

Article

“Redha tu Ikhlas”: The Social–Textual Significance of Islamic Virtue in Malay Forced Marriage Narratives

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Abstract: What accounts for the endurance of forced marriage (*kahwin paksa*) narratives in Malaysian public culture? How does one explain the ways popular fascination with forced marriage relate to assumptions about heteronormative institutions and practices? In a society where most who enter into marriages do so based on individual choice, the enduring popularity of forced marriage as a melodramatic trope in fictional love stories suggests an ambivalence about modernity and egalitarianism. This ambivalence is further excavated by illuminating the intertextual engagement by readers, publishers and booksellers of Malay romantic fiction with a mediated discourse on intimacy and cultural practices. This article finds that forced marriage in the intimate publics of Malay romance is delivered as a kind of melodramatic mode, a storytelling strategy to solve practical problems of experience. Intertextual narratives of pain and struggle cast light on ‘*redha*’ (submission to God’s will) and ‘*sabar*’ (patience), emotional virtues that are mobilised during personal hardship and the challenge of maintaining successful marital relations. I argue that ‘*redha*’ and ‘*sabar*’ serve as important linchpins for the reproduction of heteronormative institutions and wifely obedience (*taat*). This article also demonstrates the ways texts are interwoven in the narratives about gender roles, intimacy, and marital success (or lack thereof) and how they relate to the modes of romantic melodrama.



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1. Introduction: Putting Forced Marriage in Perspective

On the shelves of bookshops across the country and prime time evening television screens are fables told and retold about women trapped in unwanted marriages to handsome but cruel men. For the academic observer, the retelling of women’s suffering as romance, punctuated sometimes with comedic relief, raises questions about the structures of meaning, ideologies and capital behind media directed at women. Why do women, who would otherwise be highly educated, conservative yet aspirational about accessing the opportunities modern life has to offer, enjoy reading and writing popular romantic fiction about forced marriage (*kahwin paksa*)? A question that started as a puzzle would uncover a longer literary history that symbolically yoked women’s subordination to forced marriage. Since the inception of modern Malay literature, the fictional subject of forced marriage endures alongside the transformations of Malay society from largely under-educated agrarian to a literate, modernised populace. Female readers of romantic fiction in Malaysia who show enthusiasm and preference for tales of forced marriage (*kahwin paksa*) during a time when most women choose to enter companionate love marriages suggests a curious scenario that implicates the trajectory of marriage and modernity. Rather than a return to pre-modern marital arrangements and the ceding of agency and autonomy, a historical and contemporary fascination with forced marriage in a range of media texts as diverse as fiction and television dramas may in fact reveal something about the intensity of overlapping demands made on women’s roles in society and its transmutation into melodramatic stories. This article concerns middle-class Malay women across a wide age spectrum who

read, write, and publish Malay romantic fiction about forced marriage. Using texts from Malay literature and popular fiction, survey responses, and interviews, this article shows that their interest in stories about forced marriage is both social and literary, demonstrating the productive intertwinement of texts and emotion.

Defining ‘forced marriage’ requires problematising its status in relation to cross-cultural (mis)conceptions, religion, and individual choice. To begin with, control and consent over entry and exit from marriage determine the defining contours of forced marriage. However, the practice is, rightly and wrongly, emplaced in a grey area that sometimes overlaps with underage marriage and arranged marriage. For the purpose of this article, forced marriage is seen as the condition which precisely falls between these forms of marriages, and as a union in which individual agency may be compromised by the perception of a greater cultural or religious good. The foregoing defining terms are unequivocal, however, that the practice of forced marriage violates the basic human right to the free and consensual choice of one’s spouse (Gangoli et al. 2012).

Both feminist and human rights perspectives on forced marriage as a form of violence against women hinge on the suppression of consent. However, as feminist scholars have long argued, consent in marriage in many cultures is much less straightforward even in the best of times (Anitha and Gill 2009). As long as they live in society and in relation to others, individuals are not completely autonomous or unencumbered by the constraints of gender, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status. Women face gendered pressures to marry, which include pregnancy, poverty, and social expectations in a patriarchal society where their identity is defined in relation to men and reproductive status. Under such pressures, degrees of consent under duress may still be interpreted as ‘choice’ and ‘agency’ (Anitha and Gill 2009).

