

**POSTMODERN FEMINIST IDENTITY
THROUGH ARTWORKS BY SELECTED
MALAYSIAN FEMALE ARTISTS (2000-2015)**

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**POSTMODERN FEMINIST IDENTITY
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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures	v
List of Abbreviations	ix
Abstrak	x
Abstract	xi
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION	
The Transition From Tradition	1
1.1 Aim and Objectives of The Study	9
1.1.1 Research Gap	10
1.2 Research Questions	10
1.3 Conceptual Framework	11
1.4 Research Method	19
1.5 Scope and Limitation of The Study	13
1.6 Background To The Study	24
1.7 Thesis Structure	33

CHAPTER 2 – THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTS IN MALAYSIA:

A REVISITATION OF HOW IT BEGAN

2.1	Introduction	36
2.2	Defining Women’s Identities In A Postmodern World	36
2.3	The Birth of A New Language To Define Identity	43
2.4	The Development of Women Art In Malaysia	50
2.5	Performance Art and Feminism	64
2.6	Conclusion	71

CHAPTER 3: INVESTIGATING IDENTITY THROUGH SELECTED

ARTWORKS OF MALAYSIAN WOMEN ARTISTS

(2000-2015)

3.1	Introduction	73
3.2	Factors That Influenced The Identity of Women in Malaysia	75
	3.2.1 Religion, Law and Cultural Belief Systems	78
	3.2.2 Politics and Power	114
3.3	Characterising The Themes of Identity	123
	3.3.1 The Performativity of Gender and The Revolution of Binaries	124
	3.3.2 The Feminine Language	133
3.4	Conclusion	163

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION	166
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BIBLIOGRAPHY	172
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APPENDICES

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

LIST OF CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

LIST OF FIGURES

		Page
Figure 2.1	Kiki Smith, “Mary Magdelene” (1994), cast installation silicon bronze and forged steel, 152.4 x 52.1 x 54.6cm...	44
Figure 2.2	Sharon Chin, “Weeds/Rumpai Series II – Unknown” (2015), fabric paint and wax crayon on polyester flag, 154 x 75cm	51
Figure 2.3	William Daniell, “View From Halliburton’s Hill, Prince Of Wales’s Island” (1818), aquatint, 45.6 x 70.4cm	52
Figure 2.4	Georgette Chen, “Self Portrait” (1946), oil on canvas, 22.5 x 17.5cm	55
Figure 2.5	Georgette Chen, “Singapore Waterfront” (1958), oil on canvas, 59 x 72 cm	56
Figure 2.6	Georgette Chen, “Mosque in Kuala Lumpur” (1957), oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm	57
Figure 2.7	Georgette Chen, “Still Life: Moon Festival Table” (1965-1968), oil on canvas, dimension unavailable	58
Figure 2.8	Lai Fong Moi, “Gadis Melayu”, (1959), oil on canvas, 92 x 70cm	62

Figure 2.9	Yoko Ono & John Lennon, “Bed-in.” Amsterdam Hilton Hotel, Amsterdam. 25 to 31 March 1969, performance	71
Figure 3.1	Aisyah Baharuddin, “Kaki Tangan” (2014), acrylic on canvas, 107 cm x 107 cm	80
Figure 3.2	Aisyah Baharuddin, “Adam dan Hawa” (2013), medium and dimension unavailable	83
Figure 3.3	Sophia Kamal, “But You Don’t Know The Half Of It” (2015), mixed media on paper, 59 x 84 cm	89
Figure 3.4	Sophia Kamal, “I Am A Dream Still Dreaming” (2015), acrylic on canvas, 77 x 102 cm	92
Figure 3.5	Sophia Kamal, “Milk and Honey” (2015), acrylic on canvas, 61 x 77 cm	92
Figure 3.6	Sophia Kamal, “Lesson in Layers” (2015), acrylic on canvas, 77 x 102 cm	95
Figure 3.7	Intan Rafiza, “Antara Pencipta”, Whitebox Gallery, Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. 18 November 2013, performance	97
Figure 3.8	Shia Yih Ying, “An An As Red Riding Hood”, (2008), oil on canvas, 122 x 122cm	102
Figure 3.9	Shia Yih Ying “Fairy Godmother’s Sarong of Prayer” (2009), oil on canvas, 139 x 101cm	103
Figure 3.10	Shia Yih Ying, “Sleep! Beauties! Sleep!” (2014), medium and dimension unavailable	107

Figure 3.11	Shia Yih Ying, “Shh! Mermaids Shh!”, (2014), medium and dimension unavailable	107
Figure 3.12	Shia Yih Ying, “Smile! Princesses! Smile!” (2014), medium and dimension unavailable	107
Figure 3.13	Shia Yih Ying, “The More We Get Together III”, (2013), oil on canvas, 135 x 200cm	109
Figure 3.14	Shia Yih Ying, “The More We Get Together IV”, (2013), oil on canvas, 135 x 200cm	112
Figure 3.15	Intan Rafiza, “Scandal Makan Duit”, Lost Gen Space, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. 19 June 2015, performance	114
Figure 3.16	Aisyah Baharuddin, “Barah”, Fergana Art Space, Malaysia. 28 September 2015, performance	117
Figure 3.17	Intan Rafiza, “Merah Itu Darah”, Jalan Sultan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. 28th May 2012, performance	119
Figure 3.18	Aisyah Baharuddin, “Dewi” (2013), medium and dimension unavailable	124
Figure 3.18	Aisyah Baharuddin, “Mengandung”, (2013) medium and dimension unavailable	127
Figure 3.19	Mislina Mustaffa, “Walls”, Black Box, Publika, Kuala Lumpur. 9 November 2013, performance	139
Figure 3.20	Yante Ismail, “I’m Beautiful In My Imperfections” (2014) medium and dimension unavailable	142

