

BEYOND SUBMISSION AND REBELLION: ISLAMIC CONCEPTIONS OF FEMALE AGENCY IN *NIRNAMA: THE NAMELESS WARRIOR*

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Abstract: *Nirnama: The Nameless Warrior* (2023), the first instalment of Hilal Asyraf's *Nirnama* series and the only volume currently available in English translation, revisits the mythic landscapes of the Malay Nusantara by reimagining well-known legends and folktales through Islamic teachings and contemporary narrative sensibilities. In this retelling, familiar characters are endowed with renewed narrative depth, a voice of their own, and resolutions that reinterpret the meanings embedded in the original tales. Although the novel foregrounds the journey of its male warrior, the women who inhabit its narrative space invite closer critical attention to how they reshape the story's ethical and social dimensions. This study traces the transformation of one legendary female figure in the Malay folktales—from a character who is often stereotyped within traditional narratives, confined to modest and limited representations—to a figure who regains presence and articulation within this contemporary, male-authored text. The paper examines the revisioning of Cendana through an Islamic perspective, focusing on the interconnected themes of agency, identity, and social justice. As the central female figure in the narrative, Cendana offers a substantial site through which the novel negotiates questions of womanhood, faith, and moral responsibility. These questions guide the study: How is Cendana positioned within the narrative's moral universe, what forms of agency are expressed through her actions and decisions, and how does the novel reinterpret or negotiate conventional gender expectations within a framework informed by Islamic values? By situating this novel within broader discussions of contemporary Malaysian literature and Islamic ethical thought, this paper demonstrates how Hilal Asyraf reimagines female presence within legendary narratives and offers a deeper understanding of agency grounded in moral responsibility, spiritual consciousness, and ethical refinement.

Keywords: Female agency, Islamic principles, Malay folktale, *Nirnama*, *Takmilah*.

Introduction

Folktales are not merely imaginative narratives passed down through generations (Abdul Rahman, 2016); they are also cultural archives that preserve a society's values, fears, expectations, moral codes, and ideological structures. In Asian, Southeast Asian, or Malay contexts specifically, folktales remain highly relevant in the contemporary world because their themes and representations continue to influence today's generation. For example, *Puteri Gunung Ledang the Musical* (PGL The Musical), which will return to audiences in October 2026, continues the legacy of this iconic masterpiece and demonstrates the enduring cultural relevance of Malaysian folktales within popular culture. Adaptations in theater, film, and other media continuously reimagine traditional folktales for newer generations, allowing these narratives to survive beyond oral tradition while simultaneously reflecting evolving ideas of identity, gender, heritage, and national culture in modern Malaysia. Narratives such as these continue to reproduce and reinterpret archetypal images inherited from folklore traditions.

The depiction of women in the local myths, legends, or folktales links to traditions, religion, colonial history, cultural identity, and communal values. As cultural narratives that preserve and transmit social ideologies across generations, these folktales offer a significant and enduring site for literary and gender-based inquiry. The portrayal of women within such narratives shows how society historically constructs and regulates ideas of femininity, morality, authority, and social order. These narratives should not be interpreted solely as passive reproductions of patriarchal ideology. Folktales also function as contested spaces where women negotiate agency, resistance, intelligence, and survival within restrictive social structures. While certain female characters appear submissive or silenced on the surface, closer critical examination often reveals subtle forms of negotiation, resilience, and symbolic power. Women in Malay folktales have frequently been represented through recurring archetypes such as submissive daughters, exemplified in *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*; obedient or silent wives, as portrayed in the tale of *Pak Pandir* (Fang, 2013, p. 12); nurturing maternal figures, represented by Mak Labu in *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* (Ramlan et al., 2025); and physically attractive women, embodied by *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and the legend of Langkawi, *Mahsuri* (Osman, 2018). Such portrayals reflect broader patriarchal and societal expectations that position women primarily in relation to domesticity, emotional labour, beauty, and moral virtue. At the same time, the persistence and reinterpretation of these female archetypes across generations demonstrate how folklore continues to shape cultural understandings of gender, femininity, and womanhood within Malaysian society. However, the portrayal of women in folktales is not entirely passive or submissive. Beneath the surface of traditional narratives lies a more complex representation of female agency and resistance.

