

The Impact of the Arabic Novel *Zainab* on the Emergence of the First Malaysian Novel *Faridah Hanom*

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Abstract: Most literary researchers agree that the novel entitled *Faridah Hanom* (1926) represents the first Malaysian novel. Nevertheless, the novel has long been debated by scholars for its authenticity. As Egypt is used as its background setting throughout the novel, there seem to be some polemical arguments as to whether the novel is originally written by the author, or whether it is merely a translation of the famous Arabic novel *Zainab*. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the Arabic novel *Zainab* on the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom*. Based on the results obtained, it is found that the Arabic novel *Zainab* has had a heavy impact on the emergence of the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom*, primarily in terms of theme, characterization, plot, setting and arising conflicts. As such, it seems quite plausible that the novel *Zainab* has inspired Malaysian writer Shiekh Sayyed Al-Hadi to adapt some of the elements into his literary work *Faridah Hanom*.

Keywords: *Zainab* • *Faridah Hanom* • Malaysian novel • Arabic novel • Emancipation • Women

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the development of Islam in the Malay world, Arabic literature played an important role in bringing the knowledge of Islam, Arab culture and literature to Malays. Previous scholars have demonstrated their ability to master the Arabic language which enabled them to translate and adapt various materials in Arabic to the Malay language. Their work is considered strong evidence of the contribution of the Arabic language to Malay civilization. This study aims to investigate the contribution of the Arabic novel *Zainab* in the emergence of the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom*.

Arabic literature has contributed a lot in the development of the Islamic sciences, literature and culture in the Malay community [1]. This can be observed through religious texts produced by scholars of the past as well as through the stories of religious and Sufi poetry which were also adapted and translated from Arabic [2]. A study conducted by Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani [3] showed that the arrival of Islam in the Malay world produced a lot of changes, especially in the field of literature.

In the development of modern Malay literature in Malaysia, many literary scholars agree that the novel *Faridah Hanom* is the first novel that appeared in modern Malaysian literature [4] which was written by Sheikh

Sayyed Al-Hadi 1867-1934 [5], a well-known figure engaged in the reformation of the Malay community. Talib Samad [6] and Hafiz Zakariya, [7] stated that he translated many works from Arabic, especially in the field of Islamic studies and literature, particularly materials on Muhammad Abduh's reform ideas.

The literary scholars have made various polemical debates on the originality of the novel. Some of them view that the novel is an original work that reflects the external background. Others argue that it is an adapted novel from foreign literature and has various sources [8]. Mohammad Saleh Rahamad [9] explains the influence of the novel by way of French philosophy, specifically Rousseau's idea which was absorbed in the novel *Zainab*. A. Wahab Ali [10] in his Ph.D thesis entitled "The Emergence of The Novel in Modern Indonesian and Malaysian Literature" tried to demystify the problem, but the attempt failed because he could not find the data.

There are also scholars among them Mana Sikana [11] who have claimed that it is the result of the contribution of the Arabic novel through the Egyptian novel "Zainab". However, they are not able to ensure its authenticity because of their lack of proficiency in the Arabic language. The extent of the problem in the emergence of *Faridah Hanom* as a novel having been influenced by *Zainab* remains unresolved because there has not been a parallel study conducted on both novels to explain the

problem. This study tries to explore this area by examining the impact of the Arabic novel *Zainab* on the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom* in terms of theme, characters, plot and setting.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To collect the data, this study used the documentary analysis method. It is used for collecting the data using print and electronic materials. This allows the author to refer to printed literary materials such as books, novels, language journals, education journals, theses, magazines and conference papers that relate directly and indirectly to this field. The author analyzed the Arabic novel *Zainab* first and then the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom*. After getting information on the two novels, a comparison study was done to find out the impact of *Zainab* on *Faridah Hanom*.

Study Findings: A comparison of the two novels was made to identify the basic elements such as the theme, character, plot and setting.

