

# *Wanita* Magazines (1969–1980): National Narratives, Imageries of Modernity and Womanhood in Nation Building

**Zainurul Rahman<sup>1\*</sup>, Nasya Bafhen<sup>2</sup> and Juliette Peers<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MALAYSIA*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University, AUSTRALIA*

<sup>3</sup>*School of Architecture and Design, RMIT University, AUSTRALIA*

\*Corresponding author: zainurulrahman@gmail.com

## **ABSTRACT**

*In Malaysia, similar to other countries such as the USA, UK and Australia, popular women's magazines were established under the governance of the country's major newspaper corporations. The mass circulation women's magazine *Wanita*, was created in 1969. This paper explores how *Wanita* acted as catalyst in presenting women's voices in Malaysian society and how it presented notions of modernity, through an examination of selected *Wanita* magazine covers following the early years of Malaysian independence. This paper will also present recent scholarly findings from the first visual and social cultural investigation of *Wanita* magazine ever undertaken and offers a new perspective on narratives of citizenship, nationalism and feminism in Malaysia. Beginning with a look at the role of the media in shaping national identity, the state of media freedom in Malaysia, and the emergent stage of Malaysian archiving, it then justifies our use of *Wanita* magazine as a case study and presents*

*our discussion on how the early editions of the magazine worked actively to promote positive ideas of the role of women in Malaysian society.*

**Keywords:** *South East Asia, national identity, modernity, Malaysia, women's magazine, women's emancipation, feminism*

## INTRODUCTION

It is fair to acknowledge that the voices of women of British Malaya (18th century to 1948) influenced the voices of Malaysian women today. One of the earliest evidences of the existence of a discussion about the role of Malay women can be traced from the 20th century Malay literature. *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* was written in 1925–1926, and debated women's rights and equality. The author was Syed Sheik Al-Hadi, a Muslim man, preacher and writer. The first publication in British Malaya that involved the voices of women for women was a Malay women teacher's magazine called *Majalah Bulan Melayu* (1930–1941)<sup>1</sup>. Texts such as these serve as proof of women embracing and articulating their opinions in developing Malaysian society. Other traces of the rise of women's voices in Malaya/Malaysia can be found not only through written artefacts or official photographs, but also through visual imagery found in popular culture artefacts of this period of time, such as magazines, posters, calendars, advertisements, photographs, films, or, more recently, television programs. However, to trace the voices and the movements of the women involved in popular culture, around British Malaya and early Malaysia, through visual forms, is a complex task. Direct memory and emotional connection to the artefacts have almost been eroded in present day Malaysian society. Such popular artefacts have not been collected systematically by official institutions and can mainly be obtained from private collections.

In some countries, popular women's magazines were born under the governance of the country's main newspaper corporation. As products of mass circulation, magazines were

an affordable source of knowledge and entertainment, preceding radio and television in many homes in Malaysia. In the 1960's, due to the poverty in Malaysia, especially in rural areas, such as northern Malaysia and the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, very few households owned a television or radio (Ungku Abdul Aziz 1964).

Even though not every woman in Malaysian society could afford to purchase her own personal copy, magazines had their means of circulation and could be shared and discussed, spreading their message from one Malaysian household to another. They became an ubiquitous ephemeral artefact that not only constantly brought a wide range of issues about women to a broad population, but also played a central part in everyday life, stimulating the cultural and social flow of the nation's identity. Few studies on Southeast Asian women's magazines have highlighted the significant lack of documentation and preservation of women's magazines in Southeast Asia. Carol L. Mitchell's work<sup>2</sup> on women's magazines in Asia based on other scholars<sup>3</sup> studies in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, underlined very little scholarly exposure on the magazine's content and their roles in non-western countries; and stated that, "the dearth of historical knowledge about Malaysian women's magazines is due to the paucity of documentation of the few known colonial women's magazine and highlights the need for better documentation and preservation" (Mitchell 1998: 251)

How did the magazine *Wanita* act as catalyst in presenting women's voices in Malaysian society, and how did it use images of women on its covers to convey notions of modernity in Malaysia? This paper will examine the magazine in the first two decades since its first publication and its involvement in facilitating Malaysia's nation building.

## **THE NATION BUILDING**

In its cultural form, the primary feature of national identity is as a template for belonging, where a group of people, subscribing to a certain national identity, are seen "as possessors of a far wider range of standard properties" (Cubitt 1998: 14). These "standard properties" were described by Löfgren as:

The experience and the strategies of creating national languages, heritages and symbolic estates, etc., are circulated among intellectual activists in different corners of the world and the eventual result is a kind of check-list: every nation should have not only a common language, a common past and destiny, but also a national folk culture, a national character or mentality, national values, perhaps even some national tastes and a national landscape [...], a gallery of national myths and heroes (and villains), a set of symbols, including flag and anthem, sacred texts and images, etc. (Löfgren 1987: cited in Cubitt 1998: 16).