This study aims to analyse Hilal Asyraf's representation of one female character in *Nirnama: The Nameless Warrior* (2023). While the novel emphasises the journey of its male protagonist, the main female character, Cendana, needs a deeper critical examination of her influence on the story's ethical and societal aspects. To maintain the analytical focus of this study, other female characters are excluded from this discussion. Cendana, as the central focus of the study, is examined from an Islamic ethical standpoint, emphasising the interrelated issues of agency, identity, and moral conduct. Therefore, we propose the following research questions to guide our analysis: How is Cendana positioned within the narrative's moral universe? What forms of agency are expressed through her actions and decisions? How does the novel reinterpret or negotiate conventional gender expectations within a framework informed by Islamic values?

Literature Review

The following literature review examines existing scholarship on women's narratives in Malaysian folktales and the existing critical studies of Hilal Asyraf's works.

Women in Malaysian Folktales

Recent scholarship approaches Malaysian folktales not merely as sources of entertainment or moral instruction but as cultural texts through which psychological, ideological, and sociopolitical meanings are negotiated. Studies by Menon (2019), Osman (2020), and Ramlan et al. (2025) collectively demonstrate that female folkloric figures embody competing ideas about femininity, morality, identity, and power. Menon's (2019) Jungian analysis of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, for example, identifies archetypes such as the mother, shadow, and self, revealing how female characters embody psychological tensions and collective cultural anxieties. From a gender perspective, Ramlan et al. (2025) observe that women in Malay folktales are frequently associated with beauty, suffering, virtue, sacrifice, and monstrosity. These are the representations that both reflect and reinforce patriarchal constructions of femininity. Osman (2020), however, shows that contemporary adaptations may revise these inherited representations by reconstructing female figures as active agents who negotiate identity, resistance, and social expectations. Taken together, these studies establish Malaysian folklore as a contested space in which conventional gender expectations may either be reproduced or challenged. This tension is especially relevant to Hilal Asyraf's *Nirnama: The Nameless Warrior* (2023), which reimagines several female figures drawn from Malaysian history and folklore, including Cendana, Princess Santubong, and Princess Sejinjang. While Princess Gunung Ledang has received considerable critical attention and has been repeatedly adapted in Malaysian literature, theater, and film, these three figures remain comparatively underexamined in studies of contemporary literary adaptation.

Cendana, the novel's principal female character, bears the title Puteri Cahaya Bulan (Moonlight Princess). Originating from Pantai Cahaya Bulan in Kelantan, she travels along the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula for twelve moons and defeats renowned male warriors in her quest to become the greatest female warrior (Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 124). Her character appears to draw upon the cultural figure of Cik Siti Wan Kembang, the Kelantan ruler celebrated for her wisdom, beauty, leadership, and martial abilities (Raman, 2013). Existing discussions of Cik Siti Wan Kembang, however, emphasise her educational, moral, or symbolic significance. Yaacob (2021), for instance, examines folklore as a means of transmitting Malay values and wisdom. In contrast, Abdul Razak et al. (2014) consider how Malaysian women, including women associated with Kelantan, are represented as graceful and culturally symbolic figures. Although these studies illuminate the preservation of cultural memory, they offer limited consideration of how such representations negotiate femininity, authority, and martial power. Consequently, the transformation of the warrior queen into an idealised symbol of beauty and morality remains insufficiently interrogated. Scholarship on Puteri Santubong and Puteri Sejinjang has largely interpreted their legend through political symbolism, moral education, cultural preservation, and place identity (Daud & Subet, 2021; Erik, 2022; Tajuddin et al., 2018). Although these studies establish the legend's sociocultural significance, they tend to reduce the princesses to symbols of rivalry, moral conflict, or regional heritage, leaving their exercise of military, political, and organisational power insufficiently examined.

By contrast, Hilal Asyraf's adaptation foregrounds their leadership by portraying them as strategists who mobilise armies and prepare for war. For example, Princess Santubong in this novel organises the One-Hundred Warriors Competition, positioning her as an active political

and military leader rather than merely a jealous or morally flawed woman (Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 124). The representation of women as rulers and warriors is nevertheless consistent with the historical position of women in Southeast Asia. Reid (1988, pp. 639-642) notes that women governed significant trading states such as Pasai, Pegu, Japara, Jambi, and Solor between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. This history complicates assumptions that female authority in regional narratives is necessarily exceptional or transgressive. Instead, characters such as Cendana and Princess Santubong mentioned above may be situated within a longer Southeast Asian tradition in which women could be imagined as political leaders, warriors, and holders of public authority.