Although forced marriage is firmly established as a form of abuse and violence against women, calls for the prevention and eradication of the practice can often descend into the stigmatisation and policing of Muslim communities (Razack 2004). The ‘cultural’ argument for ending forced marriage conceals women’s realities by reifying the association of the practice with certain cultural communities and can even portray victims as willing participants who are shackled to their cultural beliefs (Gangoli et al. 2012).

This article sheds light on other aspects that cultural arguments against forced marriage might conceal, namely the vocabulary and significance of ‘redha’ (pious surrender to God’s will) and ‘sabar’ (patience) in the ‘intimate publics’ of Malay romance. Intimate publics are where “all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience” (Berlant 2008, p. vii). There is no doubt that control and consent are more subtle in reality than the exaggerated drama of romantic fiction. However, an engagement with mediated discourse demonstrates the ways the meaning of ‘redha’ and ‘sabar’ decentres consent (*rela*) as a touchstone of women’s agency. Through the vocabulary of ‘redha’ and ‘sabar’, along with other associated virtues such as *ikhlas* (sincerity), readers and writers of romantic fiction mediate their own religiously-inflected understanding of agency, control and consent.

It may be difficult to fully establish the reasons why stories of forced marriage appeal to readers and writers. But perhaps the question of ‘why’ is a misdirection. Rather than pursuing a quixotic mission into the uncharted territories of individual pleasures deemed ‘incorrect’ and inadequately empowering, it may be more productive to unpick essentialist assumptions concerning intimacy and modernity, and how they may play out in marriage. A better answer may come from identifying the limitations of the ‘scripts’ used by scholars to describe modernity, agency and pious Muslim womanhood (Mahmood 2005).

There are two essentialist assumptions or dominant ‘scripts’ (Benack and Swan 2016) unpacked in this article: first, that educated women who enjoy the trappings of modernity would prefer companionate relationships that are based on equality rather than one that denies them agency. Second, romantic love in a marriage not only occurs within a binary, dyadic partnership but in its ‘ideal’ iteration, i.e., between consenting adults. Forced marriage as a narrative trope of romantic fantasy and an anomaly for most women in ‘real

life' runs against these assumptions about modernity and marriage. To circumvent these essentialist assumptions is to consider the role of *redha* and *sabar* as virtues that do the emotional work of reproducing the script of gender subjectivity and marriage.

In the scholarship on women and Muslim marriage, Qur'anic scripture (with the Surah an-Nisa¹ often playing an overdetermining influence) represents the primary textual reference for establishing the terms of conduct expected for husbands and wives. However, the emphasis on wifely obedience as the condition for being a good Muslim woman shifts in accordance with the vicissitudes of legal reforms and social changes sweeping society. In public discourse, the lexicon of emotions provides both recourse and reflection during moments of marital strife and stress. As I will demonstrate in this article, *redha* and *sabar* are interwoven into romantic narratives of forced marriage and the reader's personal narratives like an emotional anchor in a storm of suffering.

Forced marriage occupies a significant place in contemporary 'Malay romance', understood here as a mode of storytelling in popular textual, cinematic or televisual form in the Malay language. Although the mode developed from (male-dominated) modern Malay literature, its more recent iteration dovetails with the female-dominated preoccupation with the pursuit and tribulations of heterosexual romantic love. Its close association with melodrama (Gledhill 1992) lends itself well to the equally well-received film and television adaptations.

What does it mean for romantic stories of forced marriage and sexual violence to be so popular among women today? Does it suggest a universal appeal of oppressive fantasies? In a hypermodern and global Malaysia, where literacy rates are high and relatively few barriers to women's education and employment exist, could there be something much more complex that explains the allure of conservative patriarchal romance? Why do these stories flourish? Who is writing and reading them? Where are the points of contact between authors and readers that make these stories possible?

Didactic in orientation, intimacy and sexuality are strictly circumscribed in Malay romance and consciously in opposition to the permissiveness of western sexuality. Contrary to the sex-then-marriage trajectory in western romantic fiction (see Radway 1984; Modleski 2008), love and sexual intimacy in Malay romance occur after marriage, which means the stories often begin with marriage, coerced or otherwise, so that depictions of sexuality occur under *halal* (permissible) conditions (Izharuddin 2020).

