ICLALIS 2013

Whose story? A systemic functional perspective on *Mariah*

Tan Swee Mee*, Teh Chee Seng

*Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Perak Campus, Kampar 31900, Malaysia

Abstract

Through a systemic functional analysis of Che Husna’s *Mariah*, this paper argues that Mariah is not the protagonist of the story. The study intends to explore the social cultural identity of a Malaysian woman in the linguistic context deriving from the analysis of semantic structure and lexical grammar features. Employing the Hallidayan framework, particularly thematic choice in the system of Theme and Rheme, this paper justifies its findings from the distribution and the experiential elements in these thematic choices. The distribution of thematic choice in the story shows that Mariah, who is supposed to be the Protagonist of the story is indeed an object, a muted shadow, suggesting a subordinated female identity in the Malaysian and Islamic context.

Keywords: Systemic functional linguistics; Malaysian woman; identity; thematic choice.

1. Introduction

Malaysian Muslim women are veiled with submission by the name of God (Frisk, 2009). They are also expected to be good and virtuous because of their religion and the society they dwell in (Abdul Manaf, n.d.). By employing Systemic Functional analysis, this paper explores on how Malaysian Muslim female identity is construed in a short story written by a Malay woman writer, Che Husna Azhari, *Mariah*. The short story is entitled *Mariah*, which also implies that as the name for one of the characters in the story, Mariah, is supposed to be the heroine of the story. However, through a systemic functional analysis of *Mariah*, this paper argues that Mariah is not the protagonist of

* Corresponding author: Tan Swee Mee. Tel.: +605-4688888 ext. 4254; fax: 605-466 7597
E-mail address: smtan@utar.edu.my
the story. The identity of Muslim women is thus unveiled. The construction of the values of submission and good
text.

2. Che Husna Azhari and Mariah

Che Husna Azhari is one of the most prominent Malay women writers as her another short story, Of Bunga Telur and Bally Shoes was collected in Form One Short Stories and Poems when the literature component was incorporated into the English Language syllabus for secondary schools in Malaysia in the year 2000. As one of Azhari’s most read short stories, Mariah was collected in her Melor in Perspective, published in 1993 and could be found also in Spirit of the Keris: A Selection of Malaysian Short Stories and Poems, published in 2003. It has been chosen as one of the course readings in Malaysian Literature in English for most of the Malaysian universities, to name a few, UKM and UPM.

The setting of Azhari’s stories is mostly taken in Kelantan, her native place where men and women are typically represented in a lively and light-hearted tone that reflects the writer’s witty humour while mocking her beloved kampong folks. In the story (Malak, 2009), Mariah is a business woman who has drawn all the male folks’ eyes at the market entrance every morning. Her assets not only credit to her beautiful face, well proportioned figure or graceful swaying but most importantly, a status of being widowed. The story goes on with a description about how she has become women’s envy and men’s attention and later the Imam’s desire, a desire of his first love even he has already had a perfect wife for fifteen years, Cik Yam. In a gentle and tactful way, the Imam seeks the approval of his perfect wife and has successfully “realized” his dream, taking Mariah as his second wife. The story is ended happily “before Mariah’s perfume completely enveloped him and his senses” (Azhari, 2003, p. 16).

3. Textual metafunction

The Theme-Rheme system forms one part of the Hallidayan theory of language, also known as systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), which centers on the notion of language function. In practice, SFL looks at how language acts upon and is constrained by the social context in which it functions. Any text, regardless of whether it is in the written or spoken form, resides in its society; it is the product of social semiotics (Halliday, 1993) a system of signs that reflects the origin of its social and cultural environment.