Figure 3.21	Yante Ismail, “Sorrow Found Her” (2014) , acrylic and ink on canvas, 1’ x 1.5’	146
Figure 3.22	Chong Ai Lei, “Intoxicated” (2012), oil on canvas , 168 x 124.5cm	149
Figure 3.23	Chong Ai Lei, “Pleasure” (2012), oil on canvas , 124.5 x 168cm	150
Figure 3.24	Chong Ai Lei, “Stare” (2013), oil on canvas, 90 x 142cm	152
Figure 3.25	Chong Ai Lei, “Idle” (2013), oil on canvas, 90 x 142cm	153
Figure 3.26	Chong Ai Lei, “True Romances 1” (2013) oil on canvas, 124.5 x 168cm	153
Figure 3.27	Chong Ai Lei, “True Romances 11” (2013), oil on canvas, 124.5 x 168cm	153
Figure 3.28	Chong Ai Lei, “After Sunshine” , (2013), oil on canvas, 120 x 138 cm	160

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AWAS	Angkatan Wanita Sedar (Force of Awakened Women)
GST	Goods Service Tax
MNP	Malay Nationalist Party

IDENTITI PASCAMODEN FEMINISME DALAM KARYA SENI TERPILIH ARTIS-ARTIS WANITA MALAYSIA (2000-2015)

ABSTRAK

Imej seseorang wanita sepanjang sejarah selalu terpendil dari masyarakat artistik maskulin dalam bidang seni. Perspektif dan pemikiran pascamoden membentuk ketegangan sentral dan konflik dalam karya dan persembahan ahli seniman wanita abad ke-21. Penyelidikan ini akan memberi penerangan lanjut kepada analisa karya seni dan persembahan seniman wanita Malaysia antara tahun 2000 hingga 2015 berdasarkan feminisme pascamoden. Tidak dapat dinafikan bahawa pascamodenisme secara menyeluruh mengingatkan penduduk tempatan budaya Malaysia yang mempelbagaikan identiti wanita hari ini. Koleksi karya seni dan persembahan ini menangkap idea bahawa bukan sahaja gaya hidup kontemporari dan pemikiran boleh menjadi elemen yang menjadi batasan pada persepsi identiti seseorang dari perspektif feminis pascamoden, tetapi juga faktor persekitaran lain, di mana tesis ini akan dibahas selanjutnya. Setiap konflik subjek terletak dalam keupayaan atau kecacatannya sendiri untuk mencari keseimbangan antara rasionalisasi kebenaran dan realiti, serta konflik dalam diri, sepertimana yang dibahas oleh persepsi pascamoden. Dengan memberi fokus pada isu-isu identiti dan feminisme pascamoden, tesis ini berpendapat bahawa karya seni dan persembahan para seniman wanita terpilih mencerminkan perdebatan antara menepati budaya tradisional dengan pemikiran generasi baru tentang kehidupan, pemikiran dan budaya feminis pascamoden di Malaysia yang akhirnya menyumbang idea baru mengenai identiti sebagai seorang wanita.

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ABSTRACT

The image of a woman throughout the course of history has always been secluded from the artistic masculine society in art. The urban perspective and postmodern thinking forms a central tension and conflict within new paintings and performances by twenty-first century women artists. The present research will seek to analyse selected artworks and performances of Malaysian female artists between years 2000 to 2015 in the light of postmodern feminism. Undeniably, postmodernism thoroughly reminds locals of the power of the Malaysian culture, which diversifies the identity of women today. This collection of artworks and performances capture the idea that not only the contemporary lifestyle and way of thought can be elements that place limitations on one's perception of identity from a postmodern feminist perspective, but also other surrounding factors, in which this thesis will discuss further. Each subject's conflict lies within her own ability or disability to balance between rationalization of truth and reality, as well as the conflict within the self, in relation to postmodernist interests. Focusing on the issues of identity and postmodern feminism, this thesis argues that the artworks and performances of the selected women artists reflects the grapple between conforming to the traditional culture with the new generational thought of the postmodern feminist way of life, thinking and culture in urban Malaysia which eventually leads to a whole new idea of the identity as a woman.

CHAPTER 1

THE TRANSITION FROM TRADITION

During the reign of the British in Malaya, the introduction of “modern” activities such as the promotion of sports and colonial welfare work for instance, symbolized dress reform, health and mobility for local Malay women and thus brought upon a radical social change upon the people¹. In the 1930s, Muslim intellectuals who were educated and influenced by the reformation which was taking place in the Middle East had demanded that Muslim women to be given the rights to receive proper formal education². Unlike the history of the feminist movement in the West, the struggle for women's rights in Malaya back then were not founded on women's right to vote. The first documented use of women's liberation or women's involvement as a political and social project was discovered in the 1920s Malaya was by Malay Muslim male reformers and writers from the modernist group known as the “*Kaum Muda*” such as Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Zainal Abidin Ahmad³, or better known as Za'ba. Syed Shaykh argues,

¹ Timothy Norman Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 29.

³⁹ During the nineteenth century, the Muslims society found itself dominated to European imperial powers which challenged the accuracy of Islam itself. As such, the reformist spirit emerged from Egypt to Southeast Asia of an Islamic modernist movement called the "Reformation" or "Reinterpretation" (ijtihad) of Islam. One result of the particular Islamic revivalism has been a reconsideration of the role of women in Islam. One concern, which was indicated during the movement, was that Muslim women had two choices to make: the modern westernised or the more restrictive traditional "Islamic" lifestyle. The attempt of this movement was to merge religious belief and values with contemporary levels of education and employment, to subordinate a process of social change to indigenous, Islamic values and ideals. See John L. Esposito, "Contemporary Islam: Reformation of Revolution?", in *Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 643-689.

NOTE 8: Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Zainal Abidin Ahmad were prominent religious scholars and intellectuals who had received their education at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. While they were in Cairo, they were influenced by the Universalist ideas of Muhammed Abduh, Rashid Ridha and Jamaluddin al-Afghani and were actively in contact with the reformist.