Considering the importance of interpersonal relationships between participants of romantic fiction comprising readers, writers, publishers and booksellers, romance should be understood as more than a genre or text, but as a collaborative set of practices. As practices, romantic love stories are 'social texts' whose meaning and force are created interpersonally. It can be argued that narratives of romantic intimacy do not simply occupy the register of fantasy but also serve as instructive material for self-making, as Lauren Berlant writes succinctly:

[Readers wish to] experience versions of personal life that are made up by other people claiming to derive their stories from other women's real lives, and who knows? The consumers of "women's culture" do not always need its material to be true empirically—so much of it is marked as fantasy and expressed in extreme genres tending to hyperbole and grandiosity, which are forms of realism when social suffering is the a priori of experience. Berlant (2008, p. xi)

The contemporary Malay romance fiction industry and stories of forced marriage in particular play an ameliorative role by attending to the emotionally attenuating effects of wifely obedience. *Redha* and *sabar* counterbalance the pressures of wifely obedience in forced marriage and are held as emotional virtues in the face of suffering. Like melodrama, romantic love stories by women writers have to be understood as a kind of 'mode', a "strategy to solve practical problems of experience" (Zarzosa 2010, p. 237). As a mode that articulates what it means to suffer, it is also a mode that aims to ameliorate suffering to demonstrate "the efficiency of ideas" (Zarzosa 2010, p. 257). From a gendered perspective, Christine Gledhill echoes Zarzosa's definition of melodrama as a mode, but adds that

stories of “self-sacrifice and perseverance are ideologically translated as practical ways of dealing with a world that offers women very little and has a habit of disappointing expectation” (Gledhill 1992, p. 111).

This article is structured as follows; with a section that briefly outlines the methods used to carry out this study, followed by a discussion on wifely obedience in Islam and the emergence of emotions as the vocabulary for recourse, and a case study on the portrayal of forced marriage in contemporary Malay romance and the interweaving of *redha* and *sabar* as emotional virtues within fictional and personal narratives.

2. Material and Methods

Material for this article was collected over the course of three years between 2016 and 2019 through an online survey, focus group discussions, face-to-face and email informal in-depth interviews with readers, writers, editors, publishers and booksellers of Malay romantic fiction, and participant observation at annual bookfairs and bookshops in the urban centres of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was also important to have read a number of Malay-language contemporary novels popularly recommended by readers and stories on the self-publishing platform Wattpad to build trust with participants and as a means of gaining familiarity with the themes and conventions of the genre.

In the small preliminary online survey conducted with eighty-seven respondents in early 2016, nearly half the participants were between ages 21 and 25 years (44.5 percent), and about a third were still in tertiary education (65.5 percent). Most (32.2 percent) counted themselves as dedicated readers who finish on average more than eight romance novels a month. It was conducted to identify individual preferences in romantic fiction topics, themes and typology of protagonists, including questions about recurring plot devices in Malay novels such as forced marriage and domestic conflict. Significant were reader preferences for stories about contractual marriage (*kahwin kontrak*), forced marriage (*kahwin paksa*), and sharia-compliant/‘Islamic’ romantic love (*cinta halal/ Islamik*). The fact that these stories were notably popular among readers indicates the emergence of a subgenre within Malay fiction spurred by the bestselling if controversial 2002 novel about forced marriage and polygamy, *Ombak Rindu* (Waves of Longing), by the Malaysian author Fauziah Ashari.

Between 2017 and 2019, a series of focus group discussions was organised with readers who were separated by age and marital status: between ages 19 and 29 and with those aged 30 to 50 who were either married or divorced, and were parents, married and/or single. They were segregated into these groups to anticipate age-related media habits and thematic interests. Although the invitation to participate was not gender-specific, all focus group participants who attended the sessions identified as Malay Muslim women who wore the hijab and were committed readers of the Malay romantic fiction living in the Selangor and Kuala Lumpur area. In addition to the discussions with readers were interviews with five popular and emerging authors, several publishers, booksellers, editors, and individual readers of romance that took place in bookshops and bookfairs around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. They were asked about reader preferences for forced marriage narratives and the portrayal of sex and abuse within marriage in Malay fiction. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) and occasionally in English and audio-recorded with the participants’ permission. Their names have been changed for this article.

3. Obedient Women in Muslim Marriage

Anthropologists studying expressions of love in non-western societies have noted the influence of globalisation on romantic feelings and their cultural ‘authenticity’ (see Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Padilla et al. 2007). The preference for companionate marriages to the family arrangement of one’s spouse has become a mark of modernity in some of these societies. However, in this article, I find that the relationship between love and spouse selection is less than clear-cut and calls into question the modern preoccupation with ‘love

conquers all' to the exclusion of ambivalence about modernity itself and changing women's roles.