In the English language, a clause consists of a Theme and a Rheme. ‘Theme’ is also defined as the “psychological subject” of the clause by Halliday (2004), and it is always in the first position as “the point of departure” that serves to the body in an English clause (Halliday, 1994, p. 37). Bloor and Bloor (2004, p. 65) define the first position of the structure of a clause as the “Given” information and the remaining of the clause as the “New” information of the message. According to the framework, “the point of departure” or “Given” is the clause initial that foreground the message while the following is the “New” information of the message. What the listeners/readers have already known is the “Given” and followed by the “New” information that is expected after the speakers/writers foreground the “Given” or the “point of departure”. The following examples explain how Theme/Rheme in a message is organized into different interpretations of meanings:

Table 1. Theme/Rheme in English

| Theme / Rheme | Types of Theme          |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| i: John did it. | Unmarked Topical Theme |
| ii: Last night John did it. | Marked Topical Theme |
| iii: Certainly John did it! | Interpersonal Theme |
| iv: So John did it. | Textual Theme |

For (i), a clause forms a message when the point of departure “John” is taken as the topic of the message. It is thus called a Topical Theme but an Unmarked one since there is no distinctive feature as a typical subject of a
clause. However, not all the clause initials start as typical subjects in the messages. Sometimes, experiential elements such as time or place could be found as themes in the messages. Part (ii) is one of the instances and is labeled as Marked Topical Theme. Therefore, the positioning of Theme in the organization of text is the options made by the speakers or the writers. For interpersonal function, a thematic choice could be a personal judgment like “Certainly” in (iii) while Textual Theme “So” in (iv) serves as one of the textual elements that are interwoven across the messages in the text and attain cohesion of the text.

4. Experiential metafunction - the transitivity system

The Experiential Metafunction concerns the human experience which is an interpretation of the happenings around and inside us and it is interpreted by the transitivity system. According to the framework, it is through the transitivity system that our experiences of the world are construed (Thompson, 2004, p. 88). Such experiences are construed as processes, or “goings on” (expressed as a verb group), the attendant participants (typically noun groups), and circumstances (typically adverb groups or preposition phrases), if any (Halliday and Metthesien, 2004, p. 170). The framework recognizes six processes, each with its own unique set of participants. Circumstances, on the other hand, are not tied to any one process but are generalizable across different processes. They serve to enhance, extend, or elaborate the experiential processes, and so do not exist on their own but as an expansion of something else (Halliday & Metthesien, 2004, p. 261). The transitivity system is summarized in the Table 2 (Halliday, 1994, p. 143).

Table 2. Transitivity system in English

| Process (meaning)                      | Participants            | Examples                                      |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Material (doing, happening)            | Actor, Goal (plus others) | John played badminton yesterday.               |
|                                        |                         | (Pt:Actor + Pr:Material + Pt:Goal + Circ:Time) |
| Mental (seeing, feeling, thinking, wanting) | Senser, Phenomenon       | John loves red roses.                          |
|                                        |                         | (Pt:Senser + Pr:Mental + Pt:Phenomenon)       |
| Relational (being, having; identifying or attributing) | Carrier, Attribute; Token, Value | John is a happy boy.                          |
|                                        |                         | (Pt:Token + Pr:Relational-Identifying + Pt:Value) |
|                                        |                         | John is happy.                                 |
|                                        |                         | (Pt:Carrier + Pr:Relational-Attribute + Pt:Attribute) |
| Behavioral (psychological behavior)    | Behaver, Behavior       | John is laughing out loud.                     |
|                                        |                         | (Pt:Behaver + Pr:Behavioral + Circ:Manner)    |
| Verbal (saying, indicating)            | Sayer, Verbiage         | John expressed his concern.                    |
|                                        |                         | (Pt:Sayer + Pr:Verbal + Pr:Verbiage)          |
| Existential (existing, being)          | Existent                | Once upon a time there was a little happy prince. |
|                                        |                         | (Circ:Time + Pr:Existential + Pt:Existent)    |