Studies of Puteri Gunung Ledang demonstrate the critical value of examining such adaptations through the lens of female agency. While Osman and Jalaluddin (2018) interpret her bridal demands as a critique of royal authority and male desire, Hassan and Ramlan (2023) show how contemporary adaptations reconstruct her as a woman capable of exercising autonomy and controlling her choices. Collectively, these studies establish that folkloric femininity is continually reshaped by changing ideological and cultural contexts. However, this critical attention remains concentrated on prominent figures such as Puteri Gunung Ledang, while less frequently studied women, including Cendana, Puteri Santubong and Puteri Sejinjang, are still discussed primarily as moral or cultural symbols. Moreover, previous scholarship tends to identify representations of women without examining how female agency develops across a sustained narrative journey. Addressing these limitations, the present study focuses on Cendana's mobility, martial identity, choices, and relationship with the protagonist.

Hilal Asyraf and Nirnama

Hilal Asyraf is a contemporary Malaysian writer whose fiction and nonfiction are strongly informed by Islamic ethical and spiritual perspectives. A graduate of Usul al-Din from Yarmouk University, Jordan, he has published novels, motivational works, and comics since 2009. He also established Hilal Asyraf Resources in 2016, through which he exercises greater control over the publication and dissemination of his works. This authorial and publishing background is relevant because it enables him to combine literary storytelling with his broader educational and religious objectives.

Nirnama: The Nameless Warrior is part of an expanding fictional universe that includes sequels, prequels, comics, and a forthcoming animated adaptation. Its movement across different media demonstrates the adaptability of Malaysian folklore-based narratives within contemporary popular culture and their capacity to reach younger and more diverse audiences. More importantly for the present study, *Nirnama* brings historical and folkloric figures into a contemporary narrative framework, thereby reworking established cultural meanings rather than merely reproducing traditional legends. Amran (2026) offers a scholarly analysis of *Nirnama*, examining its representation of Islam and Muslim identity, adaptation of Malay folklore, and reconstruction of the Malay hero. However, its emphasis on the novel's broader ideological framework and reconstruction of the Malay hero leaves the gendered dimensions of heroism largely unexplored. Other public discussions tend to emphasise his Islamic educational mission, popular appeal, or publishing achievements rather than the gender politics of his fictional narratives. Consequently, little attention has been paid to how *Nirnama* reimagines female folkloric figures or how its narrative structure constructs women's agency, authority, and mobility. By analysing Cendana's development, the present study contributes to scholarship on contemporary Malaysian literature and folkloric adaptation while demonstrating

how an Islamic-oriented popular novel negotiates gendered understandings of heroism and power.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The Theory of Takmilah (Combining Literature in English and Islamic Principles)

The selected text examined is in English translation, yet the theoretical framework employed in this study is grounded in Malay literary thought and criticism. The theory of *Takmilah* introduced by Shafie Abu Bakar (1996) is adopted in this study. This theory is developed based on the understanding that there is a need for a Malay literary theory that connects Malay literary texts with the Malay world, deviating from Western literary traditions that may not be entirely contextualised in the tradition and moral principles of Malay culture and belief. The use of *Takmilah* allows the study to approach this novel through a localised intellectual and cultural framework that is deeply rooted in Islamic philosophy, Malay aesthetics, and spiritual ethics, thereby preserving the novel's indigenous epistemological and cultural foundations despite its engagement with the English literary sphere. The use of a Malay-Islamic theoretical framework in this study resonates with Mahmood's (2005) argument, as both approaches recognise the limitations of imposing Western interpretative models onto texts grounded in non-Western cultural contexts. Furthermore, since most references on this theory and its scholarly discussions are written in Bahasa Melayu, translated versions are provided in the discussion to facilitate clearer understanding.

Despite its action-driven narrative, *Nirnama: The Nameless Warrior* (2023) consistently upholds important Islamic teachings through its emphasis on fundamental principles such as *aqidah* (creed), *iman* (faith), and *muraqabatullah* (consciousness and fear of God). These spiritual and divine connections resonate closely with the principles embedded within the theory of *Takmilah*. Grounded in the philosophy of *tauhid* (the oneness of God) and the pursuit of human perfection (*insan kamil*), *Takmilah* views literature not merely as an aesthetic product but as a medium for spiritual refinement, moral education, and the strengthening of the relationship between humans and Allah SWT (*habl min Allah*) as well as between humans and society (*habl min al-Nas*). Through its seven foundational principles, *Takmilah* emphasises that literary works should guide readers toward truth (*al-Haqq*), beauty (*al-Jamal*), and goodness (*al-Khayr*) while nurturing ethical consciousness and Islamic values.

