

‘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.

1. Historical Background

In the early 20th century of British Malaya, discussions on ‘women’s question’ in the Malay society as it was referred to then, were part of intellectual debates between people with traditional values that were regarded as reasons that caused the backwardness of the Malays on one side, and Western values which were deemed to be more superior and advanced in social development on the other side. The emergence of the idea of Islamic reformation of the Muslim society which was regarded as an alternative factor that could promote the importance of worldly gains as had been achieved by the West, was to be pursued within the Islamic framework. It was argued that, if the Malays wanted to survive and protect their homeland from British colonialism and immigrant domination of the Malayan economy at that time, it was vital for the Malays to find remedies for what they believed

had caused the stagnation of their own society. Among the remedies suggested was the elevation of the status of Malay women who were considered as the foundation of the nation [al-Hadi n.d: 24; *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) February 1948: 2-3]. It was argued that the decline of Islamic civilization was due to men's degrading treatment towards women that regarded them as sexual objects and denied them the right to education [*Ibu Melayu* February 1948: 2-3]. The call for better treatment and opportunities for women was said to be inspired by the Islamic reform movement initiated by Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), and later pursued by his disciple Qasim Amin (1863-1908). The need to re-evaluate matters pertaining to women in Muslim society was echoed by the Malays as well as *muwalladin* (Arabs of mixed parentage born in Malaya) who studied in Mecca and Cairo. Among them was Syed Sheikh al-Hadi (1867-1934) who was regarded as an early male feminist in Malaya who explicitly criticized the degrading treatment towards the women in Malay society [Marina Merican 1960: 55-56] whom later on had inspired many intellectuals to write about women issues in newspapers and magazines during early 20th century [Hasnah Hussiin 2011: 136].

The idea of emancipating Malay women from conservative interpretation of women perceived by the Malays was highlighted in al-Hadi's articles published in a special section "*Alam Perempuan*" (Women's World) of the *al-Ikhwān* (The Brotherhood) (1926-1931) journal which were later compiled in a book entitled *Kitab Alam Perempuan* (The Book of Women's World) which was actually the translation of *Tahrir al-Mar'ah* (Women Emancipation) by Qasim Amin of Egypt. The progressive ideas of the reformists, known as *Kaum Muda*, (Young Fraction) which were transmitted via writings published in *al-Ikhwān* (The Brotherhood) and *Saudara* (The Companionship) (1928-1941) to name a few, had elicited strong reactions from the public. The conservatives, known as *Kaum Tua* (Old Fraction) on the other hand, published their own journals such as *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) and *Pemimpin Melayu* (Malay Leader) as a measure to counter attack the reformists.

Redefining 'women' in Malay society and what was regarded as 'appropriate behaviour' for women never went uncontested. Different interpretations on what were expected from Malay women during the turbulence years of British Malaya in the early 20th century could be traced in newspapers, magazines as well as books which illustrated a new version of modern, and educated Malay women who were free from the shackles of old Malay customs. Despite the low levels of literacy among them during that period, these published materials had played an important role as the mouth pieces for the intellectuals to disseminate their ideas among the Malays.

2. The Creation of 'New Woman' and Education

In Muslim intellectual debates on women, the word 'new woman' was first coined by Qasim Amin (1863-1908) in his book *al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah* (*New Women*) who believed that the development of women's potentials should be the criterion and prerequisite for modern civilization and national development [Qasim Amin 2000]. The word 'new woman' was translated as "*wanita baharu*" in Malay word and this notion was echoed in local magazines such as *Saudara* (The Brotherhood), *Bulan Melayu* (Malay Moon), *Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department), *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother), *Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess), *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom), *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader), *Bahtera* (The Ark) and *Dewasa* (Maturity) which was influenced by the idea of Islamic social reformation. The Malay intellectuals were trying to find ways to moderate the traditional notions of gender relations with the changing world, justifying their cause using an Islamic framework to support their arguments. So as not to upset the status quo, slogans such as '*kemajuan dididik, agama dibela*' (progressiveness is taught, religion is maintained) [*al-Hikmah*

(The Wisdom) 20th July 1934: 197] and “*agama dididik moden dibela*” (religion is taught, modernity is accommodated) [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) July 1947: 13] were frequently cited which represented the version of the ‘new women’ who possessed modern characteristics, being aware of their rights and responsibilities in nurturing future leaders for the Malay society (private sphere) and their important role in contributing to the society (public sphere), but at the same time preserving their good manners and attitudes according to Islamic principles. It was their strategy to convince the Malay society not to be apprehensive towards the changes that took place concerning Malay women in education and their increasing visibility in public places during that era.