The Theme: An examination of both novels shows that the themes are concerned with women's emancipation from the traditional life which restricts their rights. Both of these novels highlighted women's rights, such as pursuing education, working outside the home and going out for pleasure. Freedom of study in the pursuit of knowledge is a right for every individual regardless of gender. Che Abdullah Che Ya [12] suggests that the Malaysian novel protested what the Malay community wanted which was freedom from the shackles of tradition and the traditional life and not for their daughters to be at home alone.

That freedom can be seen in the Arabic novel through the character of Zainab and Azizah. Azizah is an educated woman and has high educational knowledge. She masters the French language and uses it to communicate with her friend Hamid [13]. In the Malaysian novel [14], this freedom was illustrated through the character of Faridah Hanom who is educated and possesses advanced knowledge. She also masters the French language which she uses as the language of communication between her and Syafiq Afendi. Correspondence between them also utilizes this language. Adibah *et al* [15] showed that Al-Hadi stressed that parents should educate their children with Islamic values that can shape their personality when they become adults.

Women's freedom to leave the house with a specific purpose can be seen in both novels through the character of the women. In the Arabic novel that freedom was reflected through the character of Azizah who would go out for a walk around the village when she spends her semester break there away from the city of Cairo [16]. Likewise this freedom is reflected in the Arabic novel through the character of Zainab as a woman who goes out of the house to work to support her family. In addition, she also enjoys going out for a walk along the streets of the estate to enjoy the natural beauty of the rural atmosphere [17].

In the Malaysian novel [18], Faridah Hanom always goes out for a walk around the city of Cairo, especially during the festival of "Syamun Nasim". That is an annual festival celebrated by the Egyptians at the beginning of each spring. They come out to the parks, gardens, resorts and the banks of the Nile to have picnics.

Characters: The main characters in both novels are played by women. These characters move an event from the beginning until the end of the story. Male characters are secondary characters that complete the event. They appear and disappear, each according to his role, in the development of events. There are similarities in the depiction of female characters in the two novels. The equation can be divided into the role in story and the behavior.

Faridah Hanom and Zainab are the main characters that drive the story events forward. They establish relationships of love with the character of men and always go out for a walk at leisure. Their relationships face conflict because of the existence of a third person. They get married and move to the husband's house. They face suffering because of marrying a man who was not of their own choice. From the point of view of behavior, they are women who are open-minded and have high self-esteem and always take care of themselves and of their family honor.

The male characters also contribute to the development of events and create the conflict. Syafik Afendi and Ibrahim are important male characters in both novels. They are men who have a passion and diligently carry out their tasks and have a chance to make a romantic relationship with a female character. On the other hand they do not have good luck in the love relationship. To overcome feelings of frustration, they decide to join the peacekeeping force in Sudan.

Baharuddin and Hassan are the third characters that appear to create a conflict in the story. They only follow the will of their families in determining their spouses. Being married, by way of an arranged marriage to a female character does not necessarily mean that they are enjoying life because the marriage is not based on love.

This discussion clearly shows the contribution of the Arabic novel in embodying and forming the characters of the Malaysian novel. The characters of *Faridah Hanom* were taken from the characteristics and behavior of characters in the novel *Zainab*. Syafik Afendi's character was taken from the characteristics and behavior of the male character Hamid in the novel *Zainab* while the third character, played by Baharuddin, was taken from the characteristics and behavior of Hassan in *Zainab*.

Plot: In the Arabic novel [19], the story plot begins with a first encounter between Hamid and Zainab on a road leading to the farm. Since then Hamid is always looking for opportunities to meet with Zainab and they finally get to meet under the shade of the trees on the farm. Their relationship, however, could not continue due to the gap in living standards between them. Hamid thus begins to have a relationship of love with her cousin, Azizah. Zainab later meets with Ibrahim and the two become lovers. The story grows with the development of meetings between Zainab and Ibrahim. Every day after work they would meet at the edge of the farm. On holidays they would meet under the trees along the road on the farm. This meeting of lovers became active when they often meet while in the field. Ibrahim, who is a farm supervisor, always comes to see Zainab.