“The development of a woman’s intellect is a necessity for if her mind is weak or inadequate, her value will diminish, which is exactly what is happening in our society.”⁴

Whilst they fought for the education of women, the other Malay Muslim group or better known as the “*Kaum Tua*” had placed an emphasis on the importance of Islamic learning as a way of equipping Malay women with the skills to fulfill their primary role, as educators of their children.⁵

Due to the advancement of women’s rights in Malaya, the scope of literature and other printed materials had also birthed forth during the vocalisation of women’s voices in Malaya. Printed materials such as magazines were a form of media that enabled women to communicate ideas on social consciousness, liberation, citizenship and modernity. Women’s magazines that were present during the pre-colonial state in Malaya were *Bulan Melayu* and *Ibu Melayu*, which thoroughly discussed what it means to be a modern woman within the context of that particular society living in that era. These magazines were in fact the source of knowledge for women to be equipped about revolutionising their outlook, promoting ideas of freedom and independence and nationalism, emphasizing the roles of women as mothers and wives during the transition period as well as their contribution to society, while some discussed more radical issues such as women violence, sexual abuse and child marriage.

The first women’s magazine, *Bulan Melayu*⁶, was published in 1932 until 1941 by the Malay Women Teachers Association of Johor. The goal of *Bulan Melayu* was to “assist fellow women, whether those working at home or those

⁴ Syed Shaykh al-Hady, “Changes in the Upbringing of Girls are Urgent,” in *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady*, ed. Alijah Gordon (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999) 227.

⁵ Abdul Rahman Abdullah, *Pemikiran Islam di Malaysia: Sejarah dan Aliran* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Gema Insani Press, 1997) 233.

⁶ Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah, 180.

working outside, such school teachers” and to bring “enlightenment to the Malay world.”⁷ This magazine, led by editor Ibu Zain, paved the way for early discussions on the anti-colonial struggles. There were also the articulations of women’s voices found in non-women magazines such as in *Majallah Guru*, published in 1924 by the Malay Teachers Association (*Kesatuan Persekutuan Guru-Guru Melayu Semenanjung*). *Majallah Guru* was the first magazine in Malaya that allocated a column for women writers, entitled “*Bahagian Perempuan*”⁸. Through this space, women teachers, writers and scholars examined and deconstructed the customary Malay view of femininity and the role of women as wives, child carriers and mothers. These teachers, writers and scholars wrote about issues which were considered a taboo during that period such as child marriage, violence against women and education opportunities for women⁹. In between 1946 and 1948, women from various ethnic groups in Malaya unified and rose up against anti-colonialism and matters indicating women's inferior status in which had occupied Malaya¹⁰.

What caused women to begin to discuss about their own rights was of course the given opportunity to receiving formal education, colonialisation, the massive migration of immigrants as well as very likely, the freedom which had been given to women to discuss their rights in printed materials. Indeed, the birth of women writers, scholars and intellectuals had paved a way for many other women to start

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mahani Musa, “Official State Records: A Minefield for Studying Pre-1957 Malay Women,” *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation* 26 (2008): 171-188.

⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The end of the three-year Japanese rule in 1945 had caused a new wave of Malay women to voice their dispute against their rights to education, migration, activism and employment due to the closing of schools by the Japanese. Malay parents began to view the English language as a symbol of status and thus supported the extended educational opportunities in English-medium schools. The result of alongside with this implemented policy led to a rapid growth of employment among Malay women, higher migration to urban areas and social mobility. See Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, “Against Multiple Hegemonies: Radical Malay Women in Colonial Malaya,” *Journal of Social History* 47, no.1 (2013): 166.

voicing out during the pre-independence days. It is important to note that this study is about placing an emphasis of the development of women art in Malaysia and according to this historical study of events, women had begun to become braver in terms of expressing their ideologies, concerns and thoughts only during this particular period of time. However, these women were still under the male umbrella and the traditional prerequisites of becoming a modest woman. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that education was the starting point that had brought about the change of the freedom of expression among women in Malaysia. Even though the question and emphasis of “self-identity” came only slightly later, it is crucial to address such matter that rights to education played an important role in developing the minds of women in Malaysia. Although there have been instances where women seem to be quite prominent and accepted throughout the course of pre-independence and post-independence state, such explanation earlier have not entirely dealt with the multicultural context neither did it address the problems faced by Malaysian women today within the belly of a globalizing economy.

The earlier research works written in Malaysia had more sophisticated outcomes in local forms of artworks which tackled issues such as the local lifestyle, nationalism, nation building, and life during independence. The rise of technology and globalization has brought a creative and rapid change to the minds and culture of the postmodern people living in this twenty first century. The urban perspective and postmodern thinking seemingly forms the central tension and conflict within the various subjects portrayed in the collection of new paintings and selected performances by contemporary artists. The present research will seek to analyse selected artworks and performances of twenty-first century women artists ranging from the year 2000 to 2015 in the light of postmodern feminism in the case of

Malaysia. The aim of this research is to investigate the context in which postmodern feminism acts as the core that mediates identity within the frames of the collection of artworks and performances by these selected contemporary women artists. By placing emphasis on the issues of identity, it is derived that the artworks and performances of the selected women artists reflects the struggle between succumbing to the traditional culture with the new generational thought of the current way of life, thinking and culture in contemporary Malaysia which later shapes the identities of individual women. The idea of postmodern feminism demonstrated in the discussion of artworks and performances capture the idea that the contemporary lifestyle can be elements that place limitation on one's perception of identity. Each subject's conflict lies within his or her own ability or disability to balance between rationalization of truth and reality, as well as the conflict within the self, in relation to the postmodernist interest.

