

## Women Doing Malayness in Brunei Darussalam

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### Abstract

Muslim Burmat's novel *Permainan Laut* ("Play at Sea") (2008) explores the social undercurrents of a fishing village located in the Brunei Bay in the period just after independence. Cultural nuances are examined via representations of the female subject prescribed within the Malay language and a national culture that produces the harmonious, yet regulated, lives of gendered citizens in the sovereign Islamic state. As a tightly-knit nation, Brunei Darussalam ascribes to the model of *melayu jati* ("malay identity"), which inscribes family values strengthened by the national philosophy. In this way, women's cultural subservience and auxiliary role underscore their conformity with the "MIB" (Malay Islamic Monarchy) ethos undergirding the national polity. With Islamic patriarchal rules, women also understand that their distinctive roles are defined by social taboos regulated within the gender binary. Furthermore, the monarch's celebrated rhetoric of himself as the "caring father" informs the family unit, where women serve under their male leaders. This paper discusses negotiations with local language, beliefs, and customs at the arrival of, and enacted by, a tourist-cum-resident woman. In her interactions with local women and eventual marriage to a local man, she assimilates into dominant Malay culture, but also discovers a lacuna that signals an aporia in the outsider-cum-insider's impasse of Malay identity.

**Keywords:** Muslim Burmat, *Permainan Laut*, Brunei, Malayness, Islamic patriarchy, monarchy

### Introduction: A Nation-state's Discourse on Malayness and its Challenges

Apart from its well-known and well-documented oil-rich status (Hamzah; Bartholomew; Harper), the established repute of Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) as the longest surviving absolute Malay monarchy in Southeast Asia has drawn attention to this tiny sultanate (Kershaw; Nicholl "Brunei"; Nicholl *European*; Saunders; Sidhu). On 1st January 1984, the monarchy's status was reinforced in a *titah* (royal order) delivered by the twenty-ninth Sultan of Brunei, who aligned his governing power with the state-elevated ranks of Malay identity and Islamic religion (Ooi 8). On the eve of the nation's independence, the sultan's proclamation of a "sovereign, democratic, and independent Malay Muslim monarchy [MIB]" (Leake 63) cemented the tripartite structure of Malayness that would serve as the ideological marker of Bruneian identity. In this respect, Malayness is "the authority-defined identity that is found in Brunei Darussalam" (Hussainmiya "The Malay" 66). The MIB national ideology declared by the authoritative sultan has provided a legitimate platform for Malay, its language and culture, to be prized while Islamic<sup>1</sup> religion is intricately associated with the definition of Malayness—these dual orientations to be

safeguarded by the monarch (Low 1) as the self-appointed “guardian and protector of Islamic principles and Malay culture” (Saunders 87).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Marie-Sybille de Vienne delineates Bruneian Malay identity “on the dual basis of religion (Islam) and the political system (the monarchy)” (109). The increasing Islamization of national identity is evident when considering Brunei’s brand of Islamic conservatism, especially through the announcement of the implementation of the Syariah penal code (Attorney 2018). In the light of these developments to strengthen Islamic identification, for which Brunei has received international media attention (Bowie; Gunia; Khan A.), it is clear that the monarch’s elevation of *melayu jati* (Malay identity) enshrines a superior status for Malay language and culture, while reinforcing Islam as the official religion of its *rakyat* (people). A blueprint for articulating the self through this cohesive national identity promotes a distinct brand of Bruneian Malayness, a state-constructed identity whose coherence with Islam is progressively tightened. In this way, MIB offers a unified Malay identity in an independent Brunei, as it is a state construction formulated to forge a new and modern identity seceding from its historical status as a “British protectorate” (Hussainmiya, *Brunei* 1).

The focus of this paper lies in the challenges posed to this state-constructed notion of Malayness that is demarcated in the Malay-Muslim alignment by the MIB national ideology. Rather than offering a straightforward account of the traditional gendered roles of women in Brunei’s patriarchal Malay-Muslim nation-state, I propose the argument of an inadequate and incomplete assimilation into the ideological Malay-Muslim ethos established in Brunei. By addressing these difficulties, I pay attention to the ways that the Malay family unit ostensibly serves as a site to articulate gendered roles expected from both the male and female sex, but ultimately fails because of complications arising from contestations to the idea of Malayness. In MIB, an exclusive, fixed, and cohesive narrative of Malayness is strengthened. Within society, however, an inclusive, changing, and hybrid discourse of Malayness becomes evident through its broader use and application. Consequently, a disconnection between a coherent Malay-Muslim identity propounded by the official ideology and a fracturing of this idea of Malayness by social participants in lived reality results in them facing difficulties culturally assimilating into Malay identity. These tensions and contradictions are brought to the fore, especially, through the changing loyalties and shifting positions of Malay citizen-subjects who are pulled in these two directions. These fractures may also be evident in male resistance to the national ideology when men endorse an inclusive idea of Malayness (where Malay is divorced from being Muslim), and their failure as sons and husbands in their Malay-Muslim collectivist roles negatively affects women’s identity.