This imagined notion of sharing a range of similarities, whether it is historical roots, political orientation, racial progeny or linguistic oneness, makes people feel that they are a part of a unique group that differentiates them from others. It has been argued that these "standard properties" are not in themselves the natural progenitors of national identity, but ideological standards that are constructed and inscribed in the consciousness of a people, as the source of their unique origin as a nation. As Kumar notes, national identity is "the product of the process by which the nations are formed, rather than some qualities intrinsic or special to the nation in question" (Kumar 2003: iv).

The notion of imagining a nation is associated with the work of Anderson for whom the nation is an "imagined community" because most of its members will never know each other, yet they share common ideas and values as a community and "the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 2006: 7). Through communication, communities scattered across social and geographic locations, who may have no immediate bonds with each other, imagine a social bond and unity as one people. In addition, an idealistic collective vision of a better future, better life, better economic and political stability, better security, harmony and happiness also forges a sense of oneness. This aspect of national identity as

a form of belonging, which can operate across large scattered communities, differentiates it from immediate forms of kinship or interdependence in older tribal or agrarian societies.

Anderson has argued that "print language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se" (Anderson 2006: 135). This claim seems to suggest that nationhood is neither the product of a specific cultural linguistic group nor the result of people sharing a particular language, but instead it is the way in which print creates a medium for airing collective concerns and interests and enables people to communicate with each other. Therefore, Anderson concludes, "above all the very idea of a 'nation' is now nested firmly in virtually all print-languages; and nation-ness is virtually inseparable from political consciousness" (Anderson 2006: 135). While Anderson's analysis only focuses on book industries (perhaps due to the fact that his is a historical study of print revolution, which was dominated by book-publishing industries in its early days), in the centuries since the print revolution, the printing press has given birth to a plethora of formats such as newspapers, magazines, posters, flyers stamps and brochures. The variety of printed materials such as literatures, *feuilletons*, magazines, tabloids, cartoons, pamphlets, leaflets, posters have proliferated and have become essential advertising promotional utilities in a consumerist world (Williamson, 1972). The rise of popular print culture in the last few centuries has had an undisputable impact on socio-political consciousness.

## **FREEDOM OF MEDIA**

With the media seen as one of the most important cultural sites for shaping national identity, this concept assumes an added significance in Malaysia, where the media operates within strictly controlled parameters. In most countries, media operate with a certain level of autonomy in fostering a public sphere that is relatively unhindered by government control. They can often criticise and contest the government. In contrast, in Malaysia, the media is not seen so much as an independent sphere of public life, but as an agency for developing

the nation in line with the government's goals, as "the government still views the media as a means for promoting the government" (Johnson 2010). This is visible in a speech given in 1964 by the Minister of Information at the first year of television broadcasting in the country, when he said:

Television will be an important instrument of our social revolution. It will be a means of informing the people about the progress in various sectors of our national life. It will also enable them to know of the progress outside Malaysia (Nain 1999: 7).

Even though there are a variety of newspapers and magazines on the shelves of vendors throughout Malaysia, it is not an exaggeration to say that media publications are largely monopolised by the country's leading mega-publishers, Utusan Melayu Berhad (UMB) and News Straits Times Press (NSTP), which are both owned indirectly by Malaysian government (Wong 2000).

With regards to the monitoring and censorship of media outlets, the Home Minister controls the licenses of various publishing firms and also has the right to ban any publication considered prejudicial to the national interest under the Malaysian Printing Act 1984. For example, in 2010, a comic book published by a Malaysian political cartoonist Zunar was banned, along with a scholarly book by a Malaysian Muslim feminist academic on the implementation of certain provisions in the Shari'ah Criminal law and its impact on women in Malaysia<sup>4</sup>. A book on the origins of a 2001 riot between Hindus and Muslims in Malaysia by lawyer K. Arumugam was also banned. There are some international magazines and book publications sold widely in Malaysia, but they undergo the same censorship process as other domestically published material. Due to this law, several publications that were critical of government campaigns and policy have been banned or summoned to court. *Asiaweek*, *The*

*Far Eastern Economic Review* and other international publications, were banned in February 1999 as their content was found to be critical of Malaysia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Most of the content in this paper is extracted from the 2012 PhD thesis of Zainurul Rahman. The focus on *Wanita* is based on two factors: firstly, that the media represents key sites of cultural significance that shaped the ideas around national identity, and secondly, that the popular print archiving is in a nascent stage in Malaysian history. Given these two factors, the importance of systematic study of publications such as *Wanita* cannot be over-emphasised. This paper therefore focuses on two parts. Firstly, it focuses on showing how *Wanita* operated as a catalyst to present the voices and experiences of Malaysian women. Secondly, it demonstrates how *Wanita* utilised images of women from Malay/sian and other countries on its covers to support and convey the notions of feminism and ideas of modernity in Malaysia to Malaysian women.