Studies on the transformative effect of global socioeconomic changes on women's roles within Muslim marriage reveal themes of tension, conflict and incoherence. As [Rinaldo \(2019\)](#) demonstrates in her research in Java, Indonesia, these tensions are ameliorated by gendered religious scripts of wifely obedience and her husband's authority. Changes in the cultural meanings and social practices surrounding Malay marriage, however, also reflect the transformations affecting gender relations. Women have been observed to be more assertive in decision-making not only in partner choice, but also in wedding preparations and even delaying marriage ([Ong 1990](#); [Tey 2007](#)).

Scholars observing the Southeast Asian region ([Peletz 2018](#); [Rinaldo 2019](#); [Mohamad 2011, 2020](#)) note that practices of contemporary Muslim marriage are in fact less receptive to the script of mutuality expected in modern marriage. One can say that Muslim marriage and the preservation of separate responsibilities between spouses are maintained in different iterations and meanings as a response as much as a bulwark to modernity.

Enhanced expressions of piety after decades of Islamic revivalism in Southeast Asia saw an increased importance of Islam as the language to justify gender hierarchies ([Rinaldo 2019](#)). The Islamic 'paradigm of maintenance–obedience' ([Peletz 2018](#)) has taken hold in Muslim societies in Southeast Asia alongside increased access to education and work opportunities for women outside the home. In Indonesia, where Muslim marriage laws are less institutionalised than Malaysia, calls for reining women in from possibly overstepping their bounds are reflected in the rising numbers of legal disputes that allege a woman's lack of obedience to her husband ([O'Shaughnessy 2009](#)).

More extreme expressions of Islamic obedience that run against the 'common' wisdom of modernity have raised global attention. In 2011, the Obedient Wives Club (Kelab Isteri Taat Suami), a small organisation² led by affluent professional Muslim Malaysian women with global headquarters around the world became notorious for taking the 'maintenance–obedience paradigm' to the very extreme. The club became infamous for its advice to Muslim wives to be sexually adept and perform like 'whores' in the bedroom to maintain their husband's interest ([Basarudin 2016](#); [Peletz 2018](#)). Unsurprisingly, the mission statement of the Obedient Wives Club drew outcry among feminist groups for reducing marital relationships to sexual transactions.

While the importance of romantic love is under-emphasised in Muslim marriage (see [Mohamad 2020](#)), the real glue to marital integrity is the respective roles and obligations of husband and wife. Resonant of patriarchal roles in any tradition, husbands are responsible for providing their spouses with enough food and shelter in return for sexual companionship. Failure to meet their respective responsibilities is not only a dereliction of religious obligations but can be sufficient grounds for annulment.

Being obedient is not just about playing the part of a good wife but is an expression of one's striving to be a pious Muslim ([Rinaldo 2019](#)). In the Malay Archipelago, the general script of wifely obedience even in situations of intense hardship has endured for as long as the oldest existing Malay texts can tell us, which is roughly 200 years, although the script is very likely to be much older insofar as it takes its cue from Islamic and Hindu scripture. Extant texts from the 19th century that delineate such expectations for married Muslim women were conceived through multiple influences that reflect the competing religious practices and political orientations of their time ([Hijjas 2013](#)).

Complicating the seemingly axiomatic dictum of gender hierarchies in marriage are the vicissitudes of Muslim family law. Muslim family law in Malaysia evolved from legislation for governing colonial subjects into a bureaucratised legislation that serves a nationalistic agenda of producing productive middle-class families ([Stivens 2006](#)). Although regarded as conservative and unfriendly towards women, Muslim family law in Malaysia prior to the 1980s once enjoyed praise for being relatively progressive, but later reforms overturned many rights and protections for women while bolstering men's privileges ([Othman et al. 2005](#); [Anwar 2008](#); [Mohamad 2011](#)). A Malaysian Muslim man

can unilaterally divorce his wife more easily, marry another without her consent, and claim their shared matrimonial assets to fund his family with another wife. The reversal of fortune attracted much international attention to a country where women see their greater freedoms and agency to be enjoyed in the public sphere that dramatically diminish in the intimate domains of marriage.