In fact, there is no better test for the fixed idea of Bruneian Malayness than in the arrival of a truly “foreign” subject—an immigrant settler to the nation who is neither Malay nor Muslim. In this “othered” body, national benchmarks of a purist Malay identity are put to the test.<sup>3</sup> Within the nation’s body politic, the Malays reinforce

their various ideas of Malayness according to contrasting discourses of Malayness, which are found in the national ideology and social reality. Furthermore, as the gender binary is supported by the Islamic and monarchic components of the national ideology, women's attempts at assimilation are highly dependent on men's own subscription to their Malayness. In this way, I underscore the fractures of cultural assimilation that fragment the state-constructed notion of a unified Malay-Muslim identity. While the scions of the Malay race bearing Islamic faith enjoy social privilege, the foreign others (non-Malay and non-Muslims) have difficulty in gaining legitimate entry into society even through assimilation. Furthermore, the succession of the Malay race that occurs through a marriage between a Malay man and a foreign woman poses its set of dilemmas. Because of the Brunei Nationality Act of 2002, the foreign wife may be granted *warga* (citizen) status and her entrance into Malay identity completed through marriage to a local man. Such a license to enter into Bruneian Malay identity is regulated by men, who are the gatekeepers managing the (non-) entry of others into Malayness.

Exposed as a chimera of sorts, the state-constructed Malayness into which local men and women attempt to assimilate presents a lacuna through an aporia prompted by the inconsistencies and contradictions within its conflicting definitions. The contending discourses established by the nation's construction of Malay identity contrasted with Malayness in lived reality lead to a dissonance fracturing the process of cultural assimilation. In fact, shifting definitions of Malay identity confuse citizen-subjects, who are torn between embracing a hybrid notion of Malayness (Maznah and Syed 15; Asiapac 18) and checking themselves against national standards of strict adherence to a cohesive and exclusive MIB identity. Consequently, a foreign woman's attempts at assimilation into Malayness are characterized by difficulties that highlight these divergent ideas of Malayness. Crucially, she is tested on her compliance with the nation-state's discourse on MIB identity. Assimilating by eschewing "prohibited activities"<sup>4</sup> (221), for instance "alcohol consumption" (122), and taking heed of "social taboos" (222) delimiting women's work and their mobility, women submit to Brunei's Islamic patriarchal structures.

### **The Reading Approach –A Critical Lens Offered by “Doing Gender”**

The theoretical approaches employed include Candace West and Don Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender" (125), where differences between male and female are accentuated along the gender binary. In fact, I borrow this verb in their coined phrase to signal not just the gender but also racial binary that is consolidated within the processes of assimilation (gender and cultural). Significantly, doing gender as "an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction" (Fernstermaker and West 8) informs, and is also reflected in, the process of cultural

assimilation. In my analysis of a contemporary novel by a pioneering and celebrated Bruneian author, I contend that women doing Bruneian Malayness underscore their willingness to assimilate into the demarcated norms set by their male counterparts. In line with a (male) authority-defined identity, women's Malayness is produced through their incidental roles, domestic service and support shown to male authorities. In this respect, for women, agency and resistance become limited as performativity is left untapped and therefore cannot undo the cohesive structures perpetuated by the national ideology.

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler explains that “doing” may still subsume, rather than conflict with, “undoing” (3) gender through dismantling “constructedness” (3). To this extent, men do Malayness when submitting to the racial and gender binaries buttressing their authority, yet also undo Malayness when resisting a nation-state's construction of a fixed Malay-Muslim identity. If undoing gender by doing gender takes into account hybridity that subverts its fixed construction, then I argue that men undo Malayness when asserting multiplicity and fluidity instead of simply maintaining its idea of exclusivity. In fact, in Muslim Burmat's *Permainan Laut* (2008), when men fail to assimilate into a state-constructed Malayness, they do Malayness beyond the confines of a static idea propounded by the exclusive MIB national ideology. In this perspective, men demonstrate an attempt at Malay inclusivity when acting as agents of social tensions in their resistance, which leads to a fragmentation of the closed Malay-Muslim identity that is undone.

In Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, undoing gender is aligned with a theory of gender performativity, which is inextricably tied to agency and resistance. As she states, “the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency” (xxiv). For Butler, performativity allows for “opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of [a] domain of intelligibility” (*Gender* 18). In discussing the extent of women's non-agency (in their doing Malayness) and men's agency (in their undoing Malayness), it is useful to consider the workings of the ideological state apparatus (ISA) that restricts agency in citizen-subjects. For Louis Althusser, the ISA is a state-discursive paradigm that “interpellates” (11) subjects as it “hails” (174) them through social interactions, thus “recruits” (174) them. The interpellation of men and women denotes their assimilation into society in which they are acted upon by a set of ideas, such as MIB, that hails them into existence. Bereft of agency, an interpellated subject is summoned by a nation to do the work of assimilation into a state-sanctioned identity. Within the MIB national framework, the Islamic conversion is one such process marking an entry point into Malay identity. In a marriage between a Muslim man and non-Muslim woman, a *shahadah* (“declaration”, Kumpoh) of intent to assume a Muslim identity involves the male granting his female bride entry into Malayness by hailing this newly converted recipient into the Malay society in the MIB nation.

