malay cultural norms as well as according to the *syariah* (Islamic law).

### ***C. Malay Emotional Suppression***

Without intending to inflict public prejudice, the Malays generally steer away from possible confrontations where both genders administer amicability by giving consent to the adversary. Such avoidance of confrontations may range in manner of addressing controversial issues to dealing unfairness in any social mingling. Yet, this sentiment seems to be reduced, as observed by Hashim et al. (2011), where the fictional Malay women undergo changes because of rapid modernization where taboo topics are given the opportunity to be developed in narratives. Early twenty-first century representations of female Malays are likened to be more accommodating to these topics, unlike those portrayed by Azhari. Cik Yam and Mariah maintain respect for decorum and social harmony. In the case of 'Mariah', a revolt over winning a husband is kept behind closed doors or unexpressed. Cik Yam's squabbles over the Imam's decision to marry

a second wife is dealt with in private. This part of the narrative is made to be intimate, instead of dramatizing shame in the public, which thus validates the Malays' high regard for face-keeping. Airing dirty laundry in the public would only deepen the cut and bring more discord to the marriage. Mariah's silence can also be seen as a peaceful approach to the whole episode of offering her a hand in marriage. To the Malays, causing rifts to a marriage is considered as sinful. As such, a second wife is better off to be marginalized and voiceless.

Similarly, Azhari's tactful narrative strategy of omitting Mariah's more intimate and individual opinion is an attempt of presenting the realities of polygamy, which is evidently a hurtful experience, especially to the first wife. Ismail and Barani (2018) described the pains of having irresponsible men who are labelled as '*biawak hidup*' (Malay for living lizard that suggests uselessness), which are argued to be among some of the male polygamy practitioners. In the case of 'Bunga Telur', Jamal's great concern over money and budgeting in order to finance his wedding reception seems to overwhelm the focus of the short story, indicating Azhari's ridicule of the present Malay society's changing concern over weddings. It is troubling to observe the disregard over significance when it comes keeping face. The narrative questions the importance of materialism in the Malay society, which future research can pursue – does the absence of *bunga telur* and Bally shoes take away the happiness of the ceremony? To what extent, does impression play a role in a Malay society? Either way, both narratives show a triangular relationship between the Malay prejudice and the need to show deference that leaves most in a state of powerlessness, on which emotional suppression is often an inevitable impact, visibly used in order to sustain and maintain harmony within the society. It would be interesting to see Jamal running amok for not appearing presentable for his wedding in order to provide a set of *bunga telur* to the guests, or to see Mariah expressing her conniving plans to ruin Cik Yam's marriage. Yet, the Malays would see such acts as loose cannons that needed caring (if not, social boycotting) because its practice would further implicate the social dynamics of the community. Reinforcement in the form of community leaders and pious teachers would be referred to in order to tend to the situation. As such, alienation is a foreign practice among the Malays where reclusion is often less preferable. The Malays avoid confrontation in order to compensate social acceptance while experiencing powerlessness and undergoing emotional suppression. It is quite common to hear Malay elders encouraging their younglings to 'bite the tongue' before saying or doing anything. While the study on the Malays' state of powerlessness might seem aimless, understanding its cause is important to enable future improvement of Malay talents where emotional suppression may lead to the hindrance of opportunity if opinions are set aside in order to remain popular and accepted by the majority.

While prejudice is a common social deficiency, its impacts can be reduced through studying the roots of the phenomenon.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

In general, states of Malay powerlessness as depicted in the two short stories are caused by two – internal and external control, as suggested by Seeman (1959). Characters from these two short stories experience powerlessness either by people or circumstances around them, hence categorizing it as external control, or by Destiny, thus an internal control. This thematic analysis reveals two common causes of powerlessness among the subordinating Malays (the female and junior members of the society), which are prejudice and social deference. Most often, the Malays opt for emotional suppression as a means to tolerate situations that otherwise jeopardize harmony.

Since the scholarship on MLIe has yet to fully mature in its exploration as the present local social scientists and educationists seem to be more concerned with its educational and its sociocultural contribution, instead of its structural development, future direction could consider taking up the scholarship of the Malays as represented in English literary texts. This includes the understanding of the emotions and psyche of the Malays. Existing ones, particularly those as portrayed in English literary texts are few (e.g. Ismail & Yahya, 2016; Ismail & Barani, 2018). Exploring the emotions and minds of the Malays would not only help understand the characteristics and nature of this group of people but also improve discovery rooms of talent development. Given this contribution, it is important that continuous scholarship on understanding the Malays as subject of narrative is seen as part of a national ongoing effort to improve this particular race in line with the national talent-developing agenda.

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