

A MALAY MUSLIM WOMAN'S TRAVEL NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This paper seeks to answer the call of autobiography scholars like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in working towards redressing inattentiveness towards women's life narratives. It also will contribute to ongoing research done by historians like Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and her team of researchers in studying Muslim women's autobiographical modes of writing. This paper examines one of the very few travel narratives to be published by a Malaysian Muslim woman. This particular mode of autobiographical writing has a long history back from the time of the Greeks and Romans. The publication of women's personal narratives in the form of travel anecdotes such as *A Call to Travel: Muslim Odysseys* (2014) by Rumaizah Abu Bakar evidence the assertion by Borelli (2002) that women's lives are of interest and value to the wider society and in telling their stories they perform an act that Susan Bosak (2015) says is "fundamental to what it is to be human." Psychologists in the area of personality psychology have observed that life narratives written by highly generative adults reveal a strong concern for and commitment towards improving and maintaining the quality of life for future generations. Literary and psychological perspectives are taken in this study to examine how autobiographies in the form of travel narratives can function as a possible generative tool.

Keywords: highly generative adults, life narratives, Malaysian Muslim woman, travel narrative

Introduction

As Susan Bosak states, a "[l]egacy is fundamental to what it is to be human" (n.p.). Bosak explains that a legacy connects people across time, for people have a need to connect with those who have come before them, and a responsibility towards those who come after. She believes that "exploring the idea of legacy offers a glimpse not only into human relationship and building strong communities but also the human spirit," and says that stories are one of the most powerful tools people can use to change themselves and the world (n.p.). Smith and Watson argue that autobiographical storytelling is all around us, and includes both the oral and written form. They predict that autobiography studies will become increasingly comparative and multicultural and they should be given recognition (*Reading Autobiography* 84). This particular observation of the significance of autobiographies was made earlier by Antony Paul Kerby in his book *Narrative and the Self* (1991). As he notes:

Studies ranging through sociology, psychology, philosophy, semiotics, literary theory, and historiography have taken up this interest in narrative, and it has become increasingly evident to numerous influential theorists and practitioners that narratives are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience and ultimately of ourselves. (3)

Taking autobiography to mean a text containing the self-representation of one's selected lived experiences, located in specific times and places in which the personal storytelling is carried out, simultaneous with the processes of remembering and interpreting (*Reading Autobiography* 14), this paper looks at one of many genres of autobiography, the travel narrative.

Travel narratives have a long history and are usually written in the first person. Although the focus is on a journey, the other aspects of the writer's life experiences like encounters and observations of familiar and unfamiliar situations are also described. This paper examines "A Call to Travel: Muslim Odysseys" (2014) by Rumaizah Abu Bakar, a Malay Muslim writer from Malaysia and how in offering an understanding of the autobiographical motivation beyond the self, her travel stories can possibly be identified as a generative legacy.

Discussions

Malay Muslim Woman from Malaysia

Malaysian Muslim women are a group who are often presumed not to write an autobiography at all. The general assumption is that these shy and timid creatures would perhaps not do the unthinkable like reveal something of their personal self or inner journey through writing or let alone travel by themselves to unknown territory. Scholars see the practice of tradition and religious faith as strong factors connected to the preferred approach of keeping the lives of Muslim women unpublished. Although, the oral tradition of telling stories is very much part of community life in the Malay Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak, the absence of the culture of recording and publishing has left much of the lives of Malay Muslim women unheard in the academic realm. Marjorie Shastak states that

No more elegant tool exists to describe the human condition than the personal narrative. Ordinary people living ordinary and not-so-ordinary lives weave from their memories and experiences the meaning life has for them. (240)

A Call to Travel from a Malay Muslim woman's perspective

A Malaysian book reviewer, Daphne Lee, whose online review of Rumaizah's *A Call to Travel* said, "I looked forward to reading *A Call To Travel: Muslim Odysseys* because the perspective of a Muslim woman was one I had never come across before in a travel book". Rumaizah's travel destinations include the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, Istanbul in Turkey and a number of cities in Indonesia, including Yogyakarta and Solo.

Today, the shy and timid Malay Muslim woman not only travels the globe, she also studies and lives in various parts of the world. Bits and pieces of stories describing the lives of Malay Muslim women may have found their way in Facebook postings but very few Malay Muslim women have embarked in writing and publishing their life narratives and hardly still have done so from the perspective of a Muslim woman. Rumaizah does not only map out her physical journey but also describes her spiritual journey while opening the readers, eyes to the lives of Muslims in different Muslim cities. After her second *umrah* in Saudi Arabia, Rumaizah observes, "Looking back, I realise that it was the turning point for me: I have acquired much knowledge about Islam and being Muslim since then. The hijab feels more natural to me now, and is part of my attire at the Islamic bank where I work" (114). Her openness and honesty in telling the reader her *relationship* with the hijab is a perspective that can act as a meaningful contribution to many discussions lately on Muslim women and the hijab. In Turkey, another city she visits, a conversation she has with a Turkish man who runs a carpet business urges the reader to undergo the surprise and wonderment as she does and generate questions and find answers:
"Yeah. Are you Muslim?"