**A Bruneian Context: Exclusivity versus inclusivity—Conflicting Ideas of Malayness**

In Brunei, the state propounds a definition of Malayness as fixed and unchanging, rather than mobile and fluid. While Malayness serves as a self-defining term within Malay minority nations where this group is dependent on a collective identification for survival (Hussainmiya, “The Malay” 66), Brunei’s Malay majority are prompted by the state’s cohesive discourse on Malayness, as it is intricately tied to Islam and sanctioned by the monarchy. Malayness, as viewed through this narrow definition offered within the MIB ideology, presupposes that Bruneian Malays are all Muslims, which is false even though its neighbouring Malay countries have employed this equivalence as a strict configuration of identity (Muzaffar 1; Nagata 336). Brunei’s ideology of Malay-Muslim identity, which aligns it with some parts of the Malay world<sup>5</sup> such as Malaysia and Indonesia, is given credence by the term *masuk Melayu* (“enter into Malayness”) being used to describe Islamic conversions. Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s idea of the nation, the cohesive quality of MIB helps to create an “imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (49), as a tool deployed by new nation-states in their identity formation. On another hand, Partha Chatterjee would view this identity construction as a postcolonial nation’s way of asserting its “spiritual domain”—an “inner” domain that is defined as a “most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western” (6). In charting out a national identity that is racially, linguistically and religiously exclusive from British residential powers, the MIB ideology forges a colonial distinctness away from Brunei’s historical status as a British protectorate (Hussainmiya *Brunei* 1). Given that MIB mitigates “the fragility of the new nation, its ostensible vulnerability to any kind of exigency” (Heng and Devan 196), this ideological tool serves as a further strategy to achieve social harmony and peace via its rhetoric of a Malay-Muslim union. By aligning Malay racial identity with Islam, MIB blurs the distinct differences between the racially heterogeneous groups in the nation, which comprises Malays (65.7%), Chinese (10.3%) and others (24%), who are also not all Islamic believers (Brunei’s Department of Economic and Planning 2018 census). The dominant identity celebrated in MIB, therefore, conveys a romanticised ideology of cultural and religious homogeneity. Hence, the Malay-Muslim hegemony reinforces a fixed and exclusive idea of Malayness that is an “impossible ideal” (Kathrina 48), as lived reality reveals otherwise.

As discussed previously, Brunei is ruled by a centuries-old monarchy (Leake 63) that oversees Malay Muslims whose MIB orientations were passed down through the generations. The stativity of MIB as a national identity is supported by historians who trace its origins back to the period when the Bruneian kingdom was founded by the first Sultan in the fourteenth century (Hussainmiya, “The Malay” 68). Fast

forward to the twenty-first century and the official statement on MIB continues to promote a purist idea of Malayness. The Brunei government states that it is:

A blend of Malay language, culture and Malay customs, the teachings of Islamic laws and values and the monarchy system which must be esteemed and practiced by all. [...] The nation hopes that through the true adoption and practice of the MIB philosophy, the purity of Islam, the purity of the Malay race and the institution of Monarchy can be maintained and preserved as a lasting legacy for future generations. (Government of Brunei Darussalam 2007b)

Historically, there is also a case to be made against a purist configuration of Malayness. While one camp contends that MIB has existed since its first sultan, as is evident in his name change from Awang Alak Betatar to Sultan Mohammad Shah (Sidhu 20), other historians argue for the hybridity, multiplicity and fluidity of Malayness within this region (Maznah and Syed 15). Furthermore, within governmental documentations, Malayness is treated in a “broader manner than Malay purist[s] would readily admit” (Hussainmiya, “The Malay” 68). Since ‘Malay’ includes six more ethnic groups, Brunei does allow some flexibility in its usage and definition of Malay identity. The Kedayans, Muruts, Dusuns, Bisayas, Belaits and Tutongs can legitimately identify themselves as Malays here (Brunei Nationality Act of 1961). Furthermore, Christianity and other religions apart from Islam that are practiced by these *puak-puak jati* do not threaten their status as Bruneian Malays. Therefore, contrary to the framework offered by the national ideology, Malay identity resists a fixed and rigid alignment as observed by the inclusion of seven indigenous groups accorded Brunei Malay identity.

