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Rethinking Malaysian Perspectives of Gender Constructions through Ethnographic-Oriented Approach

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Abstract

This action research encompasses three phases. In the first phase, the current practice of students engaging in reading texts through the perspective of gender is examined. Gender identities: Malaysian Perspectives is a course taught to third year students for the Bachelor of Arts (Literature in English) Programme. The course provides an exploration into constructions of gender identities through literary texts. Because students are more familiar with Western oriented gender theories, they often appropriate Western perspectives in their analysis of texts, marginalising their own beliefs and values in the process of interpretation. In this research, through an ethnographic-oriented approach, students will be exposed to various methodologies as an intervention programme to enable them to rethink gender stereotypes and explore the ways in which we read and make meaning out of texts and contexts. Through ethnography, they will be able to compare their findings with the established findings elsewhere, so that they can analyse differences between the local scene and international landscape in matters related to gender.

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1. Introduction

Appropriating the gender lens in analyzing literature is not new in Malaysia. Zainab Awang Ngah's (2006) compilation of *Studies on Women in Malaysia 1990-2004* shows the width and breadth of women's studies in Malaysia. Feminism is equally a popular critical approach used by many scholars, and it is taught to many undergraduates and postgraduates as a valid framework of analysis. However, gender has always been subsumed within courses, and was not given as a course on its own. With the introduction of the course entitled Gender Identities: Malaysian Perspectives, students from Literature in English Programme at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia are exposed to various gender theories and issues as part of the syllabus in their three-year programme. In 14 weeks, they learn about the constructions of gender identities through applications of selected literary texts. However, it is a challenging task for the students to be critical readers when it comes to gender issues. While they may be well acquainted with various Western theorizing, but they are not able to adapt these theories to local texts.

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The course has sensitised them to gender matters, but they do so at the cost of marginalizing their own local perspectives and orientations. Therefore, this action research takes on an ethnographic-oriented teaching which is designed to provide students with grounding in participatory methods where they are engaged in real settings so that they may explore the ways in which literary texts are mimetic of the real world. In this way, it is hoped that they have a better understanding of gender issues from their own Malaysian/local context.

Gender identities, according to Gale (2006: 1), “is a person's sense of identification with either the male or female sex, as manifested in appearance, behavior, and other aspects of a person's life.” In our everyday life, the common construction of our gender identities is based on the concepts of masculinity and femininity. What characteristics make a man masculine or a woman feminine? What practices are acquainted with either masculinity or femininity? In the Malaysian context, a person's gender is associated with biology but the construction of gender identity is also influenced by the family's practices, religious beliefs, ethnicity and societal norms. To be certain of students' constructions of gender identities, we investigated their assumptions about gender through several tasks (see Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2010). It is found that students are aware of stereotypical ideas about gender roles and behavior. They are knowledgeable about the techniques of making women's subordination appear natural and desirable. Their narratives showed the gendering practices which they have been exposed to at home and other institutions. These practices, because they come from parents, religion and the environment, are accepted as the way things are. Therefore, cracks exist between these two perceptions: how they have been socialized and how they would like to achieve change. Gender-biased child-rearing practices within the home setting make permanent imprints of gender. At a young age, they were taught how to look physically male or female, and in many cases, their play revolves around strict gender roles where young girls play domestic games and young boys amuse themselves with rough games. They were also subjected to family traditions, religious practices and peer influence that further shape their gender identities.

It is necessary here to provide the impetus for this action research. Having taught the course for the third time, we felt that Malaysian students' current practice of analysing through the gender lens leans heavily towards Western theorising. Because feminist and gender theories are mostly developed in the West, most undergraduate students fail to adapt these conceptual frameworks to fit local contexts. Their predisposition to make use of Western feminist theories is due to two reasons. One, they have not acquired the critical eye to manipulate an approach which would render it more suitable for local texts and contexts. Two, they may be influenced by stereotypes of gender assumptions. Oppression of women occurs in many societies and cultural practices albeit at varying degrees, and this collective likeness is the *raison d'être* behind the appropriation of Western-derived theory which can facilitate in explicating issues related to gender inequality. While borrowing from these theories is valid, the process of circumventing their own beliefs and values in their interpretation of texts should not be encouraged. Local values are equally important considerations in developing critical skills of literary analysis.

We also attempt to create a more enriching environment of teaching and learning literature. The literature programme at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics at UKM moves away from focusing on canonical works with its emphasis on postcolonial theories and texts, and makes deliberate attempts to stress on students' autonomy as part of their preparation to become more independent learners. They have been taught critical appreciation of literary texts but the ethnographic method is a more engaging and hands-on way of approaching literature.

2. Intervention: Plan of Action

How is ethnography relevant to literary studies, especially in relation to gender matters? As Rachel Alsop (2005: 111) has argued cogently:

ethnography as a research methodology is typically associated with the social sciences, most usually, although not exclusively, with the discipline of anthropology. It is chiefly a qualitative research strategy that relies primarily on participant observation and concerns itself in its most general sense with the study and interpretation of cultural behavior.

How does this kind of approach work for literature students? We have adapted the plan of action to cover these activities: meeting and interacting with women who have made tough choices or lived with disabilities; comparing

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