In the novel *Faridah Hanom* [20], the plot begins with the first encounter between Syafik Afendi and Faridah Hanom on Abbasid road. That encounter bears the flowers of romance between them. They regularly meet after that moment, usually in the garden area of Faridah Hanom's house. The plot evolves with the development of their meetings in public places. They would, for example, go sightseeing by riding a horse-drawn carriage along Abbasid road and onwards to Atabah, then to Abidin, Babulluq and onto Qasrunill bridge across the Nile and eventually reach the Al-Ahram (Pyramids) area. On certain occasions they would go to an island on the Nile to enjoy the beauty of the river. Meetings between the two lovers finally centers on a house in the suburbs which is rented by Syafik Afendi to avoid the eyes of the public. They often met at that house accompanied by their servant.

The plot of this story faces conflict because of the intervention of a third person in their relationship. Faridah Hanom's uncle, who lived in Alexandria, came to her house to woo her for his son Baharuddin. Since that moment, the relationship between the lovers becomes strained and cracked. The story becomes mired in conflict. Angered at the failure of the relationship, Syafik Afendi decides to travel to Sudan for peacekeeping duties. Faridah Hanom leaves Cairo for Alexandria to live at her husband's home. She is always feeling disappointed because her husband neglects her and always spends his time at the club with his friends.

The climax of this story [21] can be seen when Syafik Afendi and Faridah Hanom meet in Alexandria. Both then decide to return to the city of Cairo. Faridah Hanom asks for a divorce by *fasakh* in the Syariah court and eventually she is granted that divorce. After this, their relationship becomes refreshed. Their meetings become active again, especially after the agreement reached by the two families. The resolution of the plot of the novel begins with the wedding of the two lovers. They manage to get married after facing failures and setbacks. Both of these couples live in happiness and peace after that.

Back Ground: The Malaysian novel portrays its backdrop as the city of Cairo and its environment. In addition, there are also events that happen in the city of Alexandria and in Sudan. Most of the plot revolves around the city of Cairo, particularly the area of Abbasid road where the two bungalows owned by the family of Faridah Hanom and Syafik Afendi are located. Other places in the plot where certain events take place include Atabah Square, the Abidin area, the Babulluq neighborhood, an island in the Nile, the River Nile itself, the zoo, Azbakiah Gardens, Al-Ahram, the city of Alexandria and a place in the Sudan.

The atmosphere in the *Faridah Hanom* novel is based on the natural environment of Egypt that has four seasons, namely winter, spring, summer and autumn. In the summer, people stroll along the Nile to take in the breeze. On the other hand, during the arrival of spring, people celebrate the festival of Syammun Nasim which entails having picnics in the parks and recreational areas. The riding of a horse-drawn carriage is a traditional Arab tradition. Similarly, large bungalows with a garden around the house are part of the traditional life for the Egyptian nobility.

The novel portrays the life of aristocratic society in Egypt who have been bestowed titles such as *Pasha* or *Bey* by the monarchy and their luxurious life complete with servants who manage their daily life in terms of

housekeeping, cooking and serving of food, doing laundry, doing gardening, being chauffeurs and also being personal servants. The novel's time setting is around the end of the nineteenth century. There is a note in the novel about the birthday celebration of Khedewi Abbas Hilmi held on one night in 1894.

In the Arabic novel, the place and environmental background reflects life and community in rural areas in Egypt. An overview of the fields and the atmosphere of workers diligently working was a main focus. In addition, there are scenes showing irrigation canals, large trees and bridges along the rivers which become a meeting place for the lovers. Also trains are used as the main mode of transportation to connect the village with other villages and the city, its station when Abraham climbed up to the town of Cairo with people flocked to ascend and villagers flocked to the train station to celebrate the departure of Abraham.