### **Muslim Burmat and *Permainan Laut* (2008)**

Muslim Burmat occupies an eminent position in the Bruneian Malay literary tradition. He began publishing from as early as the 1980s (Sariani, “Mengakrabi” 89). Known for writing across the genres of poetry, the short story, and the novel, he is regarded as a significant contributor to the Bruneian Malay literary scene. Burmat, a Kedayan, writes alongside several other Bruneian Malay authors (Chong 127). Significantly, his first novel broke an almost thirty-year silence in Bruneian Malay literature from when the first Bruneian Malay novel, *Pengiran Bendahara Menjadi Sultan* (1951) by Yura Halim, was published (Sariani, “Mengakrabi” 89). He is the first Bruneian to have won the Southeast Asia (SEA) Write award and twenty-nine others have followed since then. Not only was he a recipient of the SEA Write Award (1986), but he has also won the MASTERA (Southeast Asian Literary Association) Prize (2001) and was bestowed the title of Literary Icon of Brunei Darussalam (2002). These

accolades acknowledge his literary contributions both nationally and regionally. Burmat's creative writings are mostly published by *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei* (DBPB), which is Brunei's language and literature bureau. His prolific literary presence has gained him scholarly attention, including academic discussions in *Pangsura* (Morisidi; Ali) and a local symposium foregrounding interdisciplinary approaches to his creative contributions. In 2018, Burmat along with DBPB officers, university students and faculty were privy to paper presentations on the historical, literary (*Ho Comparative*), and educational aspects of his works. Within the national school curriculum in Brunei, Burmat's *Lari Bersama Musim* (1982) served as a textbook for Secondary 4 and 5 students until 2001 (Sariani, "Mengakrabi" 76). In addition, the Malay Literature and English Studies programmes at Universiti Brunei Darussalam include his works in their syllabi for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Thus, Burmat enjoys an extensive reach both locally and regionally.

*Permainan Laut* is his thirteenth novel that is set in the period of Brunei's early independence, as this post-protectorate nation introduces its (re-)affirmed tripartite identity enshrined in the newly launched MIB ideology. The narrative unfolds during a period of "forty years" (39) after the Japanese Occupation. This time frame not only bears significance in terms of Brunei's national independence, but also marks a juncture when Brunei's Department of Religious Affairs was converted into the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Iik 45), which exerts more influence over the construction of citizen-subjects' identity through a strengthened Malay-Muslim bond. The narrative opens in a provincial fishing village in which a Malay village chief and local men are busy discussing the construction of a mosque. The plot traces the arrival of a Japanese girl, known as Yoko, who becomes besotted with Brunei Malay culture. Initially here for a short-term stay, she decides to settle permanently in Brunei after helping her Japanese guardian conduct research on a recovered bomb. With a "romantic" (73-74) view of the Malays, she commits herself to residing within Taha's Malay household. Learning the expected roles of local women in her interactions with Minah, Taha's wife, and Tikah, a village girl whom she befriends, she attempts diligently to assimilate into the Malay culture. Her cultural immersion into Malay identity culminates in her marriage to Tahir, Taha's son. However, her success at a state-constructed Malay-Muslim identity is undone by him. Tahir's own assimilation into the Malay-Muslim hegemony is problematized by his final act of resistance, which exposes the fragmented nature of the cohesive and exclusive Malay-Muslim identity aspired to by Yoko and the local women.

Even though this novel has been examined in terms of the traumatic memories triggered by a re-discovered bomb (Ho and Dhont 138) and its natural imagery (Morsidi 3), its significant commentary on Bruneian Malay identity—a dominant theme—has not been analyzed. I attempt to address this gap by examining the novel's representations of Malayness in terms of race and gender. Although research on race and gender within

Anglophone and Malay literature does exist (Chin “Bruneian”; Chin “Counter-narratives”; Kathrina; Sariani “Imej”), these studies address Bruneian women writers’ contributions to the construction of the female citizen-subject. Consequently, works by male authors are neglected in the critical scholarship on literary renderings of racial and gender relations in Brunei. Not just a fascinating read, *Permainan Laut* makes a statement on the contradicting ideas of Malayness that are set off by a foreign woman’s arrival on the local scene.

In exploring gender identity and role in relation to Brunei’s state construction of Malayness, I hope to highlight the characters’ difficulty in culturally assimilating into the MIB nation. In this section, I provide an analysis of the local Malay women: Minah, Tikah and, to a smaller extent, Saimah and Idah. Then, I examine Yoko’s attempts at cultural assimilation into Malayness and the challenges she faces after marrying Tahir. Rising tensions and complexities between a non-Malay wife and Malay husband are addressed through the prism of her lack of agency and his resistive agency, where he undoes Malayness and begins to perform Malayness instead. Put simply, in abandoning his leadership role as a Malay-Muslim husband in their marriage, his rejection of a state-constructed Malayness espouses a hybrid idea of Malay identity (Maznah and Syed 15) that disagrees with the fixed and closed MIB state ideology. Subsequently, in analyzing local and foreign women in terms of their assimilation into Malay identity, I employ West and Zimmerman’s concept of “doing gender” (125). My coinage of “doing Malayness” signifies a consolidation of power hierarchies in the racial/gender binary. However, difficulties in upholding the MIB identity also emerge and are discussed relative to conflicting ideas of Malayness—on one hand, a cohesive and fixed identity and, on the other hand, accommodating otherness. Consequently, a fragmented Malay identity is highlighted in the fractures inherent in “doing Malayness”.