This paper focuses on the significance of visual imagery in popular print culture as exemplified by *Wanita*. The methodology uses the magazine as a case study. This research acknowledges that there are many other types of print publications that could be the focus of academic studies or scholarly discussions such as Malaysia's daily newspapers or the country's burgeoning online media scene. Thus the aim of this study is not to catalogue all possible print media and their representations of the Malaysian nation, but to tell a focussed narrative about the role of *Wanita* in fostering notions of national identity through its portrayal of women on its covers. This comprises a select data set that has been widely consumed since Malaysian independence, but which suffers from lack of research and archiving. *Wanita* enjoyed a long-term mainstream presence in the country and is still a popular publication today. It has a wide readership in the country across different female age and class demographics and reflects

cultural significance as an iconic publication engaging in public discourse on Malaysian life and culture.

While there were some other popular magazines published in Malaysia since the early 1960s, these were mainly film magazines, such as *Majalah Filem* (1960–1961), *Berita Filem* (1969–1965), *Suasana Bintang Filem* (1960–1968) and *Gelanggang Filem* (1958–1963). These magazines did not really engage in discussions about everyday life and culture relevant to this paper. In addition, most of these magazines were discontinued in the late 1960s as the impact of the Malay film industry waned from public life. But *Wanita* still continues to be a top-selling women's magazine in Malaysia after 42 years of being in print and continues to do so in the face of competition posed by global women's magazines like *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* or *Elle*.

Since its first publication in 1969, *Wanita* was published monthly. But the magazine's early monthly editions are rapidly disappearing and becoming harder to find. The national archives have a limited and incomplete collection of *Wanita's* older editions. A relatively substantial collection of the magazine's recent editions, from the early 1990s till now, can be found in the National Archives of Malaysia, but many of the earlier editions have gone missing or are currently unable to be located. Our lead author is fortunate to have obtained the older editions of *Wanita* from her mother's personal collection.

## **VOICES OF WOMEN IN MALAYSIA 1969–1980**

In Malaysia, similar to other countries such as the USA, UK and Australia, popular women's magazines were established by leading newspaper and publishing houses. The mass circulation *Wanita* (literally "women"), was created in 1969 to serve as an affordable source of knowledge and entertainment, and to portray the identity of a modern Malaysian woman, insofar as it preceded radio and television in many Malaysian homes in the mid 1970s. *Wanita* magazine was born from a discussion at a *Seminar Penulisan Wanita* (seminar on women's literature)

organised by publishers Utusan Melayu in 1969. The need to have a Malay language magazine that represented women's voices was initiated at the seminar. In an interview in the newspaper *Berita Harian*, *Wanita's* first chief sub-editor, Nik Rahimah Hassan explained the significance of the establishment of the first Malay language women's popular magazine. Two years after its establishment, *Wanita* addressed the roles of women in constructing national identity in the editor's note titled *Peranan Pertubohan Wanita di dalam melahirkan "National Identity"* (The roles of women's association in constructing "National Identity"). The content was extracted from a speech given by Senator Dr Aishah Ghani (one of the pioneer female journalists in Malaysia) in a conference about Woman in Journalism in 1971. The texts from Dr Aishah Ghani were highlighted to emphasise the importance of women in establishing associations and organisations as part of a contributing process to the country's national identity. As stated in the magazine:

[Translated] In relation to women's roles and national identity, the existing women's associations should start to play their roles. Their contribution not only will reflect the country's sense of identity, but the women's actions will also reflect the identities of Malaysian women themselves... Senator Aishah also emphasised the use of Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) as a part of constructing "national identity" (Anon. 1971a: 5).

The discussion emphasising the role of women in constructing Malaysian national identity continued throughout the magazine's history. As stated in *Wanita* magazine, April 1980 edition,

[Translated] Malaysian women also contributed in adding a mark on the history...Their achievements did not merely sit under one area of knowledge but throughout all areas of knowledge and practices; from the

world of politics to entertainment, from sports to literature and so on (Anon. 1980: 12).