Promoting the identity of positive women was vital for the reformists, in their attempts to eliminate negative perception toward women and their inferior nature which had taken roots for centuries in the mind of the Malays. As opposed to the conservative notion pertaining women held by most Malays at that time that women were evil in nature, had low intelligence, full of tricks, irrational, unreliable and susceptible to make mistakes, thus it was the men’s obligation to supervise and control them [*Pemimpin Melayu* (Malay Leaders) 26th September 1933: 6; al-Hadi n.d: 84-85]. The reformists such as al-Hadi, on the other hand, emphasized that men and women had the same nature, and this was created by God. Both of them shared the same purpose in their lives, which was to obey God’s commandment as vicegerents of God in this world. Women were men’s twin with regard to their physical and spiritual nature, quoted prophetic saying: “Indeed women and men are bodily twin” [al-Hadi n.d:1]. He constantly reminded the men to appreciate and honour women, as they were the foundation of the nation. (al-Hadi n.d:11-14). To eliminate negative perception towards women’s intelligence, it was highlighted that women during the early Muslim civilisation had shown their capabilities in Islamic knowledge and skills in various aspects of life even to the extent of surpassing their male counterparts as in the case of Aishah (wife of the Prophet Muhammad) [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) April 1947: 13-14. However, the active participation of Muslim women in building and developing the Muslim community began to decline during the Abbasid caliphate, when men started to neglect their responsibilities towards their wives because they were too preoccupied with their slave girls. The women reacted in similar manner. They too neglected their duties towards their household, which sadly was the main reason why women from then on were living in ignorance and degradation. Muslim women began to realize their mistakes after their encounter with Western civilization [Ibrahim Abu Bakar 1994: 140. For centuries, men have contempt for women, seeing them as deficient in intellect and morals. Although reformists agreed that, bad women existed, but such character was not their original nature. Such negative behaviour was, in fact the result of the mistakes made by men who had denied women a proper education and exposure to the world. The discriminatory treatments which they had endured for centuries had made them vulgar, ignorant and selfish, unable to carry their duties and responsibilities toward the family and society. [al-Hadi n.d: 54-56]. The reformists denied that women have a character that was innately different from men. The reasons why men were superior compared to women in strength and intelligence were because they had been given ample opportunities to exercise their intelligence and physical strength in everyday lives for centuries, while women on the other hand, were deprived of the exercise of those faculties and forced to remain in a situation of degradation. [al-Hadi n.d: 33].

Amidst prejudices against education for women that was argued by some conservatives as the causes for inhibited evil and bad tendencies inside women, [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay

Leader) 26th September 1933: 6; *Bahtera* (The Ark) 9th August 1932: 2], literate Malays virtually agreed that, it was vital to make education easily accessible to the girls [*Majlis* (Place to Discuss) 4th April 1932: 6]. Reports about increasing facilities for girl's education in other countries were frequently published in local magazines and newspapers so as to urge the Malays to follow their footsteps [*Dewasa* (Maturity) 31st December 1931: 3; *Bahtera* (The Ark) 29th March 1932: 2]. However, they had varying degree of emphasizes as to what extent the girls should be educated, and what were the most appropriate subjects they should learn. The contradicting views on girls' education basically reflect the different understanding about what was perceived as 'new women.' Malay intellectuals at that time, though emphasized on the importance of education for the girls, however, believed that education provided for the girls should be tailored according to women's future role as 'first educator of her children' and her role in maintaining a happy home [*Bahtera* (The Ark) 8th January 1932: 2; *Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) August 1947:1] as well as becoming good companions to the husbands, motivating them to fight enemies in their struggles for the Malayan independence from colonialism [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) April 1947: 5-6]. It was argued that, apart from studying religion, proper manners, health education, handicrafts and domestic skills, which were beneficial for their primary roles as wives and mothers, it was also important for them to learn history, astronomy and human sciences so that they could truly understand the world they lived in, and convey the message to their children [al-Hadi n.d: 21; *Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department) 1st June 1935: 45]. The only way women could contribute to the society was by being educated and not being a burden to the society, and became those 'who could take care of themselves.' Their poor state would gradually be eliminated when they could achieve something meaningful in their lives and there was no reason for others to feel pity towards women [*Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department) 1st June 1935: 45-48].