4. Research design and findings

All the clauses in the short story were sorted accordingly into Marked/Unmarked Topical Theme, Textual Theme and Interpersonal Theme in the decorative mood, Wh- interrogative mood, Yes/No interrogative mood, Exclusive imperative mood or Inclusive imperative mood and lastly exclamative mood. Minor clauses such as a call of “Cik Yam”, and an exclamation of “Why?” were not taken in the analysis. A total of 482 clauses were analysed, and 18 of them were not counted in the analysis as they are minor clauses such as exclamation in a conversation or phrases without a proper verb group. A Topical Theme either Marked or Unmarked is very experiential, and it has a dominant status to represent a human’s actions and behaviours. All the Marked/Unmarked Topical Themes, either accompanied by Textual or Interpersonal elements in the thematic position, have been investigatated and categorised. To discuss findings pertaining to types of thematic choice found in the selected short story, a summary of the specification of findings and the distribution of each category are shown in Table 3:
Table 3. Specifications of thematic choice in *Mariah*

| Theme in Declaratives | Number of clauses | Frequency of occurrences |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Unmarked Topical Theme | 261               | 54.2%                   |
| Marked Topical Theme  | 39                | 8.0%                    |
| Marked Topical + Textual | 13               | 2.7%                    |
| Textual + Unmarked Topical | 97         | 20.2%                   |
| Interpersonal + Unmarked Topical | 24 | 5.0%                    |
| Textual + Interpersonal + Unmarked Topical | 6 | 1.2%                    |
| Fronted β Clause | 13                | 2.7%                    |
| Textual + Fronted β Clause | 2     | 0.4%                    |
| Theme in Wh Interrogatives |               |                         |
| Unmarked Topical | 12                | 2.5%                    |
| Textual + Unmarked Topical | 1         | 0.2%                    |
| Theme in Yes/No Interrogatives |      |                         |
| Unmarked Topical | 4                 | 0.8%                    |
| Theme in Exclusive Imperatives |            |                         |
| Unmarked Topical | 5                 | 1.1%                    |
| Unmarked Topical + Interpersonal | 1 | 0.2%                    |
| Theme in Exclamatives |               |                         |
| Marked Topical | 4                 | 0.8%                    |
| Total of clauses investigated | 482 | 99.9%                   |

As can be seen from the table, most of the messages in the clauses are realized as Unmarked Topical themes, with 261 clauses or 54.2% standing out among all other types of thematic choices. It is followed by Textual + Unmarked Topical themes, 97 clauses (20.2%); Marked Topical, 38 clauses (8%); Interpersonal + Unmarked Topical, 24 clauses (5%); Fronted β Clause, 13 clauses (2.5%); Unmarked Topical in Wh Interrogatives, 12 clauses (2.5%) and 4 clauses (0.8%) in exclamatives. The distribution of thematic choices is further examined for the interpretation of meanings from the Transitivity System.

According to the framework, it is through the transitivity system that our experiences of the world are construed (Thompson, 2004). The representation of meanings is thus interpreted through a close investigation of the participants found in the clauses. To enhance the interpretation of meanings in a text from a systemic functional perspective, the participants as actors, carriers, sensers, behavers or sayers together with the processes of these participants were thus scrutinized. The occurrences of the participants in the clauses are ranked as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Marked/Unmarked Topical Themes in *Mariah*: types of participants and domination.

| No. | Theme                                    | Number of clauses | Percentage of occurrences |
|-----|------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 1.  | The Imam as Topical Theme                | 152               | 34.4%                    |
| 2.  | Cik Yam as Topical Theme                 | 56                | 13.0%                    |
| 3.  | Mariah as Topical Theme                  | 53                | 12.0%                    |
| 4.  | The kampong women as Topical Theme       | 50                | 11.3%                    |
| 5.  | The kampong men as Topical Theme         | 28                | 6.3%                     |
| 6.  | Other experiential elements as Topical Theme | 101       | 23.0%                    |
|     | Total of clauses investigated             | 440               | 100%                     |

6. Discussion

From a Systemic Functional perspective, Mariah in the short story is theoretically presumed to be positioned as the main participant as actor/senser/behaver in the text with more clauses providing information as the points of departure in the clauses. Mariah is ranked as the third role in the story, and the domination is just slightly higher than the kampong women who are obviously marginalized in *Mariah*. *Mariah* is not a story about a woman, called Mariah, but about a man, or more precisely, a pious man, the Imam, who is a highly respected religious leader in the Malay community.
7. Who is Mariah?