Perhaps in recognition of the emotional toll the reforms would have on women, female plaintiffs have been given more options from a menu of justifications to end their marriage (*fasakh*), including repeated acts of abuse by their husband. Other justifiable grounds for *fasakh* include coercion into immorality, unlawful disposal of her property, prevention from observing her religious obligations, and if the husband is polygamous, there is blatant favouritism towards his other spouse(s) (Peletz 2018, p. 664). Moreover, Peletz (2018) found that the reforms have in fact made syariah courts more accommodating to women's needs for legal support and demands for the restoration of their marital rights, and as a consequence more punitive towards errant husbands. For the syariah courts to take women's claims of emotional suffering much more seriously in recent decades indicates the increased significance of emotions as a site of recourse for women. The lack of specific reference to sexual violence or marital rape as grounds for divorce however continues to be a contested issue that pits Malaysian civil society against Islamic-minded lawmakers and clerics (Steiner 2019). As the next sections will show, the elusiveness of consent and marital rape as a punishable crime inform the moral worlds of Malay romance and understandings of intimacy in an unequal relationship.

If Peletz (2018) is right it is important to note that although women can initiate divorce proceedings much more 'easily' than their predecessors prior to the 1980s, they are not equal with men before the law. Rather, the reforms have simply minimised the punishing disadvantage women experience in marriage and divorce with the effect of being, at least inadvertently, more accommodating than in decades prior but nowhere near making women as privileged as men. Furthermore, the ostensibly 'female-friendly' avenues for recourse that syariah courts have adopted are enjoyed by "specific kinds of relations and specific kinds of selves that political and religious elites shaping Islamic family law and other state policies are willing to accommodate let alone promote and nurture" (Peletz 2018, p. 679). These "specific kinds of relations and specific kinds of selves" are of particular concern in this article and not the individuals who have chosen to abandon or 'disarticulate' from conservative heteronormative practices (Izharuddin 2018) or occupy non-normative subjectivities.

4. Decentring Consent: The Case of Malay Romance Fiction and Its Intimate Publics

Forced marriage was the subject of the first modern Malay novel. Published in 1925 and still in print today, *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi used romance to convey a political message of female emancipation and critique of repressive tradition. The titular character is forced into marrying her cousin, although she is already in love with another man but forbidden from marrying him. Faridah Hanum eventually rejects the man she is wedded to—to the shock and horror of audiences and religious authorities of the time. Inspired by the 19th century Egyptian Muslim reformist movement led by Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, Sheikh al-Hadi created his own version of the trailblazing New Woman. As a male creation, however, Faridah Hanum and the ideals she symbolised do not progress beyond the 'real' roles of educated women: that is, to educate her children. Urging women to pursue an education for its own sake and to be independent of men would have been unthinkable in the reformist male imagination then. There were boundaries that 'good' modern women were not meant to cross.

Modern female authorship in the Malay Peninsular did not arrive until 1934 with the publication of a short story also about forced marriage, titled '*Kesedihan Perkahwinan Paksa*' (The Grief of Forced Marriage), by Hafsa. Nearly one hundred years later, since the first modern Malay novel, forced marriage continues to be a romantic preoccupation, although this time penned by women with a different vision from Syed Sheikh al-Hadi. The trope

recaptured the public imagination in 2002 with the bestselling success of Fauziah Ashari's *Ombak Rindu* (Waves of Longing).

Ombak Rindu's uncommonly popular resonance, as seen in the various film, stage, and television adaptations in the subsequent years since its publication, redefined local popular fiction into a genre preoccupied mainly with romance. A commercial success, the novel's film adaptation was made on a MYR 1 million budget but earned MYR 10.9 million (USD 2.6 million) in box office sales. However, it is the novel's narrative crux that draws the most controversy. Like its progenitor, it is concerned with the turmoil of forced marriage. The protagonist, Izzah, a young woman from a village, falls victim to a wealthy man who sexually assaults her. She is coerced into marrying him before eventually learning to develop pious submission to God's will (*redha*). Her spiritual revelation provides her with the strength to forgive and fall in love with her aggressor who is transformed into a good man by her love. The story takes a melodramatic turn when *he* is forced to take another woman, Mila, as his second wife. After several more dramatic twists and turns involving a car accident, a coma and further distress for Izzah, Mila magnanimously requests a divorce to make way for the monogamous happiness of Izzah and her husband.