### **Doing Malayness: The Cultural Assimilation of Women in Brunei**

“Doing” Malayness emphasizes the racial and gender binary maintained through a loyal subscription to the “deeds” that inscribe Malay identity on a gendered body. For men and women, these deeds may include “speaking Brunei Malay” (59) and “dressing in Malay clothes” (80). For women, additional deeds comprise “adhering to prescriptive social taboos” (222), “performing housework” (77), and “submitting to the Malay husband” (321). Evoking Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s use of this term, “doing” (125) then consolidates women’s maintenance of the gender binary within the Brunei Malay cultural hegemony. While speaking Malay language and wearing the female cultural attire of the *baju kurung* exhibit faithfulness to the nation’s elevation of Malay language and culture, the social patriarchal structures supporting cultural taboos, housework duties assigned to women, and wifely submission are rooted in Islamic principles. As Ralph Austin explains, “Islam is, perhaps, the most confident of the patriarchal religions in its patriarchal certainty” (41), where patriarchy is

defined as “the principle of the dominance of the father over the mother with respect to the parentage of the children and, by extension, the primacy of the male in human society” (37). It is this male primacy that accords men with a privilege to inhabit the public domain whereas women are restricted to the private sphere of domesticity. In *Permainan Laut*, women’s identity is predominantly delimited by male leaders with their patriarchal certainty legitimated by Islam.

For women, doing Malayness entails a limitation of work that is described as *had kerja* (209). However, historically, such a restriction placed on Malay women’s movements and everyday work was not necessarily the case nor adhered to faithfully over the years. In Brunei, Malay identity has not always been constricted by a patriarchal hierarchy that positions women on the lower end of the spectrum with their “lesser status” (Hart 96). According to Anthony Milner, a “bilateral kinship system” (77) existed in the sixteenth century. Robert Nicholl similarly points out that women during this period would “go in boats through the settlements selling articles necessary to maintain life” (*European* 10), thus they actively and freely participated in the public spaces to earn a living for themselves and their families. The discontinuation of this bilateral practice is due to an intensifying institutionalization of binary hierarchies as Islamic theological belief rooted itself within Malay nations (Austin 36-37). If Hussainmiya is right to claim that MIB existed from as early as the fourteenth century (“The Malay” 68), inconsistencies in upholding a Malay-Muslim identity in the sixteenth century anticipate future difficulties for subsequent generations.

In *Permainan Laut*, an attention to Islamic practices and taboos is evident early on, and these frame women doing their Malay roles within state-established boundaries. In the opening chapters, the villagers are defined as *orang Islam* (15) who are preoccupied with planning the construction of local places of worship. Their discussion about the building of a new “mosque” (15) is presided over by a village chief who is identified as a pious man (16). Together, he and the other villagers employ speech traits that reveal their Islamic affiliation, such as *Insyaa-Allah* (“God willing” 17) and *ya Allah* (“my God” 25) displaying a reverence to *Allah*—the Islamic god. Their venues for *ibadat* (16) also map out a “male space” (Hart 96) that reinforces patriarchal domination. For one, the exclusion of women in these discussions denote women’s “lesser status” (Hart 96). Secondly, the mosque is principally a place of worship for men rather than women. Thirdly, a foreigner’s donation of materials for the mosque is refused (16). This final point is significant because the taboo of not accepting the contributions and rejecting the participation of a foreigner—a racial, religious and gendered other—sets the tone for Yoko’s suspended cultural assimilation. Furthermore, male elders warn children about outsiders by issuing cautionary instructions, such as “Do not trust foreigners too much” (44). As evident, male authorities decide on foreigners’

(non-)entry into their Malay community. Hence, villagers upholding a Malay-Muslim identity heavily guard it from the foreign other, whose assimilation into Brunei Malay identity is fraught.

If “doing gender [is] an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction” (Fernstermaker and West 8) and “undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” (Fernstermaker and West 4), then local men and women in *Permainan Laut* exhibit their being captive to the daily mundane activities ascribed to them. While Taha never steps foot in the gender-differentiated kitchen because he does his masculinity beyond it, Minah’s identity is intricately bound to this feminine space. Also, Taha is a fisherman who does his work of going out to the sea while his wife is defined in terms of him. This is evident when Minah faithfully restricts herself to inhabiting only Taha’s house and its immediate perimeters. As the narrator explains, Minah’s “physical presence is never far from the house and when she does step out for a while, she merely treads on its fringes” (186). As Taha’s wife, she conforms to her socially ascribed role by doing her domestic submission within a restrictive spatial boundary. In doing Malayness, she is consumed with household activities, such as “cooking” (186) and “washing” (77) for her husband and their two sons, Tahir and Husin. It must be noted that their two daughters, Saimah and Idah, have left the village to live with their husbands and carry out domestic tasks for them in their marital homes. When Minah is not engaged with her daily housekeeping, she acquiesces to Taha’s further instructions, such as “fetching chairs” for his guests (71). Doing the bidding of her husband, she perpetuates the social binary structures when training other women to “cook Malay dishes” (186) and carry out designated feminine duties. Hence, Minah serves a functional role in the private sphere while Taha does his work in the public sphere. By doing so, she faithfully assimilates into the Malay culture and does Malay identity.