When Hallidayan theory deals with the Textual Metafunction, Theme/Rheme is always a matter of choice by the speaker or writer as mentioned earlier. The occurrences of Mariah as Topical Themes in the text are less than those of other individual Participants, the Imam and the Imam’s wife, Cik Yam. The role played by Mariah is overwhelmed by all other individual Participants in the clauses. The Imam is leading the flow of the story, dominating 152 Topical Themes in the text. The main events go to how he meets his first love, a lady resembling Mariah, how his love of the first lady shuttered, how he meets Mariah, how he seeks approval of his first wife, Cik Yam, and how he realizes his desire, taking Mariah into his house. Although the short story is entitled Mariah, in a closer examination of the 50 clauses having Mariah as the Topical Theme, we have found that only 11 processes are realized as Material processes in which Mariah serves as Actors, representing the doer of the action in the story. The examples collected are shown as follows:

a. Every morning at seven sharp she would walk past the market entrance into the village square.
b. Mariah would easily pass for a beauty in her late twenties.
c. and [Mariah] moved gracefully.
d. No, [she did] not [move] gracefully.
e. …but [she moved] sensuously.
f. She treated the Imam with reverence and courtesy, befitting his station and stature.
g. She served him the choicest morsels on her best cutlery.
h. She continued, serenely unaffected, with her nasi belauk selling until the very day she married the Imam.
i. Mariah’s wedding surpassed even her own expectations.
j. She took out her savings from nasi belauk selling.
k. …before Mariah’s perfume completely enveloped him and his senses.

One would not know much about Mariah because the actions taken by the Actor of these Topical Themes seem rather insignificant. Other clauses taking Mariah as Topical Themes do not reveal much too. The most prominent type of processes found is Relational-Attribute processes where Mariah, as the Carrier in the Topical Theme, is followed by a linking verb to be ‘was’ or ‘had been’, and a description about her attributes and status. Next to this category is Mariah as the Senser in the Mental process type, in these clauses such as ‘she felt, found, realized, noticed and so forth. Another type of processes found in her is the Verbal process, with four clauses in which she replied, sighed (2 times), and said ‘yes’, ended the four clauses in a very precise way, without much verbiage. Relational and Mental processes are rather passive and non-dynamic in nature. Mariah, as found from the Topical themes in the 50 clauses, the portrait of a Malay woman is rather vague and plain. She could be seen, felt, not much heard though, smelt and is given a position as the main character viewing from the title of the short story, but ironically her personality is not explicitly disclosed to the readers. She seems to be admired or envied by many since she is beautiful, independent, capable, attractive, sexy and rich; she possesses attributes which could be taken as a new and modern model of women in the kampong setting; however, the grammatical structure of the text interprets it to the contrary. She is not leading the largest portion in the Topical Theme domination; instead, the least when compared to her other two counterparts, the Imam and Cik Yam. She is not the main Actor in the story but merely a Carrier of certain attributes, a Senser for the mental activities, and her voices are not much heard too even as she sighs twice, but it sounds rather insignificant.

8. Whose story?

Mariah is actually a story about a Malay imam in a Malay society. The Imam is the protagonist represented by the Topical Themes either Marked or Unmarked and also his possessions such as clauses starting with “his wife”, “the Imam’s wife nasi belauk”, “his heart” and “his dream”. In the early days, the “object” of his ardent longing is the Sheikh’s daughter, his heart “ached with the pent-up longing” and he “vowed” to himself, “I shall make her mine”. Fifteen years later, his object has been turned into Mariah, a beautiful widow in his village. Thus, at the end of the story, his dream comes into reality.

No one in the kampong knows how Mariah resembles the Imam’s long lost love, the Sheikh’s daughter and how
he could have Cik Yam’s approval. The kampong folks “wondered what Quranic ayats the Imam blew on Cik Yam’s face to subdue her”, but they all agree that Cik Yam is “a model of virtue” in this point, a perfect woman who could respond so generously and gracefully upon her husband’s request for a second wife, sharing her love with Mariah, “a blousy woman who is untutored in religion and untutored in everything”.