Malay romantic fiction publication in Malaysia since *Ombak Rindu* may seem preoccupied with women trapped in an abusive marriage, but as an industry, it is not monolithic in its storytelling output. Catering to a wide range of readers who are different in age, marital status, educational and regional background, the heterogeneity of the romantic fiction industry is reflected in the signature affective aesthetic of certain authors and the publishing companies they write with, of which are mostly small and independent. For example, readers of the popular novelist Siti Rosmizah are devoted to her emotionally 'heavy' and highly melodramatic storytelling style. Other readers, however, may eschew emotionally weighty fiction, defined as stories about women's suffering, claiming that they are 'too terrified' to open a sad novel fearing that they would be overcome by emotion and can never 'move on' from the character's narrative world.

Booksellers and publishers can often predict aesthetic preferences based on the reader's age. Contrary to the findings of the online survey I conducted, a sales executive of a local publishing company informed me that women over the age of 30 represent the majority of Malay romance readers. They are mostly women with children, civil servants, and housewives who prefer stories that are 'truer' to life, peppered with messages that life "isn't so easy or straightforward, that it must be an obstacle course." Younger readers like 'sillier', youthful romances similar to rom-coms, lighter in tone and feature female characters who are more independent. Readers 'beyond the age of 45' enjoy Islamically inflected material, stories that are more didactic and can teach them more about Islam.

In its positioning as different from the romance found in the paperback novels of Harlequin Mills & Boons, Malay romance fiction accommodates the script of wifely obedience to her husband's violent demands and the consequences that arise from the legality of marital rape in Malaysia (Steiner 2019). Romance novels construct moral worlds that permit sexuality only within the bounds of marriage but within which sexual violence is treated with more ambiguity. In this respect, publishers of Malay romance operate as both literary and moral gatekeepers. Speaking with publisher and bookshop owner Hamidah, she says she will not accept depictions of consensual sex before marriage from her authors. However, they can bring in marital rape into their stories provided that repentance and romantic feeling will eventually prevail. She states that readers want scenes of non-consensual sex and may understand them as the facts of intimacy and sexuality in an unequal relationship. Violence against women is not a cause for moral outrage if the heroine finds a path to acceptance, love and healing afterward. This is not to say that enthusiasts of Malay romance reject notions of consent. Rather, consent is less important than the guardrails of faith and piety during moments of great suffering.

5. Catharsis of Emotional Virtue

... *Redha tu ikhlas, pasrah tu menyerah* (Submission to God's will is an expression of sincerity, total surrender is defeat).

Ombak Rindu (2002) by Fauziah Ashari

Ombak Rindu and its subsequent adaptations tap into a collective reservoir of emotions that intertwine feelings of romantic intimacy, pain, and eventual pious acceptance. A quote from the novel that has gained much traction among fans, a life of its own so to speak, evinces agency in pious surrender and acceptance: "Submission to God's will is an expression of sincerity, total surrender is defeat." It occurs by the end of the story in a quiet conversation between two women caught in a love triangle, Izzah the rape survivor and her co-wife Mila. Mila utters the line in her decision to exit the polygamous marriage for the sake of Izzah's happiness and her recognition of their mutual suffering.

The line appears as an aphorism on personal blog posts, memes, and other fan-created posters as bearing a motivational message that 'after hardship there is ease,' which echoes the testimonies of American women readers who find comfort in romantic fiction (Radway 1984). *Redha* and *pasrah* are distinguished based on the experiential framing of personal struggle. A person who sees their personal struggle as a test from God embraces *redha* with sincerity (*ikhlas*) and patience (*sabar*). Both *ikhlas* and *sabar* are derived from the Arabic and imbued with other virtues of good Muslims like endurance, perseverance and purity (Haeri 2017), virtues that are freighted with affective labour. *Redha* involves occupying a place of acceptance in the face of great hardship. *Pasrah*, on the other hand, is an emotional surrender and the inability to find redemption in personal pain. That the quote above should resonate so much with audiences indicates the ways media texts can weave into personal narratives of piety and spiritual motivation. Rather than passive consumers of popular if not 'trashy' media content, Malay women possess 'tactical' media competencies that reveal a defensiveness of the status quo (Syed and Runnel 2014). Previous research also suggests that women are conscious of the social consequences of their reading practices particularly when texts of 'ill repute' like romantic fiction are concerned (Parameswaran 2002).