During Malaysia's first phase of "nation building", *Wanita* enthusiastically represented women's voices and promoted women's rights. In its first publication in August 1969, *Wanita* encouraged women to fulfil their needs, regardless of their age, status, and class; and to prompt their thoughts to make their voices visible in the society and, most significantly, to create awareness of their rights (Zainurul 2012).

This can be seen in the portrayal of Malaysian and foreign women on its covers showing different characters and personalities. Examples of women from other countries and their activities for women's rights and freedom were employed in the magazine as examples of role models for and in solidarity with Malaysian women. Photographs used by the magazine were captured mainly in everyday life scenes such as in their office, at home, or outdoors, and very little was done in the studio. Thus the photographs were less constructed, as computer technologies were not used in the photo editing, compared to the photographs of women depicted in later covers of the magazine. Women were shown in the roles and positions they played in developing the country. In the content of the magazine, articles followed up with strong feminist voices portrayed not only through the text but also through visual forms. It reflects that the purpose of *Wanita*, in its early years of publication, was to provide awareness about women's rights in the context of the young nation.

Responding in an interview, *Wanita's* first Chief Sub-Editor, Nik Rahimah Hassan provides insight of the early stage of the establishment of *Wanita* magazine as the country's first women magazine (Nor Afzan 2010). She stated:

[Translated] The chosen content for the magazine at that time, was emphasised in creating the awareness about women's rights as wives and mothers. At that time, even after the achievement of the country's

independence, women were still regarded as second-class citizens. They were not allowed to further their studies or to get a good job, but were tied to the family's expectations. In brief, women at the beginning of the independence did not get equality in most areas both at work and at home. Most of the articles at that time, provided them the inspirations and motivations, and facilitated their thinking. Issues on womanhood focused more on practicality such as learning tailoring. Very little space was given to discussions about beauty, as we (the editorial team) thought it would only provide negative perceptions in relations to the exploitation of women in various contexts and, in the end, would only damage the women themselves (Nor Afzan 2008: 11).

Traditionally, *Wanita* magazine had not been coy about a major focus within Malaysian women's lives – sexuality. It was the first women's magazine in Malaysia to cover female liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, marriage, childbirth, parenthood, how to find a man, how to maintain a relationship, and how to enjoy a relationship. As highlighted in the editor's note:

[Translated] From 1969 till the end of 1970, the fight for women's rights has shown success. Now Malaysia has the first woman minister, accomplishment of the equal pay rise, laws to support and provide protection for women – these are the greatest gifts to our fight for women's rights. The roles of women from now on will be important and growing, and we have to continue renewing our determination to fight for women in order to get the same rights and positions in the society. And this magazine will be the agency to bond women in this battle (Anon. 1971a: 5).

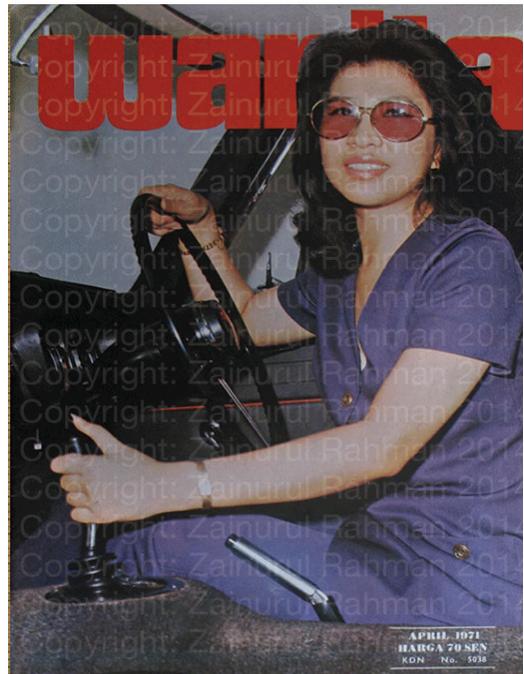
Although not every woman in Malaysian society could afford to purchase her own personal copy, *Wanita* had an informal means of circulation, in that it could be shared and discussed, spreading the ideals of womanhood from one Malaysian household to another. The existence of *Wanita* as the omnipresent women's magazine in Malaysia not only constantly brought a wide range of issues to do with women and modernity to a broad population, but also became a central part in Malaysian women's everyday life, stimulating the cultural, political and social flux of the nation's identity.

### **MODERNITY AND WOMANHOOD**

In *Wanita* the notions of modernity were discussed, negotiated and contested in the context of Malaysian everyday lifestyles, through anecdotes, short stories, articles, cover stories, and through the selections of images on the magazine's covers and in the content.