Another illuminating case is Tikah’s internalization of female subordination in line with a Malay-Muslim orientation. Born and bred in *Kampung Kuala Duka* (206), she represents the local female generation who are yet to marry in Brunei. As a product of her sheltered upbringing, Tikah lives a socially restricted life. She also forfeits her autonomy because she lets her parents dictate when she stops schooling. Under their direct instruction, she leaves having completed only her “primary years” (206). The motivation behind their decision has to do with social demands for Tikah to prepare to assume the gendered role of “motherhood” (268). When imparting the same expectation for Yoko, she testifies to her own obedient acceptance and faithful assimilation. She informs Yoko, “As part of the female sex, we are to bear children and raise them in the house” (268). Lacking agency, Tikah simply serves as a pawn for her parents and submits to their ambition for her to prepare herself to be a wife and mother, which is regarded as the highest female virtue in Islam.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as secondary school entails her leaving the village, her parents disapprove because the town is no place for a girl.

So, while the town is freely frequented by Taha and Tahir who go there to renew their fishing licenses, it is a space that is prohibited for girls. Even though Saimah and Idah reside in their husbands' homes in town, their presence there is in direct relation to providing them with domestic support. The gender binary that restricts girls and, in turn, privileges men is evident through the submission of girls co-opted within Malay-Muslim identity.

***Orang asing* (foreign other): Yoko doing inclusion along the racial/gender binary**

The female Japanese protagonist who arrives as a tourist and becomes a resident in Brunei drives the plot in *Permainan Laut*. With its narrative about a raced and gendered outsider within the Malay-Muslim society, Burmat's novel examines the conflicting tensions arising within the local community—some villagers welcoming her and others suspicious of her “challenging the norms” (242) that they uphold. Her cultural assimilation is facilitated by her Malay proficiency acquired from as early as during her “university studies in Japan” (59). Arriving well-schooled in the Malay language as well as customs, she tries hard to gain social entry within the nation. Even so, her outside status is heavily inscribed on her body—a “foreign other” (209) whose otherness as a non-Malay and non-Muslim challenges the hegemonic structures within the village and nation.

Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the Malay-Muslim cohesive identity is that which appeals to Yoko, as she is receptive to Malay language and customs as well as the Islamic faith. The attractions of Bruneian Malay identity lie in “village ways” (223) that bear hallmarks of a collectivist culture. Arriving in Brunei, she can fluently converse with local villagers as she “not only speaks Malay, but with a Bruneian accent” (59). In terms of assimilated Malay culture, she gains a sense of community-centredness, as she is “fast to familiarize herself with the villagers' ways” (54), which the locals also refer to as “our ways” (72). In doing Malayness, Yoko adheres to Malay customs such as Malay greetings (243), “bending down” (83) as a form of courtesy when walking past others, and wearing the cultural attire of the *baju kurung* (80). Furthermore, she uses her purchased *tudung* (“headscarf”, 67), which is a salient symbol of Muslim-feminine modesty. Doing Malay-Muslim femininity in these ways, she thus assimilates into the Malay community.

Yoko's cultural assimilation consolidates the dominant status of the Malays and signifies the Islamic patriarchal norms in Brunei. In the village, if men are assigned the role of “guardians of Islamic principles and Malay culture” (Saunders 87), then women are assistants doing their service to bolster the Malay-Muslim patriarchal system. In aspiring to a prescriptive Malay-Muslim femininity, Yoko does Malayness at the expense of her Japanese roots. As she is keen to assimilate faithfully into the Malay community, she conversely does a disservice to her culture of conception by disregarding her Japanese identity and ignoring her cultural traditions.

Crucially, she fails to uphold her Japanese identity when refusing to heed her father's call to wear the Japanese cultural attire of the "kimono" (155). If the kimono is a signifier of Japanese culture and its attendant ways, then her neglect to carry it along with her to Brunei reveals that she lacks the desire to model her Japanese identity to the villagers. On the other hand, it points to her complete adoption of Bruneian Malayness. Through this perspective, she does Malayness as she closes "possibilities of resistance to the regulating power of [Malay-Muslim] normativity" (Mahmood 48) when trading in her Japanese cultural traditions for an assimilated identity in the Malay hegemonic state.