Ever since its inception in 1837, "feminism" has been a term discussed by many scholars around the world across different fields of study.¹¹ Women throughout the course of art making have been secluded from the artistic masculine group in mainstream art. It was an issue for women to be considered as artists, especially if their artwork circled around themes related to their gender. Feminist art, however, only made its highlight in the 1960s in the United States that has drastically evolved the way society perceived the role of women as professional artists. Sadly in most cases we can find, women artist's works are being depicted as being too feminine, sentimental and "safe". Nevertheless, these issues have evoked feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Whitney Chadwick, and Lucy Lippard to question and revoke

NOTE 1: It is significant to take note that Malaysia consists of three different main races- Malays, Chinese and Indians. On this stand to eliminate racial biasness, the researcher will generalize the whole social structure and research based on a general point of view as Malaysians.

¹¹ Kristin Switala, "Various Fields Within Feminism," *Feminist Theory Website: Various Fields Within Feminism*, 1999, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/fields.html>

against the hierarchy of the art evaluation system for being gender bias as most art historians, critics, curators, museum and gallery directors are mostly male. Such case will eventually cause a subjective approach towards female artworks.

A viewpoint positioned by Linda Nochlin in her article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists”¹² contradicts the sexist theory, which explains that the reason why there are no outstanding female artists present in the industry is because humans with wombs do not have the ability to create anything significant, or of great value. Even though there has been a study¹³ on why there have been no great women artists in the art industry especially in the West which addresses the fact that this issue arises due to the oppression of women when it comes to social expectations, art education and opportunities, there is a lack of emphasis which have been placed on why this issue is surfacing in the art scene in Malaysia. According to Yuen Chee Ling in her thesis, “Figura Wanita Dalam Karya Pelukis Wanita

NOTE 2: I have chosen to discuss about the issue of why women artists were considered insignificant in the nineteenth century because it addresses the issue that women were considered vulnerable and unproductive compared to men, which is still obvious in Malaysia’s society today.

¹² Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, (Westview Press, 1988) : 147- 158.

NOTE 3: This study was carried out by Linda Nochlin dismisses both the sexist and feminist approach because both theories do not explain nor does it address the core subject of the question raised. Rather than forwarding her arguments with regards to one’s emotions, Nochlin provided a historical analysis instead. According to Nochlin, the reason why this problem exists in the art industry has very much to do with the lack of open doors of opportunities for women in the industry compared to men. Nochlin argues that it is relatively incorrect to consider the fact that learning art does not require proper training and opportunities. In the light of this, every artist cannot be assumed that they were naturally born to be great. Every artist, men and women alike, has to undergo certain kind of training or apprenticeship to another artist. However, in that particular era, educational institutions were not quite as available for women who were interested in art compared to men. As a matter of fact, it is significant to not lay hold on the idea that the reason why this question arises is because there is something wrong and incomprehensible about women but rather, a focus should be placed on what is wrong with the art institution. In the nineteenth century, the influence of Romanticism has very much dictated the minds of society. Many successful artists would romanticise stories which led to their triumph, for example, having their hidden talents and gifts to overcome all of life’s odds whether it is related to poverty, social class or discrimination. Women were generally encouraged to study art only as a form of hobby, not as a profession. The expectations that society had towards women was a stumbling hurdle that had stopped women from truly devoting themselves to art. Women were only expected to devote herself to her husband and her children: “...unlike other oppressed groups or castes, men demand of them not only submission but unqualified affection as well; thus women are often weakened by the internalised demands of the male-dominated society itself, as well as by a plethora of material goods and comforts: the middle-class woman has a great deal more to lose than her chains”

Malaysia”¹⁴, Rosalind Foo in the twentieth century, followed by prominent local women artists such as Georgette Chen, Hamidah Suhaimi, Liu Siat Mui, Norma Abbas, Eng Hwee Chu and Silvia Lee had contributed to the development of women art in Malaysia. Although there are several publications, research, studies as well as exhibitions made about the study of women art, this issue to why women artists in Malaysia are under appreciated still remains intact.

In today’s context, the term “woman” has always been a significant matter to both the male and female gender. The roles of a “woman” is oftentimes defined and governed by an individual perception to the subject. This understanding is again very much influenced by one’s personal experiences, mostly by the opposite gender. How then do women themselves in Malaysia portray the image of their own gender? Such case defines the search for an “identity” among women. In the art industry, any female artist, trained or untrained, amateur or professional, is always exposed to the act of revealing the hidden secrets within herself as well as her emotions, thoughts and feelings about her own personal life as a woman. This research explores how Malaysian women artist’s concerns have shifted from just having conventional roles to a postmodern feminist occupation in discussing about their own individual self, need for achievement, appreciation and true freedom to obtain their own unique identity. Though earlier Malaysian artists, scholars, curators and critics share a common interest in discussing individual identity, the paucity of researches done to testify postmodern feminist identity in new Malaysian artwork is limited. Contemporary women artworks in Malaysia have come to an extent whereby artists are more vocal and prominent in their style of creating a masterpiece. Comparatively, the Malaysian art scene has gone through a thorough and rapid development as well

¹⁴ Yuen Chee Ling, “Figura Wanita Dalam Karya Pelukis Wanita Malaysia”, (PhD diss., Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2007), v.

as a shift in voicing their opinions about the Malaysian cultural perspectives. In this century, many new and uprising artists have been flooding the market, rising beyond horizons, seeking to exhibit their artworks.

As globalization emerges, the Malaysian culture is being enlightened, creating new issues and perspectives which link to the questioning and reasoning of the meaning of identity especially among the younger generation. Many youths of the younger generation start experiencing a new quest of sexuality which eventually leads to mismatched identity. As Quayum suggests:

“...by helping to open up culture, modernization should create a more congenial atmosphere for literature, ironically though, it does more harm than good”.¹⁵

Truly, the subjects as reflected in many contemporary artworks especially the ones by women artists are submerged in their own perceptions and behaviour that lead to confusion and clashes within the notion of the self. This eventually leads to the fragmentation of their identity.