On the *Wanita* cover of the April 1971 edition (see Photo 1) a woman is depicted sitting in the driver's seat of a car as if she is driving. Che' Kathijah Ahmad, was chosen as the magazine cover girl. She was a senior economic officer in the Malaysian government's Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA), and a 1965 graduate of a London university. In the interview discussion, it was suggested that "Women are responsible to shape their own personality" (Nawawi 1971: 16–17). In the interview, it was also suggested that women should not be easily satisfied with what they had, but continue educating themselves. The consideration that most women would be just happy hiding behind the shadows of their husbands, and also that most of the works that men were doing could also be handled by women, were also being emphasised in the interview.

[Translated] If a woman chooses to be a housewife, she should not spend her time only for managing the family and household. Instead, she should also spare her time to join as a volunteer in non-profit organisations, not one but many. Most importantly, is that she will have time to socialise with others. It is best if women are able to mix in different areas and groups. Therefore women will be able to learn through socialising, discussing, seeing and hearing from various views and environments (Nawawi 1971: 16–17).



**Photo 1:** *wanita* April 1971.

Wearing a mixture of modern and traditional Malay clothing, Puan Sri Hamidah, the wife of Malaysia's then Chief Police Officer, was photographed as the *Wanita's* cover girl in the October 1976 edition (see Photo 2).



**Photo 2** *Wanita* October 1976.

The article discusses Hamidah's roles as a mother and wife of the country's "top cop". Aware of a common situation among policemen's wives, separated from society and their social activities restricted to the "police family", Hamidah encouraged Malaysian women, particularly her fellow policemen's wives, to get involved with clubs and associations (Idris 1976: 17).

[Translated] Puan Sri Hamidah encourages police housewives to socialise and to get involved in the society they live in and not only to mix with the police community. If there is some spare time, they should get involved with communities or voluntary work in associations or organisations such as the Red Cross association or centre for blind people... As a wife, we can also contribute by leading and encouraging husbands to strive in their careers.

During Malaysia's first phase of "nation building", *Wanita* showed enthusiasm in representing women's voices and promoting women's rights. This can be seen not only through the selection of models used in the magazine's cover but also through the content of the articles, the perceptions represented through the articles and photographs published in the magazine. Women were presented in different characters and personalities. Examples of women from other countries and the activities they had been involved with in supporting the women's rights and liberty were highlighted in the magazine. Photographs were portrayed with integrity; real life shoots were different from the *Wanita* magazine's cover in the following decades. Women were shown with their own unique individual attitudes and presenting the roles and positions they took as part of their contribution in developing the nation. Most of the magazine content and discussions used a direct and straightforward style, with few constructions or limitations. Strong feminist voices were clearly portrayed not only through the magazine's contents and articles but also through the visual forms such as photographs and advertisements.

*Wanita* magazine in its early editions often chose to juxtapose women with topical news issues, for instance in a striking image on the cover of *Wanita* in April 1975 edition (see Photo 3). The magazine cover portrayed the image of a woman with a complete set of biking gear wearing a helmet, leather jacket, jeans, boots etc., and posing as if driving a motorbike.



**Photo 3** *Wanita* April 1975.

The headline of the article "*Susah Senangnya Bertopi Keledar*" (The challenges of wearing a helmet) was also striking.

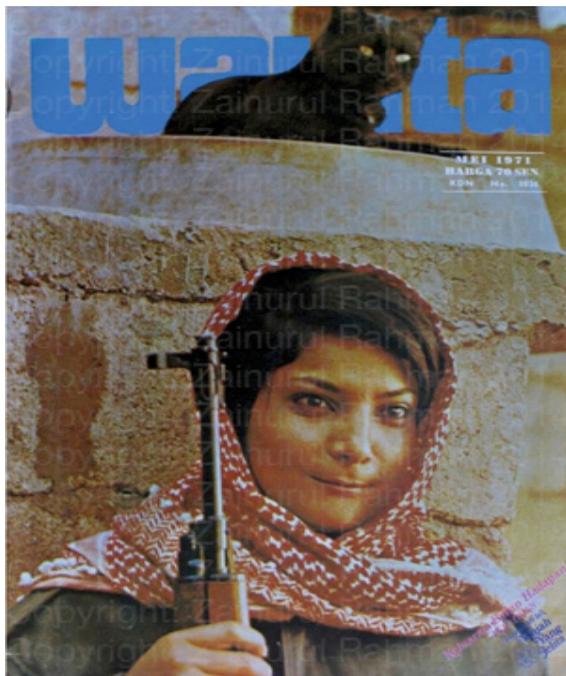
The discussion was on the new government's policy introduced on 15 February 1975, making it compulsory for every motorcycle rider to wear a helmet when driving a motorbike. The article shows interviews with eight female motorbike riders (a few of whom were Malaysian celebrities) and photographs depicting changes to the new law requiring motorbike users to wear helmets. From the articles, a few women bikers and passengers stopped riding their motorbikes because they felt embarrassed with the helmet covering their heads, while others were concerned about their road safety and supported the new policy. Two young women suggested that the government should also provide assistance such as the space to store the helmets, in order to encourage the public to wear helmets. In one of the interview, the lady biker expressed,