The intended emotional response from stories of forced marriage is not necessarily pleasure but catharsis. Zanariah, who is Hamidah's sister and co-owns their publishing company, evaluates the merit of a manuscript based on the number of times she has cried reading it. However, it was important, she stresses, for the stories her imprint publishes to end 'happily' for the heroine. For readers, writers, and publishers alike, there is an expectation that characters in such stories to go through a familiar narrative arc: coercion into marrying a man they dislike but eventually grows to love. The stories also follow an emotional arc from great anguish to happy resignation. They provide an emotional blueprint and melodramatic mode for managing personal crisis that can be applied in 'real life'.

Keen reader Murni best exemplifies the application of fiction to personal life. In a focus group discussion with three other participants, Murni explained that she sought out stories about forced marriage because she had been coerced into marriage herself. As a young woman, her mother had arranged, without her prior knowledge, for her to marry a male friend. Filial piety towards her mother, a recent widow, meant that Murni had little choice but to please her grieving parent. Furthermore, should she object to the marriage, she would bear the guilt of failing to fulfil her late father's wish for her to be married. However, whatever affection that developed begrudgingly during her marriage collapsed after his infidelity with other women followed by his attempt to sexually assault her sister. She said she had remained patient (*sabar*) when he was "fooling around with other women" but his attempted rape was for her the unforgivable grounds for divorce. Murni spoke about the emotional trauma when her marriage ended. In the succeeding years, she turned to Malay romantic fiction for solace and found identification with characters who survive the turmoil of forced marriage. As Murni retells her life narrative she asserts that Malay romance may not be 'real', but she finds fictional parallels nonetheless cathartic.

Malay romantic fiction echoes the Islamic maintenance–obedience paradigm but delivered in highly dramatic prose. Juliana, a fiction editor, argues that Malay romance novels are interpreted as guidebooks for courtship and marriage. She argues that, “in general, the idea of a marriage according to most romance novels is that wives need to please their husbands, no matter how badly they are treated, or how displeased they are by the behaviour of their husbands [who] cheat, [have a] bad temper [and neglectful].” The novels rarely offer divorce as a solution to troubled marriages, she states:

I cannot remember ever reading any recent [within the last 20 years] Malay language works about a woman who seeks the dissolution of her marriage after years of abuse or mistreatment. There could be some around, but I may have not come across any yet. There is plenty about women starting over after a failed or cancelled marriage but not the ones where the women are actively seeking a way out of unhappy marriages

The ideology of male protectionism in Muslim marriage is built into the narratives of forced marriage. Men step in to ‘protect’ women from *fitnah* (slander) and allegations of *khalwat* (illicit proximity) in melodramatic scenarios that leave them with ostensibly no choice but to marry. Although they may be trapped in a marriage with a woman they do not love, they will still claim their conjugal rights by force if necessary. Under these circumstances, Juliana says, *sabar* and *redha* operate as emotional linchpins to tolerate a husband’s abusive behaviour and he will eventually atone for his cruelty:

The belief that “*sabar* (remain patient) and you will be rewarded sweetly” is so strong among Malay women, which is probably because of religious belief, that every time they are mistreated, most of them would just remain patient and faithful to God, hoping that the significant other will change. In many romance novels, many husbands are shown to have repented, or punished for their evil deeds by being run over by a car or sent to prison (*sudah menerima balasan atas perbuatan keji mereka seperti kena langgar kereta atau masuk penjara*). It might not occur to [readers] that life does not work that way.

Redha and *sabar* may also be woven intertextually to ameliorate the disappointments of married life. If anything, the fantasy of romance and the reality of domestic intimacy overlap in the realm of what the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1979, 2012) calls emotion work, or the effort to manage one’s feelings in the spheres of domesticity and intimacy. Emotion work should be distinguished from emotional labour—which more correctly takes place in professional domains. Emotion work is the mental and psychological exertion of presenting a socially acceptable self and managing rage, disappointment, irritation and despair to fulfil one’s social role (see Jones (2004) for a related discussion on middle-class women’s emotion work and management of stress in Indonesia).