“Yes, I am. Are you Muslim?” I ask him back.
 “Sometimes I am, sometimes I’m not.”
 I put down my glass of water, surprised.
 “Are you a modern Muslim?” he asks, nonchalantly.
 I hesitate, wondering what he means. “Yes, I would say so.”
 “People at my village are conservative, they have many restrictions. I’m not like that?”
 (A Call to Travel 37)

At times Rumaizah educates her readers with information like the following: “He [Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)] created the Charter of Madinah, the first Islamic Constitution that guaranteed fundamental human rights for Muslims and non-Muslims, which some scholar deem the world’s first human rights law” (95).

When she journeyed to Indonesia, she observed *religious* practices which she was not supportive of. The observations she recorded may possibly trigger readers to seek answers to what the true teachings of Islam entail.

I do not drop a contribution in the coin box. Although the grave is not a *keramat* where people worship, it is not what I am used to. I am not sure whether I should support it financially, considering the religious practices I have witnessed. Back home, group *zikir* is usually performed inside the mosque of after congregational prayers. I have not seen it done in a graveyard before.
 (164)

Jelinek (2007) observes that women’s life narratives like Margery Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ca.1438), St Teresa of Avila’s *Life* (1565), as well as English and American religious narratives and personal diaries from the 17th and 18th centuries, place much less focus on public, historical or worldly aspects of women’s lives than their personal lives – such as matters related to home, family hardships, people close to them, and especially those who have influenced them (83). Given that Smith and Watson urge students and scholars “to engage in their own explorations of, research on and new thinking about women’s life narratives” (*Before They Could Vote* 20), exploring Rumaizah’s *A Call to Travel* can be potentially significant to contemporary and future Malaysians, not eliminating too, how significant the exploration can be to international readers. The publication of the collection of experiences penned in Rumaizah’s travel narrative encapsulate a spectrum of wisdom gained through personal, spiritual, social, cultural and historical events that has shaped her life and this effort can be viewed as a gift of concern for present communities and future generations.

Studying Travel Literature of Highly Generative Women

Kotre’s definition of generativity is explained as “a desire to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self” (*Outliving the Self* 10). Kotre prefers to view generativity as arising not from a fear of death, but the “exuberance and expansiveness of life” (35). In short, what Kotre does is to highlight the need to pass on a legacy through stories that are capable of transforming experiences of personal hardship, disappointment or pain into narratives that help redeem the past, and provide understanding and wisdom for those in the present and the future. At the same time, reliving and retelling are activities that help life storytellers validate their own lives and hence form activities that provide a source of strength and meaning in their later lives, as well as for other generations who read these life narratives (Manheimer 19). This strong determination to put their life stories across in the form of published autobiographies for others to read and study suggests that these narrators are highly generative individuals as in sharing their stories they promote the formulation of positive outcomes among the readers.

Conceptual Framework

Travel narratives – A Generative Guide to Future Generations

Erik Erikson introduced the concept of generativity over 60 years ago, and defined its primary concern as “establishing and guiding the next generation” (Childhood and Society 267). He depicted people in society as aiming to achieve generative outcomes by leaving behind a positive legacy upon attaining adulthood, and committing themselves to patterns of love and work (McAdams, *The Redemptive Self* 4). Since its introduction, generativity has become multifaceted in its application to the study of adult development, with expansions on Erikson’s concept being undertaken most prominently by psychologists John Kotre and Dan P. McAdams. According to McAdams, “[g]enerativity is the adult’s concern for the commitment to promoting the welfare and development of future generations” and it “can be expressed in many other ways too, including, teaching, mentoring, leadership and even citizenship” (4). McAdams also highlights Singer and Salovey’s identification of self-defining memories as key components of narrative identity (243). These self-defining memories represent very clear and intense emotionally charged experiences in one’s life, that then manifest as repeated concerns (243). It is people with these concerns for and involvement in contributing towards a better future for succeeding generations that McAdams and his peers have labelled as highly generative adults.

This paper suggests that the study of life narratives in the form of travel narratives or anecdotes particularly written by Muslim women can be read from the suggested approach as not only will it help to connect or reconnect readers to the style of writing, voice and perspective of the writer but also provide them with the opportunity to inherit a kind of legacy that is passed on with the intention to generate further positive outcomes.

Conclusion

Travel narratives offer the expression of the ‘self’ through writing where the writer/traveler reveal experiences and discrete ways in which they weave their selves through familiar and unfamiliar environments. As a Malaysian Muslim woman, Rumaizah’s modes of witnessing and recording travel, description of various subjective voices and on-location experiences ranging from holy to human have broken down barriers and revealing the personal self for readers to understand and learn from. *The Call to Travel: Muslim Odysseys* is a possible legacy that can generate more self-expressions of travel experiences, wisdom and further insights into lessons learnt in life and the strong desire to share and connect with the world we live in.

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