According to Shafie Abu Bakar (1997):

“Islamic literature is a depiction distilled from the life of society and aims to provide education and guidance towards appreciating more comprehensive Islamic values.”

The theory is founded upon seven core principles: first, the principle of divinity characterised by *Kamal* (perfection); second, the principle of prophethood represented through the *insan Kamil* (perfect human being); third, the principle of Islam, which is *Akmal* (most complete and perfect); fourth, the principle of knowledge and literature, which is *Takamul* (perfecting); fifth, the principle of literature itself, which is aesthetic and possesses the quality of *Takmilah* (perfect and perfecting); sixth, the principle concerning the writer, who should strive towards self-perfection (*istikmal*); and finally, the principle concerning the audience, aimed at nurturing them towards becoming *insan kamil* (the perfected human being). This theory encompasses all dimensions of literature, beginning with the writer as the bearer of the meaning and message, followed by the process of constructing and developing the narrative through which the

message is conveyed, and finally, the reader, who serves as the recipient and interpreter of that message and meaning.

The Concept of Female Agency

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1999), conceptualises agency through performativity and the subversion of gender norms, suggesting that gender identities are continuously produced and potentially disrupted through repeated acts. Lois McNay (2000) further defines agency as “the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities” (p. 10). Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2005) challenges the limited interpretive framework of female agency that often fails to account for the experiences of religious women, arguing that agency should not be understood exclusively through acts of resistance or liberation but may also emerge through practices of faith, discipline, and voluntary adherence to religious values. Therefore, agency is the capacity of individuals to act within systems of power in ways that may challenge, interrupt, or transform existing norms and structures. In this study, we adhere to Mahmood’s approach, which defines agency as existing through obedience, faith, and religious practices, and Shafie’s *Takmilah*, in which agency may emerge through conscious spiritual discipline and the pursuit of ethical perfection. As such, the female agency that we aim to explore here does not necessarily mean resistance; it generally refers to the capacity to act meaningfully within social conditions.

Submission and rebellion are two themes that initially informed the critical inquiry into the portrayals of Cendana in this novel. Through examining the development of this character, it becomes clear that both concepts are closely embedded within her experiences and narrative trajectories. However, the novel reconstructs these themes in ways that challenge conventional understandings of agency. Rather than presenting rebellion solely as resistance against the dominant male patriarchy and submission as passive obedience, this study hypothesises that the novel deconstructs these binary assumptions by portraying female agency as a more complex and dynamic process shaped by faith, moral consciousness, and personal conviction. The social setting presented in the narrative may be understood through Burke’s (2012) observation of gender-traditional contexts that promote strict “gender relationships based on male headship and women’s submission” (p. 2). Furthermore, the novel itself has been described by some readers as “too preachy” (Hilal Asyraf, 2026), which may contribute to preconceived assumptions and potentially lead to biased interpretations of its female representations and ideological positions. Hence, to facilitate a more balanced reading, Burke’s four analytical categories of agency- resistance, empowerment, instrumental, and compliant agency are employed as interpretive tools alongside Shafie’s theory of *Takmilah*.

First, the resistance agency views women as active subjects who challenge, oppose, or modify dominant structures, institutions, or practices that constrain them. This agency draws heavily from classical feminist and post-structuralist thinkers, such as Butler (1999) and Simmel (1971). Burke (2012) explains that resistance agency assumes women are not passive recipients of religious or social doctrines but actively negotiate or oppose them (pp. 5-7). Secondly, the empowerment agency focuses on how women reinterpret religious teachings or social practices in ways that provide psychological strength, confidence, or emotional fulfillment. In simple terms, Burke (2012) finds women in this category, though “believing in their subordination to men, find some aspects of their religion to be empowering” (p. 7). The third category is instrumental agency, which assumes “women want to free themselves from patriarchal culture and stifling aspects of their lives” (p. 8). This approach focuses less on emotions and more on tangible benefits obtained through participation in religious structures. Women participate in

religious practices not solely because of spiritual belief but also because these practices provide them with practical or social benefits in everyday life (p. 9). Lastly, the compliant agency states that women may exercise agency through voluntary conformity and religious commitment rather than through resistance. This agency is particularly aligned with Mahmood's (2005, p. 115) approach, which challenged Western feminist assumptions that agency must involve autonomy or resistance. Instead, she argues that agency may emerge through practices of faith, discipline, and submission.