The subjects in the selected artwork by various women artists from 2000 to 2015 testify the perspectives of contemporary society. Men and women no longer abide to the rules of following traditional conventions to define their own identity as a spouse or partner, or rather as a person, but instead seek to survive the consciousness and self-expression of their own identity. It should be noted that although the identity of society in postmodern Malaysia has evolved, it does not mean that each individual no longer possess his or her own senses. They still do, only in the sense whereby they practice their freedom to express homosexuality, ignoring taboos, switching from patriarchal control to female subjectivity and so on. Such formation of society does not actually transgress the breaking of moral values in a society but rather embodies the whole idea of a postmodern world. Indeed by

¹⁵ Mohammad A. Quayum, *One Sky Many Horizons :Studies in Malaysian Literature in English*. (Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2007) 26.

paying attention to the works of the selected women artists, it can be inferred that the artworks do portray to a certain degree a detachment from the usual trends and cultures in Malaysia. Although this may be true, the possibility that such fragmentation of the individual's self and identity can be considered as applicable to the postmodern Malaysia.

1.1 Aim and Objectives To The Study

The aim of this research is to analyse the course of Malaysian women's artworks and performances throughout the years of having undergone change, focusing on identity between years 2000 to 2015. Identity in contemporary Malaysia is a complex issue especially among the younger generation and this is often conveyed in contemporary writing which reflects the artist's tendency to be more individualistic. This thesis intends to look at this multilayered and often confounding process of women's identity. It seeks to show why the women's movement in Malaysia is somehow unable to fully play a key role in establishing the identity among women. It is in this context that the researcher will review some of the more important perspectives on postmodern feminism elsewhere before drawing in the Malaysian experience as a basis for rethinking the issue. Many emerging women artists and critics have created artwork not for the visual enjoyment of a particular audience but rather to question the political and social norms of society about what the female identity is all about. This whole idea revolves around the issue of putting an end to oppression. Nevertheless, in the twenty first century, women artists no longer suffer from the means of being oppressed by the male gender but rather they (women) now possess a voice to express themselves in a vital manner due to change in the contemporary society. Many women now seek to discover who they really are in the social hierarchy. Are they equal to men? Is there such thing as the freedom of

expression? Are they still bound to traditional customs and belief systems? Why then are there still women who are being objectified as instruments of pleasure to men if society has really changed? What then does it really mean to be a woman? These are among the few questions involved.

- One objective of this research is to understand the rationale behind the identity of the women subjects represented in each of the artist's works.
- On the other hand, it also tries to revisit the depiction of identity among women today through the formal images and themes by selected women artists.

1.1.1 Research Gap

This study was initially undertaken because to date, no study in relation to the postmodern feminist identity has been carried out on the selected artists and their works. While previous studies have addressed the link between identity and feminism art in the Malaysian context, this issue can be further explored, especially from the postmodern feminist perspective. Past writers and researchers had analysed and discussed the issue of the Malaysian female identity as whole in their works. Unfortunately, it is noticed that writers focused a lot more on earlier Malaysian artwork, which talked a lot about culture, beliefs, traditions, and religion in creating the identity as a female Malaysian.

1.2 Research Questions

- What were the factors that led to the representation of the depiction of identity of each woman subject in the works of the artists?
- How does the formal images and themes projected in the Malaysian women artist's works represent women's identity?

1.3 Conceptual Framework

Judith Butler questions the understanding that certain gendered behaviours or what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity are natural styles and forms which illustrates the manner that an individual's cognitive performance of gendered behavior is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality. Butler stresses on "a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts"¹⁶. In other words, Butler seeks to question the extent to which one can assume that a particular individual is said to define him or herself, wondering to what extent our actions are determined for us by our place within language and convention. Butler herself was very much influenced by the postmodern and poststructuralist usage of the term "subject" rather than an "individual". She observes that one cannot simply assume that there is a form a stable influence that enables us to perform various roles in a lifespan but rather, the very act of performing gender is the thing that defines and constitutes who we are. As such, Butler claims:

"In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief".¹⁷

¹⁶ Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue Ellen Case. (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1990): 273-278 .

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

NOTE 4: During my experience as a Literature student in my Bachelors Degree program, I was introduced to the power of Literature writings and Art in shaping the identities of Malaysians upon achieving Independence. The birth of local women writers and artists played an apt role in providing an individual voice for Malaysian women in the background of Malaysia's constant struggle to define women's identities –knowing that women back then were taught to be an honourable mother, wife and daughter. The common strive to build a shared identity among Malaysian women has been a constant dilemma among politicians and even within the Malaysian society itself. While the concern during those days was about establishing a foreground to what it means to be a Malaysian, such entity of the previous nation-building concept is somewhat evolving towards a more individual and focused group of people today, moving forward from stereotyping, homogeneity and conformation towards patriarchy. The Malaysian women today, per se, are as significant as men as we can see that many women hold high positions in the marketplaces compared to how it was back then. While I strongly

This leads to the discussion about identity in which identity itself is an illusion that is subconsciously created by our own performances. This influence mentioned here is a sort of punishment or authorization imposed upon us as well as taboo systems in which we are all forced into it. What Butler means here about gender being performative is that the idea of gender is forever ingrained within the act of description. For instance, once a doctor or nurse declares in a labour room “It’s a girl/boy!” they are not speaking on behalf of what they see, they are already actually assigning a gender to a body that may not have any existence beforehand outside this discourse. The statement “It’s a girl/boy!” is performative. Thus, this leads to the extent of naming the child “girl” or “boy”, “male” or “female”, initiating that this act is a symbolic form of power, governing and enacting femininity or masculinity. One obvious consequence of such forced enforcements is apparently the creation of that which cannot be articulated.