Despite emphasizing the primary roles of women within domestic spheres, some of the reformists such as al-Hadi suggested that they should not be too dependent on men. The discriminatory treatment received by women had made them unable to be independent. According to al-Hadi, Islam did not prohibit women from working, as showed by Muslim women throughout history. They had been praised for their remarkable abilities. If women were properly educated, they also should be given the opportunity to work and use their abilities just like men did and contribute to the society and nation [al-Hadi n.d:42].

The Muslim society had treated women unfairly for centuries. They had been denied education and prohibited from working on a basis that men as their guardians were responsible to maintain and ensure their well being. In reality, many of them were left alone and not properly taken care of by their guardians. In many cases, there were orphans with no relatives, women whose husbands had died or had divorced them and left the children with them, at the same time had to work and be independent to make money to support themselves and their family members. Thus, working was inevitable for their survival. As such, it was not fair to prohibit women from working for it was allowed in Islam. Being illiterate, ignorant and naive, they could not take care of themselves from the harsh world of men and might end up grovelling to others to take pity on them, and in some extreme cases they might involve themselves in prostitution for that was the only way to make a living. For that reason, women should be educated at the first place. Knowledgeable women could have better judgement and would be capable of managing their own affairs without depending on other people and would not be easily swindled by corrupted guardians. [al-Hadi n.d:45-47]. The images of working Muslim women from other countries especially from Turkey,

Egypt, India and Indonesia were constantly highlighted in local writings [*Sahabat* (The Friendship) 18th September 1940: 18; *Bahtera* (The Ark) 13th May 1932: 2].

Amidst the reluctance of conservative Malays to let Malay women working alongside men, there were constant supports that women should be working. Women, according to them have equal share of contributing to the society by sharing their skills and knowledge to develop the Malay society. As such, according to Mohd Amir Osman, an educated and capable woman should work in government offices and other salaried posts [*Saudara* (The Companionship) 8th March 1933:1]. He was disappointed with Malay parents who prohibited their educated daughters from working because they were ashamed to let their daughters ‘sell their faces on every lane, street and town’ (*menjual muka di serata lorong, jalan dan pekan*). It was a waste that English educated Malay women did not utilise their knowledge and skill compared to Chinese and Indian women who had outnumbered them working in government services [*Saudara* (The Companionship) 3rd December 1932:1]. To promote better opportunity for women acquiring sufficient knowledge for them to survive in the competitive world, it was suggested that the government should establish vocational schools exclusively for Malay girls [*Saudara* (The Companionship) 18th February 1933:7].

Apart from stressing that women should be working in areas which were considered as best suited for women, such as teachers, writers, doctors and nurses, [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 10th November 1934: 391], a women magazine such as *Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department) had illustrated that Malay women during that era had also been working as photographers. In the editorial column congratulating Miss Shamsiah Umar of Kuala Kubu Bharu, upon her appointment as a writer and photographer of *Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department), it was mentioned that her appointment would promote women’s development and inherently discarding unnecessary ‘shy attitude’ which had hindered Malay women’s progress for centuries [*Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department) 20th May 1935: 40]. So as to convince Malay women audiences to put aside their shyness, the editor’s photo of herself wearing a head scarf was used as the front cover of the magazine with a note that the reason why her photo had been used as a front cover was “to urge our people (Malay women) not to feel ashamed and they should let their photos be printed” in the magazines. From then on, the contributors of the articles were encouraged to attach their photos so that it could be printed alongside with their articles [*Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department) 20th May 1935: 40].