The Imam, as the religious leader in the kampong, has had “a perfect model of wife”, Cik Yam. Taking a second wife seems not reasonable for him but it is acceptable in the Islamic background, especially taking in Mariah who has granted an extra asset of being widowed. Thus, the Topical Theme he “believed it was fated, a part of a grand design by God to heal his heart” while he questions “Didn’t the Prophet himself say that three things are pleasing to him, prayers, women and perfume?” The struggle is then justified and he “felt resolved to do what he had to do”. A man in action, the Imam is the real Actor in the story.

Cik Yam, a perfect wife and a model of virtue, is defeated when her husband asks for a second wife, “Despair and humiliation all came”. In the construction of a perfect role model in the Muslim world, does Cik Yam not have any struggle? Could she not resist the begging by the Imam? These questions should have been spinning around especially when her fans, the village teacher, Cik Gu Nab and others gossip like most women do, and when they report to Cik Yam about the Imam’s visit to Mariah and wonder how Cik Yam “could have easily succumbed to the whole arrangement”. In the end, Cik Yam and her fans who make noise and share the same opinions and have all the effort to prevent the consequences, make no impact to the issue, although they are positioned legally to ignite the quarrel between men and women.

Mariah is a unique representation when compared to the representation of the other three, the Imam, Cik Yam, the kampong folks in Mariah. She is detached from others, selling her nasi berlauk in the open air, seen by everyone in the kampong, gossipied by other women, and becomes an object of the top representation of the Muslim world, the Imam. Under the name of God, she is sanctified, deserving ranking equal to prayers, “Didn’t the Prophet himself say that three things are pleasing to him, prayers, women and perfume?” The yes/no interrogative mood underscores it.

10. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated a systemic functional analysis of Mariah using an integration of the Hallidayan Theme-Rheme system and transitivity framework. The investigation in the clausal level suggests that the framework is a dynamic resource for interpreting meanings of a text. Indeed, the short story entitled Mariah could be rectified as any other name such as “A Perfect Wife’s Woe” or “The Imam’s Long Lost Love”. Instead, Azhari named the story Mariah, foreshadowing an ironical truth from a mysterious goddess. Light-heartedly, the story is ended with great humour, and no one is offended, neither the women folks nor the men folks. The Given/New or Theme/Rheme flows within the constraint of the context from the different personalities in a Malay rural community. The shared values of submission and good virtue of Muslim women are again soaring high.

References

Abdul Manaf, N. F. (n.d.) On becoming good women: A study on the ‘fragmented self’ in Malaysian Muslim Women’s Writing in English. Feminist Studies in English Literature, 15(2), 113-114.

Azhari, C.H. (2003). Mariah. Spirit of the Keris: A Selection of Malaysian Short Stories and Poems, 6-13. K.L: Maya Press.

Bloor, T., & Bloor, M. (2004). The functional analysis of English: A Hallidayan approach (2nd ed.). London: Arnold.

Frisk, S. (2009). Submitting to God: Women and island in urban Malaysia. Copenhagen: Nias Press.

Halliday, M. (1993). The act of meaning, in Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1992: Language, Communication, and Social Meaning, J. E. Alatis (Ed.). Washington: Georgetown University Press. 7–21.

Halliday, M. (1994). An introduction to functional grammar (2nd ed.). London: Arnold.

Halliday, M. (2002). On grammar. J. Webster (Ed.). New York: Continuum.

Halliday, M.A.K., & Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (2004). An introduction to functional grammar (3rd ed.). London: Arnold.

Malak, A. (2009). Che Husna Azhari: An English sojourn. Asiatic, 3(1). June, 2009. Retrieved at http://asiatic.iium.edu.my/3n1/article/Amin_Malak/Amin_Malak.pdf.

Thompson, G. (2004). Introducing functional grammar. London: Arnold.