The theoretical documentation of postmodern feminist art practice with regards to identity in Malaysia had not been a famous issue to discuss about, at least until very recently. I have initiated this particular research based on personal experience as a Literature student at Universiti Sains Malaysia during 2011 to 2015. This research is an ongoing response towards art and its discourse towards more philosophical concerns and the initiation of contemporary miniature art movements. Thus, besides simply validating a rationale behind why the matter of identity has become a topic especially among artists, this thesis will also look into the various conditions that tilted Malaysian women art practice towards such concern.

The research explores the relation between male and female equality as

believe that the cultural essence has shaped the identities of women in Malaysia, there are other factors, both internal and external, which has contributed to the overall concern of women’s identities today.

offered by the postmodern feminist theory within the context of Malaysia's social and political environment in order to justify its hypothesis. For the purpose of this research, the researcher will draw upon Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity. While this research attempts to comprehend the reason behind the ongoing question about identity among women in Malaysia as depicted through the selected artworks, this research seeks to understanding the rationale behind what brings about the idea of identity in this twenty first century.

The framework is based on the influence of postmodern feminism. Postmodern feminism is an art historical methodology that merges postmodern and post-structuralism, moving beyond the borders of liberal and radical feminism believed to have begun and developed during the 1980s¹⁸. In general, individuals who embrace this term may be against feminism overall because they have a sense that it does not related to society today. Moving on from the traditional understanding of feminism, women were thought to have equality. Postmodern feminist individuals agree that feminism was in fact a good deed to society where it first helped women to receive the rights they deserved nevertheless, in today's context, such notion is no longer applicable¹⁹. The general view in the postmodern feminist theory is that problems in society surface today as effect of an overall position that involves both men and women alike. The contextual approach deals with artworks in the social, religious, political and economic context of selected women's art Malaysia in which they were conceived. This research is an effort to understand the change in Malaysian women's art practices, using selected artworks from 2000 to 2015 as a context and make an effort to determine the factors that facilitated such changes.

¹⁸ Jane L. Parpart, "A Postmodern Feminist Critique," *Who is the 'Other'?: A Postmodern Feminist Critique of Women and Development Theory and Practice* 24, no.3 (1993): 452-455, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7660.1993.tb00492.x

¹⁹ Ibid.

Butler further argues, "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed."²⁰ To Butler, gender is an objective natural thing that does not even exist. A person's gender is not tied to the physical traits of a person but is confined, separated and defined by social construction, therefore it is prone to change "because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis"²¹ She further states that a person's body becomes its gender and finally comes to conclusion about its true self through a collection of acts which are revised, consolidated and renewed through time. Butler strives to attack the assumption that normative heterosexuality forces individuals to confirm to heterosexual standards for identity.

Having said this, the occurrence of Butler's nature of gender has provoked many doubts and stirred debates among feminists, sociologists, philosophers and theorists alike who are concerned over Butler's construction of the meaning of "performativity". Seyla Benhabib, a political thinker, wrote in response to Butler's ideas in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* that the "death of the subject" will solely cause self-incoherence. Benhabib discusses that should there be no gender identity behind the expressions of genders then how can a woman amend her "expressions" by that she is constituted? Benhabib comments:

“..we are now asked to believe that there is no self behind the mask. Given how fragile and tenuous women's sense of selfhood is in many cases, how much of a hit and miss affair their struggles for autonomy are, this reduction of

²⁰ Ibid., 278.

²¹ Ibid., 273.

female agency to “a doing without the doer” at best appears to me to be making a virtue out of necessity.”²²

With reference to what has been mentioned, one can actually say that Butler’s proposition of what constructs identity is somewhat characterized by negative surroundings suggesting a context of loss, inferiority and inevitable law imposed upon gender. Nevertheless, the reason why Butler’s claims seem to have a harder place to be rooted in the Malaysian context and is faulty in the sense of the local setting is because of how society works. There are sets of shared values and cultural beliefs that collectively define the Malaysian identity. A Malaysian woman’s behaviour towards who she is for instance seemingly conforms to the acceptance of their (women’s) own condition, passed down from one generation to another and is motivated by the synching of one’s place in society. The attempt to demystify gender and women’s identity using this theory in Malaysia does not involve a battle between gender, the self and how an individual performs. It involves a larger war between the self and the larger essence of culture, value and religion. Again, this notion is difficult to refute as in Malaysia’s setting, the collective set of shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes which operates and acts as a unifying force within society, all in all, constitutes the human essence to express and analyse their identities. The removal of such entities will result in even greater conflict within the notion of identity. Such interventions will dilute the essence of what makes an authentic Malaysian woman a Malaysian woman that of course is made up of her own uniqueness. Butler’s focus on abstraction instead of structure attenuates the stance of identity when all these while this issue have been discussed widely. Instead of

²² Benhabib, Seyla, et.al. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. (London: Routledge, 1995), 22.

creating a solution and a proper definition of it, Butler's ideas may lead to a mass of unredeemable discussion because of its lack of clear distinguishment and its focus on individual performativity. Geoff Boucher comments:

“She (Butler) locates the central dynamic of contestation in the vicissitudes of hegemonic norms in the “psychic life of power” within an individual, her theory remains confined to the perspective of the isolated individual either resisting their subjectification or confronting their oppressor.”²³

Butler's ethics contradicts a significant element of her politics, without, however, arriving at a more satisfactory position. Albeit to this problem is the ongoing focus of Butler's questioning of the formation of identity, which focuses solely on an individual rather than an entire culture as a whole as in the case of Malaysia. Also, during the interview conducted by the researcher with the selected artists, there were common outstanding factors which defined women's identities that were raised by the artists. These factors very much revolved around the space of value, cultural and religious factors. Which is why, the final chapter of this thesis will discuss Butler's concept that challenges the flawlessness of what defines identity and aims to justify the hypothesis it puts forward that an artistic discourse is not a process inspired by divine to be judged on its own formal qualities alone.