However, there were also less ambitious roles of women depicted by some of the intellectuals. They encouraged women to learn hand craft and domestic skills which could be both used for their everyday house chores as well as for side incomes. They did not expect educated Malay women to hold highly regarded occupation such as lawyers, doctors or government servants [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) May 1947: 2; *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 29th August 1933: 6]. Others thought that Malay women should only be allowed to learn religious education and humanities which were considered as sufficient for them to educate their children and protect themselves from the harsh world so that they would not be tricked by someone else [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 29th August 1933: 6]. A writer in *Saudara* (The Companionship), clearly indicated the impropriety of women doing men’s jobs, where they would eventually become financially independent and no longer dependent on males [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 24th October 1933:2]. It was unthinkable that Malay women worked as lawyers, judges and other male dominated jobs, since the rightful place for them was at home with the children. It was the responsibility of the men to work and provide for the family [*Bahtera* (The Ark) 12th January 1932:

2]. They argued that women were incapable of doing the jobs properly, so that they should not be allowed to hold jobs which were usually done by males [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 14th November 1933: 6]. It would be calamitous for the Malay society to let men and women work together. Working women were regarded as having discarded their obligation as mothers by leaving their children behind to be brought up by uncivilised servants. The children, they said, might end up behaving like the servants with no refined manners [*Bahtera* (The Ark) 12th August 1932: 6].

Malay women were reminded not to follow the footsteps of Muslim women from Egypt and Turkey who had enjoyed Western women's emancipation which was considered as contradicting with Islamic principles [*Saudara* (The Companionship) 4th April 1934:9]. They argued that the decadence of Western societies was due to the women's liberation that resulted in free sexual practices, the increasing number of illegitimate births and abortion. The men could also find themselves jobless since their positions were taken by women [*Bahtera* (The Ark) 2nd May 1932: 9]. They argued that it was inappropriate for women to work, as the gender role within Islam clearly indicated that women should be housewives and husbands should be the breadwinners [*Saudara* (The Companionship) 25th April 1936: 4; *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 14th November 1933: 6]. Educated women who were brave enough to venture the men's world were criticised saying that 'a woman who only knows how to read and write does not necessarily mean she is a good and honourable person if she leaves the house messy and refuses to do dirty house chores' [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 9th January 1936: 12]. To some others, working women who had freely interacted with the men, and did not fear men were considered as of low dignity. Once women have a taste of their hard earned money, they would regard marriage as a hindrance to their free life style [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 5th December 1933: 3]. The education provided by English schools was perceived as the reason why Malay women had deviated from their traditional role [*Bahtera* (The Ark) 9th August 1932: 2].

The opposition towards women's progress, however, seemed to be directed to women working on salaried posts, as it was considered as they had 'grabbed the rights of men' who traditionally were those who worked supporting the family [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 1st April 1934:12]. Women were, however, encouraged to work as farmers. Aware of views that disapproved of working women, the author cautiously mentioned that they did not mean that 'women should be working in salaried posts' but what he/she suggested was that women should work as farmers, utilizing land that they owned so that it would not go wasted [*Dewasa* (Maturity) 15th February 1932: 9]. Examples about the success of agricultural projects in Europe were cited indicating that European women had managed to contribute to the economy of their country by working as farmers. European countries such as Belgium, Germany, Austria and France had established vocational schools for girls to enhance their agricultural skills and management [*Dewasa* (Maturity) 15th February 1932: 9]. The stories about Malay women were usually illustrated as young, educated, beautiful, charming, moralistic, intelligent and courageous with the objective of guiding the audience towards morality and honour [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) June 1947: 1; *Semangat Muda* (Young Vitality) 1937: 1-16]. The editor in *Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess), on the other hand, reminded the audience that stories about lovesickness without the essence of positive characteristics towards Malay development would not be published [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) June 1947: 1]. In *Serikandi Tanahair* (Female Warrior of the Land), a short story published in *Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess), the heroine was illustrated as someone who was courageous, constantly urged her fiancée to be patient and brave enough to face the death sentence

imposed by the Dutch. Instead of being tearful of losing her fiancée, she was the one who gave courageous motivation to her fiancée to overcome his fear of death [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) June 1947: 1-3]. Although there were love stories, it was layered with passion for national development of the Malays, striving for women's proper status and role as well as their rights. The heroines were depicted as those who were courageous and constantly gave motivations with meaningful speeches to the public. This was an illustration which was contradictory with the notion of unmarried young Malay women during that time who were usually shy and timid [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) June 1947: 1-3; *Semangat Muda* (Young Vitality) 1937: 19-21].