[Translated] It is not safe to keep the helmet hanging on motorbike when it is not used. We hope that the government will provide some sort of space to keep the helmet such as the car park where there will be someone guarding it (Anon. 1975: 28–29).

Similarly, the *Wanita* cover of the May 1971 edition (see Photo 4) also reflects on female involvement as an activist, a popular topic at that time. In the cover it portrayed a photograph of a woman, Leila Khaled (a Palestinian activist), with a scarf covering her head and holding a rifle in her right hand. Above her head was a black cat. Ms. Khaled, representing the women's freedom activist and a Palestinian female commando, came to public attention due to her role in the 1969 "Black September" hijacking incident and has been called the "poster girl of Palestinian militancy" (Ireland 2010).

Among the photographs accompanying the article in *Wanita* includes a photograph of Ms. Khaled in her everyday life, like any other woman, doing her daily grocery shopping. The headline stated "*Leila Khalid [sic], Wanita Srikandi Palistin: Pembebasan wanita dan pembebasan Palistin – slogan hidup-nya*" (Leila Khaled, Palestinian Female Warrior: Women's liberty and freedom for Palestine is her life mission). In the article, Ms. Khaled discussed about ordinary women's dreams in life, including her future wedding plans, having a family, getting good education and also the story of her involvement in the Palestinian battle. As written in the article,

[Translated] Leila Khaled's battle is the battle of many Palestinians, as it is an ongoing combat. She will continue to fight till her last drop of blood for the people and her country. The strength and bravery of this Palestinian female warrior were revealed through her action in the international war conflicts (Anon. 1971b: 25).



**Photo 4** *Wanita* May 1971.

The cover of *Wanita* in June 1975 (see Photo 5) was significant because it marked the moment when the magazine used its cover to attract both male and female readers. The woman on the cover of this edition was a well-known actress from the neighbouring country of Indonesia, Mila Karmila, depicted with a cigarette in hand. This edition of the magazine

stated that an interview with Karmila would be featured in the next issue; however, the article was not included in that subsequent issue of *Wanita*.

Such covers of *Wanita* magazine, in its first few years of publication, implied that Malaysian women cherished a high degree of individual liberty. Through this period, the magazine actively provided motivation, supported ethical discussion and encouraged women in Malaysia to gain knowledge and most importantly to progress. In the first decades of *Wanita*, women were defined by their professional careers, personal roles and the positions they took in everyday activities and how they facilitated Malaysia's growth as a nation.

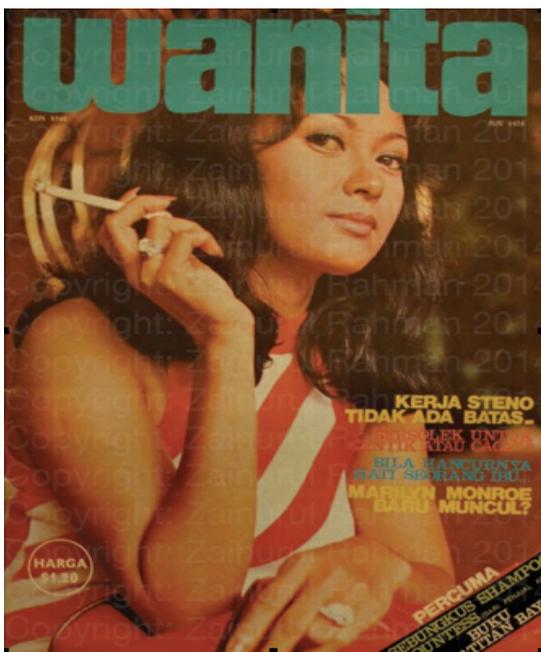


Photo 5 *Wanita* June 1975.

To emphasise the concept of female identity, a full-page article was allocated in each edition to encourage discourse about women and their careers. This section mainly featured interviews, highlights on different experiences, in which Malaysian women readers were given professional advice and educational information. The articles also pointed out the inter-relationships between women professional practices and personal life, such as the family affairs, working environments, relationships, social activities and hobbies. Thus, the articles managed to combine new and empowering information with topics that were aligned with common conceptions of the genre of women's magazines as sites of recreational reading and entertainment, conforming, on the surface, to accepted constructs of Malaysian women's roles.