Comparison and Analysis: After examining the two novels, it can be concluded that this study achieved its objective, namely the Arabic novel *Zainab* has played a significant role in the emergence of the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom* with regard to theme, character, plot and setting. A key theme for both novels is women's emancipation which is described as freedom to leave the house for work, study and going out for pleasure that was illustrated by the action of the main characters of the two novels.

In the Arabic novel *Zainab* there are five people who played important roles in the plot development. They consisted of two women and three men. The main character which moves the plot development is Zainab. In addition, Azizah's character also contributes in the development of the plot at the beginning. Both of them have the characteristics and traits inherited by Faridah Hanom's character. Similarly, the roles played by both of them were played by Faridah Hanom.

Hamid is a character that contributes to the movement of the plot because he starts a love relationship with Zainab. Ibrahim is the character that contributes to the development of the plot. The personality features and properties of Hamid and Ibrahim can be found in the character of Syafik Afendi. Similarly, the roles played by both of them are also played by Syafik Afendi. Hassan is a character that becomes an obstacle to a love affair between two lovers. His characteristics, his nature and roles played by him can also be seen in the character of Baharuddin. This comparison clearly shows that those three characters in the novel *Faridah Hanom* are inspired

by the characters in the novel *Zainab* in terms of features, character and also their roles in the development of the plot.

According to the progress of the plot story in the Arabic novel *Zainab*, the meeting between Zainab and Hamid is fruitful at the first sight during the two encounters on the road leading to the farm. The relationship between them is not sustainable because of the gap in their social status. Zainab brings feelings and meets with a supervisor farm where she worked Ibrahim. The love relationship between them leads to meeting after meeting at the farm every day for work. They then expanded on that by having extra meetings under the shady trees.

These romantic relationships between two lovers are obstructed because of the existence of a third person. Zainab's father receives a proposal from Hassan's family without asking her consent. Starting from this moment the plot story begins branching. Each person feels disappointed and reacts in a peculiar way. Ibrahim decides to go to Sudan to join the peacekeeping force. Zainab moves to her husband's house with a feeling of sadness.

A similar plot occurs in the Malaysian novel which revolves around a love affair that happens between two teenagers who fall in love at first sight as a result of the Abbasid road encounter. Their romantic relationship also is obstructed by a third person, Baharuddin, who marries the woman. To forget about his misfortune, Syafik Afendi also decides to go to Sudan. Faridah Hanom moves to her husband's home with an empty feeling and plenty of disappointment.

The above comparison clearly shows that the plots of the two novels are the same from the point of view of the beginning, development of the story, conflict, climax and resolution. The plot revolves around the romantic relationships and encounters between the two lovers.

Regarding to the background setting in terms of place in both novels, it seems to be the same background, where the events occur in Egypt with just some differences in terms of the place where certain incidents happen. The Arabic novel *Zainab* has as its backdrop a rural setting made up of the fields, the canals and the village community life where people live in modest circumstances. Most of the plot revolves around the farm and its environment. Meanwhile, the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom* is set in the urban community life of luxury city living. The plot revolves around places in and around the city of Cairo.

The same background is described by the two novels in the city of Alexandria in which the female characters have to move to be at their husbands' houses after marriage. Similarly, the male characters end up going to Sudan to be part of the peacekeeping force. Regarding the time where the events of both novels are supposed to have taken place, it is the late nineteenth century, specifically around 1894.

CONCLUSION

After comparing the two novels above, it is clear that the Arabic novel *Zainab* has contributed to the emergence of the Malaysian novel *Faridah Hanom*. This contribution can be clearly seen in the theme, character selection, the structure of plot construction, the picture background and issues portrayed. This does not indicate that the Malaysian novel's writer directly translated the Arabic version into the Malay language. Looking at the course of the plot and character selection the question that can be answered is that certainly the Malay writer had read the Arabic novel beforehand and has made an adaptation of the novel.

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