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The observer, writer, wife and mother

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THE past few weeks have been manic for Dr Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf. She's preparing for a trip to London to present a paper, as yet untitled, and she's busy promoting the book she co-wrote with a colleague, Dr Mohammad Abdul Quayum.

Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women's Writing In English, 1940s - 1990s has been receiving positive feedback from women academics and writers.

"The book started out as my PhD thesis," Faridah explained. "I did my best not to censor the writers because of the importance of the work, which consequently ended up being a very thick book!

"So my editors told me to edit it to a more manageable size, and I decided to work with Quayum. I knew of his work, we had met before and I was comfortable with him. He also delivers, which is important!"

But why work with a man?

"Feminism is not exclusive, women for women only. The real target audience is the men, and I wanted to see the book done, so I chose Quayum."

Faridah, who is also the head of the Islamic International University Malaysia's English Language and Literature Department, is tireless in her efforts to document Malaysian women writers and their work.

But what sets her apart from other academics completing their research is that she too is a writer, who has faced rejection, success, plateaus and all the challenges a writer faces.

"I started late. Writing is a luxury. It comes with or maybe after affluence. It has to do with time. For women to write persistently, they must be either women of leisure, unmarried, childless or have many maids!

"I find it fun but tiring! Stressful! It's no joke juggling my family, career and writing. You know that women writers tend to miscarry? Yet life as a writer goes on," she said.

She was irked by how people condemned some writings by women as low quality, and argued that with all that goes on in a woman's life, to have one book or even a short story published was a big accomplishment.

"That's why it's important to document these voices. The book was written for that purpose. That's the reason why women are supportive of this book: women's literary history is finally recorded."

As an observer of the Malaysian literary scene, Faridah said Malaysian writers, both in Bahasa Malaysia and English, were producing a body of work that was worth getting excited about.

"I can't speak for other vernacular writers but I suspect they are the same. After all, don't all Malaysians share the same food, weather and politicians?

"Works produced during the Mahathir era are excellent material for study and research on Malaysia and the region. We're in the thick of things politically and socially, and because of the urgency of the matter that must be put across, Malaysian writers say things as they are.

"There's healthy development going on with both the English and Malay writing worlds trying to bridge the gaps. Datuk Baha Zain, Raman of Silverfish (Books), they're all striving hard to build a link. But we need to go beyond this. We need to go over into the Chinese, Tamil or even Iban writing worlds as well.

But Faridah noted that while the Malay writing circle received a lot of funding and support, critics often went to the extreme and called Malay

writing boring and tailored to local politics.

"Me, I write in Bahasa Malaysia. My soul is Malay and souls don't lie."

On being a woman writer, Faridah said there had initially been some distrust from the predominantly male writing establishment.

"Maybe then I was still new to the scene, they were easily excited and hypersensitive to criticism. Plus the fact that whenever I criticised something, such as the portrayal of women on stage by one of the Malay writers, they would get personal.

"But this is phenomenally Malaysian. You can't criticise them without them attacking you at that personal level. People do not respond to criticism professionally here."

Besides her womanhood, religion has also proved to be a factor in Faridah's self-identity as a writer.

"My consciousness as a Muslim began as an undergraduate in New Zealand in the 1980s," she recalled.

"There was an Islamic revival everywhere - Khomeini in Iran, the Al Arqam movement here. I was never involved in such movements but I found their approach to religion and life humbling, simple.

"I later went to Britain and Australia and my pursuit of post-colonial studies helped me defend my need to have an identity I was comfortable with.

"As a Muslim in a non-Muslim country, I find people willing to listen more intently than here. They are attracted to different ideas, things whereas Malaysians want uniformity. The world has gone global, yet people are threatened by diversity and differences."

Faridah was also unhappy with what she saw as an unfair portrayal of Islam on the global stage, even though statistics showed that in countries such as the US, more and more people were converting and becoming Muslims.

"There needs to be a fairer portrayal of Islam. I blame Muslim writers for not asserting the good values of Islam in their writings. We keep getting replicas of Salman Rushdie and what have you.

"I truly don't see many Muslims pursuing this, for the sole reason that they are in other fields and industries like medicine and architecture. We need more Muslim writers for better understanding of the religion and Muslims globally."

The interview is over. Faridah has to rush back to Gombak where meetings with students and colleagues await her.

She's got a lot on her plate now. That paper for the London conference. A story to work on. Her daughter's schooling. Her husband.

"Some days, a woman's work is never done," she smiles wanly.

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