In Yoko, the opportunity to revisit and re-think ideas of Bruneian Malayness is presented. For instance, when Taha brings her under his roof to serve as his wife's "assistant in the kitchen" (85) once she is adopted as a daughter, villagers begin to query their living arrangement. On a social level, the warm invitation extended to her signals an open entry into Malayness. However, as marked in the villagers' "reservations" (222), this initial permissibility of granting her social inclusion is superseded by their ideologies of a cohesive Malay-Muslim identity. For her to continue living within Taha's household with his unmarried sons, she must transition away from "foreigner" (239) to "Malay" (62) by gaining legitimate inclusion through marriage. In Islam, it is "unlawful" (16) for members of the opposite sex to be in close proximity, except in legal marriage. This prohibition is known as *khalwat* and is not taken lightly as those who are caught are punished for their "violation of Islamic morality" (Black 315). In the novel, illicit close encounters between Tahir and Yoko are exemplified in a scene where he inadvertently enters the bathroom to find her stark naked in the shower (Burmat 126). Thus, to appease the villagers, both Saimah and Idah take it upon themselves to return to the village to put a stop to the rumours milling about concerning their brothers and Yoko. These sisters' suggestion of a *nikah* ("Islamic marriage") between Tahir and Yoko serves as a solution to legitimize her presence (241), eschew "social stigma" (242), and avoid punishment by Islamic male authorities in the village. At their behest, Tahir thus does Malayness when he agrees to marry her. In marriage, he does the bidding of the Malay village as he fulfills his masculine role to protect his "family" (244) and show his commitment to Islamic principles entrenched in the Malay culture. Hence, Malayness is depicted through both social openness and national expectations of MIB that promotes a cohesive and exclusive Malay-Muslim identity.

### **Suspended Assimilation: An Impasse in an (Un-)Conventional Marriage to a Malay Man**

If taking into account Hussainmiya's statement that "the ranks of Brunei Malays swell by continuous admission of new blood through marriage and also through the process for conversion to Islam" ("The Malay" 77), then

Yoko's marriage to a Malay man exemplifies an instance of this means of proliferation of Brunei Malay identity. Despite this critical juncture of marriage marking a greater level of assimilation, Yoko remains an *orang asing* (99) to her husband and the local villagers who continue to inscribe her with outsider status. She can potentially (re-)produce Bruneian Malays since any children from this marriage will automatically be granted citizenship and full assimilation into Malayness. However, she is deprived of a complete entry into Brunei Malayness despite her conversion to Islam at the point of marriage. Her arrival in Brunei during the eighties also situates her before the implementation of the Brunei Nationality Act of 2002, which allowed non-Brunei (non-Malay) wives to gain citizenship through their Brunei (Malay) husbands. On the whole, state exclusionary laws that do not favour the female foreigner and her Malay husband's insistence on her "othered" (209) subjectivity foils her dedicated attempts at a successful entry and increased participation within Brunei Malayness.

To this extent, I argue that a lacuna in an aporia encountered by Yoko results in an impasse in her doing Malayness. In fact, it becomes impossible for her to assimilate into Malayness because her marriage remains unconsummated, her husband introduces contrary teachings, and finally abandons her. Furthermore, Yoko assumes total blame for failing Malayness as a married couple when she "apologises" (314) on his behalf. Her readiness with a self-apology reveals the lack of forgiveness granted to women who fail to assimilate, while signalling the forgiveness that is easily granted to men (Chin and Kathrina 112). Furthermore, when explaining that work restrictions on women are "not instructed by him" (223), Tahir points to an ideological state apparatus at work. He enacts his resistance to a state-constructed patriarchy interpellating the villagers. Through Tikah, Yoko learns to "wait at home" (265) rather than go out to sea with him. However, through Tahir, she learns that his expectations of her are not aligned with rigidly-demarcated gender roles. Moreover, his rather self-serving self-exile reflects negatively on her and impedes her assimilation. Along this line, Tahir introduces tensions and social fractures in their attempts at doing Malayness. Therefore, his failure to uphold his own role as a guardian and protector of the MIB national identity within his marriage results in a permanent disruption to his wife's attempts at assimilation. Working against a Malay-Muslim framework, he thus causes a fragmentation of Malay-Muslim identity.

Consequently, Yoko's impasse in assimilation is characterized by a deadlock instigated by Tahir's decision to leave her "indefinitely" (322) to work on a trade ship that "fails to dock on the island of Borneo" (32). A lacuna—defined as a space that resists the laws of socially constructed hierarchies—arises through the wife's estrangement and her husband's defiance of conventions. As Tahir's self-exile contravenes Malay collectivist culture, "[his] capacity to realise his own interests against the weight of custom

tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (Mahmood 38) illustrates his agency to resist the national ideology of Malayness. Notwithstanding her attempts to embody the good wife ascribed in the instructions of “A wife shall obey [her husband]” (321) and “A husband ought to have his own personal space respected by his wife” (321), Yoko experiences a suspended assimilation.