On the contrary, it was constantly highlighted by the reformists that many educated Malay women had neglected women's welfare. They were indifferent to the plight of Malay women who were in dire needs of their helps especially uneducated women who were oblivious to worldly affairs and their status needed to be elevated within the Malay society [*Umat Melayu dengan Musharakat* (The Malays and Society) 1938: 26-27; *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) August 1947: 5-6]. It was suggested that Malay women should be concerned with the welfare of Malay women who were in dire needs of their help and directly involved in organization and work alongside their male counterparts for the betterment of the society, or better still to establish women organizations since only women knew about women issues in depth [*Umat Melayu dengan Musharakat* (The Malays and Society) 1938: 22-23; *Pelita Malaya* (The Torch of Malaya) 13th March 1946: 4]. If the Malay society wanted to progress they should not forget the welfare of the Malay women and provide them with better education and beneficial knowledge about worldly affairs, so that they could also contribute to the society alongside their male counterparts [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) August 1947: 5-6]. However, they were reminded not to neglect their domestic roles [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) May 1947: 10].

In this regard, it was inevitable that the reformers gave speeches to motivate the public especially the women. Despite criticisms from the conservatives that women were not allowed to be the focus of public eyes, women reformers insisted that it was acceptable in Islam for women to give public speeches for the benefit of Muslim society [*Sahabat* (The Companionship) 21st February 1940: 16]. They argued that women in Islamic history had participated in war and given public speeches to the armies to boost their fighting spirit against the enemies [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) July 1947: 3-4]. In an attempt to urge Malay women to be involved in associations and organizations, stories about women's participation in charity efforts in other Muslim countries such as Egypt, Turkey and Indonesia were constantly highlighted [*Dewan Perempuan* (Women Section) 1st May 1935: 21, 29; *Bahtera* (The Ark) 8th July 1932: 3; *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) June 1947: 15-17]. As such, the new women, not only have to know how to deal and work with men to achieve progress and create a civilised Malay society, but they also had to know how to interact with other women as well.

3. Morality and Appropriate Behaviour

The Malays during that time were extremely concerned about the question of morality, which could be observed on the practice of segregation between men and women and the importance of marriage to safeguard the chastity of the women. Although both sexes have to observe certain behaviour which was considered as appropriate, women were imposed with more requirements and restrictions in their lives to measure up with what was considered as appropriate behaviour. Immorality and inappropriate behaviour was considered to have stemmed from lack of religious consciousness that would be detrimental for the survival of a righteous Muslim society.

It was generally agreed by Malay intellectuals both reformists and conservatives that education played important roles to inculcate good manners and appropriate behaviour in the daily lives [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 12th September 1933: 6]. The image of overtly timid and shy Malay girls who could not hold a proper and meaningful conversation with the elders due to their strict upbringing was considered to be disadvantageous in the competitive world. If Malay women wanted to compete with the immigrant women in British Malaya who had outnumbered them in government services and other sectors, they had to change their attitudes and be more active, vocal and competitive, but at the same time to observe their behaviour as deemed appropriate within the Islamic perspectives. Thus, Malay girls who were courageous enough to deliver public speeches were highly applauded [*Majlis* (Place to Discuss) 6th Jun 1932: 3]. Zainun Sulaiman after visiting some girl guides camps was amazed with the attitude of European girl guides who seemed to be comfortable enough to hold meaningful conversation and discussions about important topics with their elders. Thus, she suggested that Malay girls should also be allowed to participate in the girl guides movement [*Bahtera* (The Ark) 26th April 1932: 2-3].