With regard to Butler's works that have been discussed above, the researcher would like to explain how this research differs from Butler's sets of ideas. While her works have suggested concepts about demystifying gender and so on, this research will look into the artistic practices which is a complex response to many other surrounding factors that affect artists in a society to raise concerns about identity that plays a significant role in defining women's identities in the Malaysian context. Butler's concepts and ideas are apparently generalized in a way which perhaps can be more suitably applied to Western beliefs where society can freely practice the

²³ Geoff Boucher, “The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler,” *Parrhesia*, no. 1 (2006)

notion of bisexuality, heterosexuality, transgenderism and what not. However in the Eastern context where culture, respect and value is highly emphasised and embraced, such context may not be applicable locally due to existing factors. Based on the data collected by the researcher through direct interviews, although the artists had raised concerns about their identities in a way which seems to coincide with Butler's ideas, nevertheless, they (the artists) do portray a sort of inability to detach from their local roots of what makes them Malaysian. As a matter of fact, while Butler's works emphasises more on gender matters, how it relates to the shaping of identity and how it ought to be eradicated, this thesis will investigate how other existing factors have shaped and affected women's identities in a more local Malaysian context. This thesis seeks to also point out if Butler's concerns and concept can be applied locally in Malaysia as a whole.

1.4 Research Method

The research method employed here in this thesis is a qualitative analysis applied to the selected artworks displayed by twenty first century local women artists who had exhibited their artworks from the year 2000 to 2015 such as Sophia Kamal, Yante Ismail, Shia Yih Ying, Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, Aisyah Binti Baharuddin, Chong Ai Lei and Mislina Mustaffa. The qualitative analysis is conducted based on primary data through direct interviews with the artists and secondary data such as academic sources, journal articles, books, web pages and primary data in the form of in-depth interviews with the artists. This approach is applied in this research to derive the factors which surrounds and affects how these selected artists define their identities. It is also used to indicate the similarities in the questions and struggles that these artists face in search of who they are. This research is based on a purposive

sampling technique where the researcher selected the eight artists because up to date, there is a limited source of written resources and discussion about the selected artists and to focus on particular characteristics of postmodern feminist which is the main interest of this thesis. To maintain the effectiveness of this study, the researcher has decided to focus on artists who had produced their work from 2000 to 2015 upon identifying similarities in their techniques as well as imagery usage in their works.

A qualitative analysis was done on these few selected works because it is a feature of qualitative research that enables the researcher to analyse the characters and issues in relation to the artworks in greater depth. A qualitative analysis enables the researcher to analyse the characters' responses to gain insight into their cultures, behaviour, issues and attitudes.²⁴ A textual analysis based on library research, extraction from art catalogues, newspaper articles as well as magazine write ups on the following artists will be done and applied to the selected artworks by these local women artists. On this basis of having a textual analysis, the life, politics, the social context of the artist's works, philosophical musings, cultural relevance, the significance of the setting of the artworks and performances, it's narrative voice, imagery and symbolism of the artworks and performances by the artists were being analysed. The artworks and performances are also analysed based on its formal qualities to reveal the hidden narrative meaning, symbolism as well as its metaphorical representations which connotes identity.

Besides this, the researcher has also decided to make some observations via video recordings on the performances by Mislina Mustafa, Aisyah Baharuddin and Sharon Chin on their artworks. The researcher will be sourcing out the videos by searching through online resources such as YouTube or Vimeo. Such methodology is

²⁴ David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* (3rd. edition) London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2010) 44.

carried out because some performances have been performed in the past years and have not been restaged. Other than that, a soft copy of the video will enable the researcher to look closely and replay the details of the performances.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with open format questions. Each session consisted of 30 minutes to one hour. It started with a brief introduction to the subject. In order to further document and to enable a deeper analysis of the subject, the artists were asked to revisit and talk about their experiences and identity being a woman in Malaysia and were inquired later if they think the current situation, changes and policies undergone by Malaysia has caused them to respond differently and given greater dimensions to their works. The artists were then requested to analyse their current works and why they had chosen to create such works. The open-ended questions were aimed and constructed to provide a conclusion regarding a clear and defined explanation of the identity of women in Malaysia today. The reason why the researcher has decided on a more descriptive or narrative approach in this thesis is to help describe and comprehend the indication of identity by the selected artists. Since a descriptive analysis would provide better understanding to what the artists has to say about identity, this approach will help provide a better platform to discuss and analyse the features and patterns of the artworks. A descriptive analysis in the case of this thesis will help provide a general explanation to a wider range of experience in this case.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

1. The research will explore eight Malaysian women artist's works conceived in between 2000 to 2015 that includes both visual arts and performance art. The research explores the art based on the responses of the selected artists towards

current postmodern feminist trends and ideas in the context of identity. This research would take into account the allegories, symbols, techniques and images that these selected artists are using to define their identities.

2. The research will also explore and connect the factors that led these selected artists to create a new identity which in general reflects the common concern of Malaysian women within this century.

The researcher created an analysis to undermine what lies within the thought of eight selected contemporary artists and performance artists from the year 2000 to 2015 which comprises of Sophia Kamal, Yante Ismail, Shia Yih Ying, Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin, Aisyah Baharuddin, Chong Ai Lei and Mislina Mustaffa using a postmodern feminist perspective in their quest for identity. The aspects of which the research looked into were the common indications of identity in their artworks and performances through the use of metaphorical representations of the female body, the women subjects as well as the use of common surrounding formal qualities and indications which evolves around women. The researcher needs to clarify that these eight women artists were selected from more private exhibitions within the time frame of 2000 to 2015 instead of public exhibitions from The National Art Gallery or other public collections was because of the availability of the selected artist's works that are framed by their questioning of identity which is also accessible to the researcher. These selected artists have also been active in the art scene within 2000 to 2015 thus, their school of thought, reasoning, experience and ideas about the topic may relate to the local context in a clearer manner. In relation to this, there have been no private collections in public sectors which exhibits artworks that display or reflect such matters addressed in this thesis. The researcher has also decided not to include any male respondents as part of this research to protect the authenticity of the female