Rising tensions and complexities between Tahir and Yoko are increasingly evident through the former’s agency and the latter’s void. In Tahir, undoing Malayness to challenge the state-constructed idea of a fixed Malay-Muslim identity becomes apparent. He begins to perform Malayness to subvert the ideological norms that interpellate his body-subject. His rejection of a fixed and exclusive idea of Malay identity is enacted when he abandons his male authoritative role in his family, village and nation—which is an act of resistance as he renounces his role as the guardian of his family stipulated by both Islam<sup>7</sup> and the Malay collective community (Saunders 87). In a society where patriarchal control and authority dictate the cultural norms of life, his self-banishment then signals his articulation of a fluid (not fixed) Malay subjectivity. In his departure, he also realizes his own interests as his decision serves a “personal ambition” (321) rather than the needs of the Malay community that continues to espouse a state-sanctioned MIB identity. In this sense, his exit marks a Malay performativity that exposes the limits of an exclusive Malay identity. In his symbolic “death” (322), the concept of Malayness is thrown into doubt as he introduces the idea of hybridity, which resists the cohesive model supported by the national discourse on Malayness. In contrast, Yoko’s passivity and compliance with the norms set by the Malay and Islamic nation continue until the end of the novel. Signifying her continuously interpellated subjectivity, her internalization of “wifely submission” (Burmat 321) culminates in her feelings of overwhelming negativity. Consequently, she slips into the emotional territories of a damaged subjectivity or a “poor ego” (Freud 246). Borrowing from Sigmund Freud’s concept of an irresolvable grief (“Mourning”), Yoko’s “sadness” (316) is melancholic inasmuch as her losses are irredeemable and nullify her gains accumulated through her determined assimilation into a fixed Malayness.

In its ending, Burmat’s novel strikes a formidable tone of melancholic depression in the representation of the marital deterioration between Tahir and Yoko. Instead of their union marking a celebration of a hopeful future, a downward spiral into a state of despondence is triggered. The changing language of the narrative reflects this shift towards grief. In its vocabulary, a stylistic change is detected through the novel’s tonal movement from earnest positivity to utter despair. In Tahir’s self-exile, Yoko meets with a suspended assimilation that begets no further lessons on Malayness from Tikah. Instead, a monologue takes over in which the omniscient narrator loudly signals Yoko’s “worrying restlessness”

(322) and feelings of “grave injury” (322) in her estrangement. Significantly, the novel culminates with Yoko’s voice as she pens a dismal love poem to Tahir (324-329). This structural shift towards a monologue curtails any open lines of dialogue between the married couple. Obfuscating communication by closing off conversations between these two parties, her solitary voice of disappointment concludes her journey as she comes full circle. Inasmuch as she is her only companion, Yoko’s isolation reflects her frustrations at assimilation. Signifying her forlorn and desolate disposition, the novel ends on a dim and painful note.

### **Conclusion**

As evident in my analysis of *Permainan Laut*, the meanings of Malayness continue to change in line with the hybrid theory of Malay identity (Maznah and Syed 15). As Tahir exemplifies, men undoing Malayness and engaging in Malay performativity reveal opportunities acted upon to expose the tensions and contradictions within Malay identity. Considering that Tahir does so and is not made culpable for his actions, it is thus not uncommon to witness resistance to the ideological limits of a state-established Malay-Muslim identity. On the other hand, women doing Malayness mitigates men undoing Malayness as the former’s dedication to their gendered roles is accentuated in comparison with men’s non-adherence. Along this line, women’s faithful assimilation into a cohesive Malay-Muslim identity upheld within the MIB ideology results in few to no occasions for them to exercise agency to resignify Malayness. As Yoko demonstrates, her self-blame for her husband’s subsequent failure impedes her agency and resistance. In doing Malayness, she readily consolidates the racial/gender binary to enter into a Malay-Muslim nation. However, Yoko unwittingly serves as an instrument to feed into a social estrangement that reflects the intricate discords within Malay identity. To this end, she indirectly enables men to resignify Malayness, which marks shifting norms away from a hegemonic notion of a fixed Malay identity.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Brunei follows the Shafi school and Sunni denomination of Islam.

<sup>2</sup> For more, see Braighlinn 18-23.

<sup>3</sup> Hussainmiya states, “In the official Bruneian Government documentation, it is obvious that the term Malay is used in a much broader manner than Malay purist[s] would readily admit” (“The Malay” 68).

<sup>4</sup> All translations from Muslim Burmat’s *Permainan Laut* are author’s own.

<sup>5</sup> The “Malay world” spans boundaries from Madagascar in the West to the Cocos islands in the East (Hussainmiya, “The Malay” 67).

<sup>6</sup> In the Quran, it is written “Who amongst the people is the most worthy of my good companionship?” Each time, the Prophet Nabi Muhammad replied, “Your mother.” (See Khan M. 21).

<sup>7</sup> According to Prophet Nabi Muhammad, “Men are the guardians of their families and it is the responsibility of every guardian to guard those who fall under his own guardianships” (Mustadrak, vol 2, p. 550 cited in Muammad).

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