From the point of view of marketers and publishers who speak as readers themselves, avid readers read romance novels in pursuit of something that is missing or lost in their lives. The missing or lost element is typically love and romance. Lack of affection and emotional connection with their heterosexual partners is a common refrain. Married women read novels to fantasise about the ideal man who is very different from their own partners. For Hamidah, romance novels act like a mediator between desire and real life. Malay Muslim women face a great number of pressures, she states. Many will be financially independent before and during marriage but there is a lack of love and mutual affection and intimacy. Women are expected to maintain their looks after marriage but there is little incentive (both verbal and financial) for them to remain ‘beautiful’ long after marriage. As Hamidah informs me, they enjoy very little romantic intimacy because of professional and domestic pressures but more so because romantic intimacy usually disappears after they start having children, which is very soon after marriage.

6. Conclusions

Practices and spaces that cultivate the production and sharing of stories among women who seek the means for working through difficult emotions in their personal lives suggest the promiscuous overlapping and interweaving of fictive text and life narratives. As a set of practices, Malay romance demonstrates the power of modern popular literature to elevate and downplay the prism of the personal, allowing women to test the efficiency of ideas. Unhappy marriages and tolerated polygamy can be interpreted as a test from God and endured with stoicism, patience (*sabar*), pious submission (*redha*) or surrender (*pasrah*).

Several themes underpin the findings in this article. First, melodramatic narratives of forced marriage offer a cultural space for working through difficult emotions related to marital problems and domestic demands. Tales of love that eventually blossom following the trials of forced marriage are resolved with *redha*, that a woman's obedience is a pathway to ensuring the possibility of happiness for both husband and wife. Second, stories of forced marriage become a point of reflection that minimise the tensions between increased opportunities for women in the public sphere and the hierarchies maintained, at least rhetorically, in the domestic domain. By decentring consent and placing more emphasis on emotional virtues, the contested nature of forced marriage and marital rape are necessarily thrown into ambiguity.

Participants of romantic fiction perform what Elizabeth Bucar (2010) calls "creative conformity" in their accommodation of boundaries that separate women from men and the valorisation of women's roles as dependent on others, especially men. They take advantage of the contradictions that prevail at the intersection of neoliberal conservative Malay Muslim culture and Islamic consumer culture to find desire and solutions within female-oriented socialities. However, they also maintain clear moral boundaries that keep women in their place. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the overlapping systems of power and how women resist to some while accommodating and getting caught up in others.

When egalitarianism in public life poses a potential threat to traditional gender roles and their commitment to Islam, women may want to emphasise and even overcompensate the script of obedience and subordination. Without an emphasis on wifely obedience, egalitarianism is deemed destabilising and subversive to male domination and authority. Women may pursue other performative strategies that can be seen as allaying the possible threat to male privilege, such as dressing modestly and veiling in public (Kandiyoti 1988). However, it is marriage and a woman's responsibility for its interpersonal emotional equilibrium that become the site within which obedience and subordination are referred to as guiding principles—not that these are necessarily adhered to in the day-to-day realities of married life, as Rinaldo (2019) demonstrates. Rather, it is about expounding gender ideals and striving to comply with injunctions spelled out in the Qur'an. Thus, romantic stories about contemporary iterations of forced marriage function as cautionary scripts for women faced with religious obligations and demands of participating in modern public life.

In sum, women's emotion work lies at the foundation of writing and reading Malay romantic fiction. While it often goes unappreciated and uncompensated, the Malay romance industry taps and capitalises on it. Stories repurpose cultural ideas of women as emotional creatures responsible for managing the delicate balance of peace in the household. In turn, they become a social text and a mode for emotional solutions. As some women turn to romantic fiction as a resource for self-help and comfort, we have to consider the competing roles of popular and literary texts in everyday life. Put another way, textual romance can be an intervention into evolving ideas about marriage and modernity. As discussed above, popular narratives about forced marriage in particular engage the reader with ideas and ideals of what companionate marriage *should* look like, along with an attempt to come to terms with the threat of modernity and egalitarianism to traditional gender roles. They may not offer liberation and social justice that are seen to be consistent with western-style

feminism, but they are more efficient at providing the tools for emotion work, sanctified by Islamic virtue.

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Notes

- ¹ Surah 'an-Nisa' ('The Women') in the Qur'an contains passages on the rights and roles of husbands and wives, including a controversial reference to a husband's right to physically reprimand his wife who disobeys him.
- ² The Obedient Wives Club is connected to the business company Global Ikhwan that specialises in halal goods in keeping with prophetic traditions (Peletz 2018).

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