school of thought and also to provide a clearer voice for the women in the discussion of the matter. In this study, a postmodern feminist approach will be applied on the selected works related to the manifestation of the struggle within the inner thought of the female artists as well as the grapple between conforming to the traditional culture with the new generational thought and idea will eventually aim to explore the postmodern feminist way of life, thinking and contemporary culture in the highly urbanized Malaysia especially among Malaysian women. Such instances are done to discover the meaning and create and understanding of women figurative art in Malaysia. The knowledge of women art will establish a common ground among male and female artists to create a pathway for both genders to express themselves at the same time bridge the gap between genders for both parties to be able to freely discuss about social, economic, political, environmental and psychological responses altogether. The researcher will focus on the application of postmodern feminism in the Malaysian context to investigate the relation of identity in the twenty first century and how it has led to the establishment of women's identities.

This narrative study will also comprise of how each woman artist uses different styles, motions and techniques in observing their life experiences. The central argument of this thesis will establish works from 2000 to 2015, especially those which have been advanced that women art is an instrument to many artists and performance artists in redefining the concept of identity in which has shaped many women's consciousness in today's society. While seeking to analyse the modern portrayals and perceptions of the various artists in their artwork, a postmodern feminist perspective may best encapsulate the whole complexities involved. To view this collection of artwork based on the lens of postmodern feminism, it subtly illuminates a role that each individual artist portrayed possesses his or her own

subjective thoughts. The female identity is represented in a way whereby the individual is completely being detached from her own identity. As Malpas suggests:

“It is the subject who experiences, partakes in and reflects upon change, and the subject’s ability to retain a sense of identity in the face of the transformations produced by history is vital if there is to be any possibility of making sense of development and progress”.²⁵

One issue that clearly needs the researcher to justify is about why performance art by Mislina Mustaffa, Sharon Chin and Aisyah Baharuddin has been included in the study. From time to time, the evolvement of a work of art has been thoroughly addressed and seen as a continual development of the art industry worldwide. Artists are becoming bolder to bring in new ideas, merging media and trying out new styles. As this thesis will touch on the identity as a woman in particular, it is important to address the idea of performance art and also how it has helped women to successfully provide a voice to the idea of postmodern feminism in the artwork. While studies about performance art have been discussed, there are limited sources which examine the creation of a new feminine language, which focuses on the power of a female body. A small section in this research paper will be dedicated to identify and discuss the artworks and performances by Intan Rafiza, Sharon Chin and also Aisyah Baharuddin to evaluate how their performances and artwork have in fact contributed to the manifestation of their own identity as women artists as well as to address certain issues which seem to be the core factor that influences as well as affects the entire idea of being a woman in the twenty-first century. As a matter of fact, performance art often challenges the audience to consider in a new and unconventional way of art, breaking free from the usual conventions of traditional art and breaks down the idea of what art really is. It is important for the researcher to address performance arts as well especially in the study of women because

²⁵ Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern*. (New York: Routledge, 2005) 58.

performance art deals a lot with the notion of the “body” which is a deep concern, representation and debate among many women. Performance art is the live presence of the artist and the real actions of her body to create and present ephemeral art experiences to a particular audience.

There were certain challenges while attempting to analyse the artworks. This is especially when postmodern feminism is used as part of the analysis because postmodern feminism indicates strong personal opinions and biasness. Based on this theory as proposed by Butler, the multifariousness of oppressions faced by women cannot be comprehensively placed into a hierarchy. As a matter of fact, Butler believes that these oppressions cannot be ranked at all; and takes the easy way out by eradicating the idea of not only postmodernism, but also women in general. Such focus is emphasised on the matter of gender itself to generally imply it upon a wider scale of what society is experiencing can appear to be a one-sided viewpoint. It is crucial therefore, that the researcher eliminates any form of potential emotional and gender biasness from the research process for any valid analysis of the artworks. Due to potential biasness, there are certain data analysis methods that can be unsuitable for the methodology of this particular thesis. One method that has been considered for the purpose of this thesis is a direct interview regarding the works of the practicing artists. Nevertheless, such an approach will likely introduce the personal biasness of the artists into the given analysis. A limitation of the study is the relative imposition of the autobiographical style of painting and performance by certain artists that is rather personal in that manner. Whilst the findings of the research can be applied in general cases in the study of identity among twenty-first women artists in Malaysia, there are some significant exceptions. In particular, there are artists who have received their education overseas. Thus, this creates the question that the artists

may have been very much influenced and capsized by the Western culture which eventually leads to the fragmentation of their identity.

The question that arises is that “Can this sort of painting created by them be classified as Malaysian women art?” The researcher’s concern is that perhaps the artist has been very much influenced by the western culture so much so that he or she implies their culture into generalising the Malaysian culture and identity. As such, their life experiences and even the way each artist perceives her life can be different from another artist of a different race. For this reason, these findings cannot be generally implied to the larger community based on this study alone as not every person has been going through the same experiences in life. Any opinion and perspective may circle around personal biasness towards a particular subject.

Another limitation faced by the researcher is also the fact that there has been a lack of practicing Indian artists in the contemporary art scene. Which is why, this research had no Indian artists included. Besides this, there are also many other factors and postmodern feminist behaviours that may contribute to the identity of a Malaysian woman which the researcher has not chosen to discuss in this paper.

1.6 Background To The Study

The question about a woman’s experience in the real world is a constant debate that has no end to it. The discrimination of gender, the suppression of women’s rights, the conformity and oppression that each woman faces is relatively different. While the study of identity had always been about nation building in the past, its definition had undergone certain changes over the years. Before diving into a further discussion about women’s identity in Malaysia, it is significant to note that society has become more individualistic and each person has their own definition