During an era where the notion of women emancipation was frequently cited as a way to promote social justice and development of the society, there were constant fears that Malay women would end up like some Western women who were considered as immoral, and that had been supposed to have caused the decadence of moral values in the West [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 24th October 1935: 14; *Bumiputera* (Prince of the Land) 21st January 1935: 2].

Although Western societies were regarded as superior in material aspects as compared to the Malays, they were also thought to be facing moral decadence due to the free interaction between males and females that led to free sex that resulted in the high number of illegitimate births. As such, morality and appropriate behaviour of Malay women had been a heated topic in newspapers, magazines and books. Though reformists generally promoted the idea of women emancipation and the freedom from old customs and practices, they always reminded that such emancipation should not be in contradiction with Islam. It was frequently reminded that, Malay women should only imitate Western women in aspects that were beneficial to them, and not to imitate in regards of their dressing and social interaction with men [*Bumiputera* (Prince of the Land) 21st January 1935: 2].

The 'new women' were reminded to dress modestly according to Islamic principles. The trendy fashion during that time, 'bandung style' was criticised by the reformists being contradictory to the Islamic principles. It was argued that the 'bandung style' - a snug fitting short tunic blouse - as well as Western and Shanghai dresses which were adopted by Malay women at that time, could arouse men's desire [*Umat Melayu dengan Musharakat* (The Malays and Society) 1938: 1-2, 12]. Alternatively, they were encouraged to dress modestly by wearing head scarf and loose fitting clothes [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 12th September 1933: 11]. Malay women were reminded that they should only imitate western women in term of their success in elevating women's status by acquiring education within the society, but it did not necessarily mean that they should follow how western women dressed and their attitudes regarding free interaction with men [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 1st August 1935: 14].

Although Malay women during that era were encouraged to get to know men before they decided to get married, relationships between women and men should be perceived within Islamic boundaries [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 26th March 1936: 13]. They were reminded to avoid being with men in secluded places such as parks, cinema, night clubs and hotels, for fear it would lead to illicit close proximity and illegitimate intercourse [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 6th February 1936: 13]

tarnishing one's reputation and bringing disgrace to the family, Islam and the Malay society as a whole [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 2nd January 1936: 15]. They were constantly reminded to be mindful of their '*budi pekerti*' (manners) as Malay women, to be humble, and to avoid behaving snobbishly and haughtily to others [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) June 1947: 19-20]. The slogans of '*kemajuan dididik, agama dibela*' (progressiveness is taught, religion is maintained) [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 20th July 1934: 197] '*agama dididik, moden dibela,*' (religion is taught, modernity is accommodated) [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) July 1947: 13] illustrated the importance of chastity, morality and appropriate behaviour that should be observed by the 'new women' so as to protect their dignity and honour. Malay women according to both reformists and conservatives should not discard their honour and dignity in the name of emancipation [*al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 24th October 1935: 14].

The moderate outlook between the two extremes concerning the new women is well illustrated by the reformists. They should not behave like Western women who were unconcerned about their modesty in their dressing and how they freely mingled around with men that could lead to some calamities and disaster to the society [*Saudara* (The Companionship) 4th April 1934: 9]. To them the women should not be confined inside the house, and became unaware about the outside world, or were forced to get married by parents and would be unable to implement their rightful duties effectively due to their ignorance and naivety. Extreme outlook in the consideration about women would be disastrous to the women themselves. They were recommended to be moderate in their judgements. Although the women were encouraged to struggle for success and be allowed to participate actively in the public sphere, they were reminded not to neglect their responsibilities at home, for such acts would lead to the disaster to the Malay society in the long run since their primary role was first as educators of the future Malay leaders [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) May 1947: 9-10]. For that reason, Islamic education was considered as the foremost importance in women's life and should be acquired from early on before they acquired other worldly knowledge [*Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) June 1947: 10-11].

Their concern was not unfounded. Increasing Western cultures were adopted by the Malays especially those who lived in towns and cities. Stories about Malay women freely walking with men, following Western style of dressing, exposing their hair and baring their skin were claimed to be "modern people." Prostitution and increasing number of the culture in entertainment that mushroomed in British Malaya during that era, had put the Malay society in constant fear and worries [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) April 1947: 16; *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 24th October 1935: 14]. For this reason, they were sceptical about 'worldly education' as opposed to religious education. They blamed English education and the adoption of Western lifestyles as the factors that led to some Malay women to be haughty and neglectful of their primary roles as wives and mothers [*Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 24th October 1933: 2; *Bahtera* (The Ark) 9th August 1932: 6].