Challenging and rare professions employed by women in Malaysia were also part of the early editions of *Wanita*, and depicted through visuals on the magazine's cover and text within the magazine. Most of the professions introduced in *Wanita* were monopolised at the time by males, and were considered too rough or challenging for women. However, *Wanita* encouraged women in Malaysia to explore these professions through providing information, articles, examples and also moral encouragement. For example these efforts made by *Wanita* in supporting women's progress can be seen in an article published in August 1974. The article titled, "*Wanita di dunia lelaki*" (a woman in a man's world) provides stories of American women's triumphs in getting recognition in the areas that were traditionally dominated by men. The professions highlighted included airline pilots, electricians, rail engineers, orchestra conductors, and mining workers. Inspiring text about the equal rights for women was shared through an article about American.

[Translated] American men may make jokes about it, or perhaps talk about it secretly, but women in America continue moving forward in making big changes in society. The differences between the common terms used in everyday activities such as "salesmen" and "sales workers", "pressmen" and "press operators", or "firemen" and "fire-fighters" are the proof. The terms

that used "men" have been dropped. The new terms that dropped "men" will be the title in the American census to eliminate the old concept that separated "men's work" and "women's work" (*Wanita* August 1974: 54–56).

Through the years, the percentage of women in Malaysia continuing to further their education increased. The number of women attaining higher education has increased from 49% in 1970 to 75.2% in 2000 (Mahari, 2011: 7–10). Overall opportunities increased for Malaysian women to pursue higher education and be empowered to participate in the labour market. Simultaneously, the expanded education and career options for women increased their economic independence. One inevitable result is that more women in Malaysia choose to be unattached (Lamanna and Riedmann, 2005). Early editions of *Wanita* inspired women in Malaysia to be independent by not only encouraging them to develop skills and knowledge, but also by providing examples of women in Malaysia and women from other countries that had success in obtaining high positions and held important positions in the society. In the *Wanita*, August 1971 edition (see Photo 6), the woman that was chosen for the magazine's front cover was then one of the first Malaysian female judge, Tan Sri P. G. Lim. She was appointed as Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations (1971–1972) and later Ambassador to Yugoslavia and Austria (1973–1977). The interview highlighted her visibility and profile, as an international representative for the country and also for the women in Malaysia.



**Photo 6** *Wanita* August 1971.

The woman chosen for the cover for *Wanita's* May 1973 edition (see Photo 7) was Madam Shamin Hamid, the wife of the then Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh residing in Malaysia. Being an expat wife, Ms. Shamin, made use of her residence in Malaysia to continue her studies, after having graduated with a Bachelor of Science (Mathematics) from the University of Dhaka. In the interview she expressed her excitement of being able to continue her doctorate at the Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. In her interview she stated,

[Translated] To continue learning is very important for women in my position as the right hand of a diplomat... And she believes that education is the most important aspect in life, regardless of being a housewife, a mother or a professional (*Wanita*, May 1973: 12–13).



**Photo 7** *Wanita* May 1973.

## CONCLUSION

In comparison to the recent *Wanita* magazine's covers, the first decades of the magazine paid less attention on the women's beauty and appearance. This was not due to beauty and appearance being considered as minor, but mostly because promoting education and autonomy for women was then the drive of the magazine. There was little sense that *Wanita* was an agent for advertising like most of the women magazines nowadays; instead, the magazine was driven to "advertise" strong characters, as well as independent and educated women in Malaysia.

The media in general plays a part in the country's imagining of national consciousness; this paper has demonstrated how women's magazines such as *Wanita*, can play important roles in a country's nation-building. It promoted ideas of independence and modernity, by providing support for women's ability to choose areas of work, education, direction of future life and their contribution in the country's development. In its first decade, *Wanita* demonstrated a mixture of women for its covers, implying that not only was it representing the voices of Malaysian women, but it was also acting as an agent to encourage Malaysian women to be independent and involved in areas traditionally dominated by men. *Wanita* appeared to be co-opted into a process of creating urbane, sophisticated and modern Malaysian women, as shown through the covers and contents of the publication's early editions, in which women were not defined by their race, but instead by their individual character, their professional background, their education or other achievements. This paper has also demonstrated that popular print media, such as *Wanita*, can provide important social, historical, political and cultural references of a nation. Unfortunately, due to the lack of development in archiving in Malaysia, *Wanita* magazine covers have not extensively been preserved, and this limits significantly the visual references for examining the culture and history of the Malaysian nation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), RMIT University, Utusan Malaysia Berhad, Hamzah Sendut USM Library, Malaysian National Archives Centre and Madam Rokiah Wahab. All the images published in this paper are under the copyright of Utusan Malaysia Berhad and owned by Madam Rokiah Wahab (personal collector), and translations from Bahasa Malaysia to English are under the copyright of Zainurul Rahman 2014. This paper is part of a PhD thesis of Zainurul Rahman (2012).

