

‘New Women’ and Morality: Discourses on Appropriate Behaviour of Malay Women in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract. This paper examines debates that emerged during the early 20th century in British Malaya regarding what was perceived as ‘new women’ and appropriate behaviour of Malay women. The reformists’ called for women’s emancipation and for the creation of ‘new women’ with sufficient knowledge of women’s rights as well as the skills to elevate their status within the society. On the other hand, there were conservative voices that emphasized the need for Malay women to return to their original place, assuming their natural and rightful obligations within the domestic sphere. The group supporting the idea of social reformation of the Malay society argued against what they perceived to be the misguided interpretation of Islamic teachings that used to control women and suppress their basic human rights. They opposed the strict conservative interpretation of Islamic teachings and old Malay customs on matters related to women that had been used to reinforce moral hierarchy of gender relations within the families and which was extended to the society and nation. The heated debates between reformists and conservatives regarding Malay women and their appropriate behaviour appeared in newspapers, magazines and books accessible to the most literate Malays. The magazines such as *Dewan Perempuan*, *Ibu Melayu* and *Puteri Melayu* to name a few, were the mouthpieces of those who supported the creation of ‘new women’ and opposed the continuation of the practice of secluding women by the conservative Malays who used their own newspapers, such as *Pemimpin Melayu*, *al-Hikmah* and *Bahtera* to criticize the reformist outlook of Malay women as deviant and contradictory to Islamic principles. By analyzing topics related to women’s issues such as women’s emancipation, education and working-women which were directly related to the topic of what was considered as appropriate behaviour during that era illustrated that Malay intellectuals were trying to find ways that would justify the existing notions of gender relations with the changing world by using an Islamic framework to support their arguments.