Emphasizing on the objective of creating a better society and nation, the new women were supposed to be those who did not have greed over worldly gains. As such they should not be concerned with jewellery and adornments which most of the times would lead to difficulties and sufferings to the deprived husbands [*Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) October 1947: 2, 11]. Instead of wasting time unnecessarily, Malay women were encouraged to deepen their understanding about worldly matters by reading newspapers, magazines and books [*Bahtera* (The Ark) 8th March 1932: 2].

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it could be said that the new women as depicted by Malay intellectuals during the early 20th century were those who knew their primary roles as first educators of the future Malay generations and who also knew how to be good wives and companions to their husbands. As oppose to the traditional Malay housewives who were ignorant, uneducated and unaware of matters outside the house, this new women should be the ones who were armed with religious and worldly knowledge. They were not only skilled in maintaining a good harmonious family, but also acutely aware of worldly matters and the aspiration of the Malay people to achieve progress and development. As an alternative, the 'new women' who had gained knowledge and skill could contribute to the society by working alongside their male counterparts. It was considered as wasteful if their knowledge and skills were not utilised. It seemed that women emancipation which denoted the creation of the 'new women' in British Malaya as perceived by the reformists was to liberate women from rigid Malay traditions and customs that hindered women from enjoying their rights to education. This, however, was far from the understanding of absolute emancipation as perceived by the Western society. As first educators of the future Malay leaders, the 'new women' were expected to be staunch defenders of morality according to Islamic principles while implementing their duties and responsibilities towards their families and social development of the Malay society.

References

Newspapers and Magazines

1. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 8th January 1932
2. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 12th January 1932
3. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 8th March 1932
4. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 29th March 1932
5. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 26th April 1932
6. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 2nd May 1932
7. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 13th May 1932
8. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 8th July 1932
9. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 9th August 1932
10. *Bahtera* (The Ark) 12th August 1932
11. *Bumiputera* (Prince of the Land) 21st January 1935
12. *Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department) 20th May 1935
13. *Dewan Perempuan* (The Women Department) 1st June 1935
14. *Dewasa* (Maturity) 15th February 1932
15. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 1st April 1934
16. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 20th July 1934
17. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 10th November 1934
18. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 1st August 1935

19. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 2nd January 1936
20. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 9th January 1936
21. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 6th February 1936
22. *al-Hikmah* (The Wisdom) 26th March 1936
23. *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) April 1947
24. *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) May 1947
25. *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) June 1947
26. *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) July 1947
27. *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) August 1947
28. *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) October 1947
29. *Ibu Melayu* (The Malay Mother) February 1948
30. *Majlis* (Place to Discuss) 4th April 1932
31. *Majlis* (Place to Discuss) 6th Jun 1932
32. *Pelita Malaya* (The Torch of Malaya) 13th March 1946
33. *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 8th August 1933
34. *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 26th September 1933
35. *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 24th October 1933
36. *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 14th November 1933
37. *Pemimpin Melayu* (The Malay Leader) 5th December 1933
38. *Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) June 1947
39. *Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) July 1947
40. *Puteri Melayu* (The Malay Princess) August 1947
41. *Saudara* (The Companionship) 3rd December 1932
42. *Saudara* (The Companionship) 18th February 1933
43. *Saudara* (The Companionship) 8th March 1933
44. *Saudara* (The Companionship) 4th April 1934
45. *Saudara* (The Companionship) 25th April 1936
46. *Sahabat* (The Friendship) 21st February 1940
47. *Sahabat* (The Friendship) 18th September 1940

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1. Hasnah Hussiin, *Isu Pendidikan Wanita Melayu Dalam Akhbar dan Majalah Melayu, 1920an-1940an* (Malay Women's Education in Malay Newspapers and Magazines 1920s-1940s), *Jurnal Sejarah*, vol, 19, pp.135-151, 2011.
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