## NOTES

1. For further discussion about women movements in pre-independence Malaysia, see Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah, *Pemikiran Islam di Malaysia: Sejarah dan Aliran* (Kuala Lumpur: Gema Insani, 1997), 180.
2. See Carol L. Mitchell, "The New Asian Woman: Women's Magazines and the Spread of Mass – Culture in Southeast Asia," *The Serials Librarian* 35, no.1 (1998): 247–259.
3. See Claudine Salmon's, "Presse féminine ou féministe?" *Archipel* 13 (1977): 157–192 and Myra Sidharta's "Women Magazines in Indonesia: Between Hopes and Realities", *Prisma* 24, March (1982): 69–77 sweeping survey on Indonesian women's press, includes both feminist and popular magazines. See also John A. Lent, *Malaysian Mass Media: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Buffalo, USA: Council on International Studies, State University of New York, 1978) and Doreen G. Fernandez, "Women in Media in the Philippines: From Stereotype to Liberation," *Media Asia* No.14 (1987): 183–193.
4. See Shahirah Mahmood, "The Politics of Shari'ah Reform and Its Implications of Muslim Women in Malaysia," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* Issue 36, (September 2014): <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue36/mahmood.htm>.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. 2006. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anon. 1980. Perbentukan identiti nasional. *Majalah Wanita*, April: 12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975. Wanita bertopi keledar. *Majalah Wanita*, April: 28–29.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1971a. Dari meja pengarang. *Majalah Wanita*, April: 5.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1971b. Leila Khalid: Wanita Srikandi Palestin: Pembebasan wanita dan pembebasan Palestin – slogan hidup-nya. *Majalah Wanita*, May: 25.
- Cubitt, G., ed. 1998. *Imagining nations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Idris, F. 1976. Puan Sri Hamidah isteri ketua polis yang rancak dan lekas mesra (Puan Sri Hamidah, the strong, friendly wife of the police chief). *Wanita*, October: 6–7.
- Ireland, M. 2010. *How a Palestinian hijacker being held in a London police station some 40 years ago inspired international journalist Dan Wooding, to write his first novel, "Red Dagger"*. 18 September. <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2010/s10090107.htm> (accessed September 2010).
- Johnson, L. 2010. Basic data of Malaysia. *Press reference*. <http://www.pressreference.com/Ky-Ma/Malaysia.html> (accessed February 2014).
- Kumar, K. 2003. *The making of English national identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Lamanna, M. A. and A. Riedmann. 2005. *Marriages & families: Making choices in a diverse society*. USA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Löfgren, O. 1987. The nationalization of culture: Constructing Swedishness. *Studia Ethnologica* 3: 101–116.
- Mahari, M. Z. 2011. Demographic transition in Malaysia: The changing roles of women. Paper presented at the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Statisticians, New Delhi, India. 7–10 February.
- Mitchell, C. L. 1998. The new Asian woman: Women's magazines and the spread of mass – Culture in Southeast Asia. *The Serials Librarian* 35(1): 247–259.
- Nain, Z. 1999. Portraying the poor: The media and poverty in Malaysia. Paper presented at the Seminar on Media and Human Rights Reporting on Asia's Rural Poor, Bangkok, Thailand. 24–26 November. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.
- Nawawi, Z. 1971. Wawancara dengan sa-orang ahli ekonomi kanan FAMA (interview with FAMA senior economist). *Wanita*, April: 16–17.
- Nor Afzan Mohamad Yusof. 2010. Nostalgia: Antara glamour dan cabaran. *Berita Harian*, 16 April: 11.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. Majalah ubah minda masyarakat. *Berita Harian*, 27 August: 11.
- Ungku Abdul Aziz. 1964. Poverty and rural development in Malaysia. *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia* 1(1): 71.

Williamson, J. 1972. *Decoding advertisements: Ideology and meaning in advertising*. London: Maryon Boyars.

Wong, K. 2000. Malaysia: In the grip of the government. In *Freedom of the press in Asia*, eds. L. Williams and R. Riche. Canberra: Asia Pacific Press ANU.

Zainurul Rahman. 2012. *Chronicling fifty years (1957–2007) of Malaysian identity through popular print media*. PhD diss., RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.