Methodology

Guided by close reading methodology, the analysis follows the subject through a linear narrative, identifying changes and transformations of the character from the beginning to the end. The reading begins with identifying the character's narrative functions, followed by a close examination of her actions, dialogues, relationships, and symbolic representations. Burke's categories of agency are then applied to identify the forms through which women negotiate power and social expectations. At the same time, the theory of *Takmilah* functions as the broader interpretive framework through which these actions are understood as processes of ethical and spiritual development. This layered reading enables Cendana to be examined not simply as a passive or resistant female figure but as a dynamic subject whose actions contribute toward the pursuit of *insan kamil*, or a perfect human being.

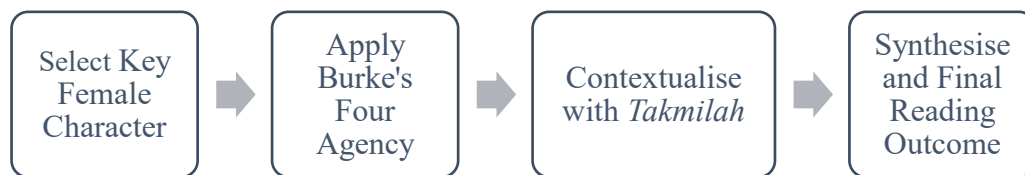


Diagram 1: The Systematic Process of Close Reading and Interpretation

Analysis and Discussion

Cendana appears in Chapter 3 within a setting that departs from the conventional portrayal of female characters in the Malay folktales. Rather than occupying domestic or passive spaces commonly associated with women, she is depicted travelling alone and encountered within a battlefield setting (Hilal Asyraf, 2023, pp. 58-77). This introduction immediately positions her outside traditional gender expectations and establishes her as an active figure whose presence is associated with mobility, independence, and martial strength. Cendana is a character whose portrayal closely reflects the bravery and martial prowess associated with Cik Siti Wan Kembang of Kelantan. However, the novel's retelling extends beyond merely reproducing this historical and folkloric figure by strengthening and reconfiguring her characterisation. While the author retains the conventional descriptions of her beauty— "*The voice belonged to a woman of stunning beauty*" (Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 85)—these attributes are reconstructed within an Islamic framework through the depiction of modesty and the embodiment of a Muslim woman's identity— "*Two hairpins adorned the scarf wrapped around her head. Her whole attire, worn slightly loose to veil her physical body, came with a layer of outerwear for protection*" (Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 85).

Cendana's clothing can be further understood through the Islamic concept of physical modesty. Boulanouar's (2006) examination of Muslim women's clothing provides a relevant framework for this study by explaining how women's dress reflects the Islamic principles of *haya'* (modesty) and appropriate bodily coverage. Rather than referring merely to fashion choices or

styles commercially labelled as Islamic clothing, modesty is closely associated with the concept of *awrah*. El-Guindi (1999, p. 12) defines this Arabic term as ‘involute vulnerability,’ referring to the parts of the body that must remain covered. This representation presents a contrast to the more conventional portrayals of Cik Siti Wan Kembang (Abdul Razak et al., 2014), which often foreground aesthetic beauty without emphasising religious identity. Therefore, Hilal Asyraf reshapes the figure into one that integrates physical strength, femininity, and Islamic identity. For women, the *awrah* generally encompasses the entire body except the face and hands when they are in public or in the presence of men outside their *mahram*—male relatives whom they are permanently prohibited from marrying (Al-Qaradawi, 1995, pp. 154–60). In this scene, Cendana’s attire indicates that she is situated in a public setting rather than a private space or in the presence of *mahram* family members and other Muslim women.

Her first battle with the protagonist, Nirnama, serves as an important entry point for examining her agency because it marks the earliest significant moment in the narrative where her actions, choices, and identity become visibly articulated through conflict.

“I aim to lead the best army to defeat Jagat the Holy, and for that reason, I’ve looked for and defeated many warriors, local champions, and town heroes alike! Yet in all my travels and after having defeated countless opponents, one stubborn question came up more and more. Want to know what that is?”

“‘Have you defeated Nirnama?’, ‘Did you fight Nirnama yet?’, ‘You still haven’t fought Nirnama, have you?’” Cendana recounted with clear disdain.

“That damn question kept coming back to me, not matter how many have fallen by my hand. It’s as if... my own power isn’t enough, never enough, and my own strength will go unacknowledged unless I defeat you.”

(Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 104)

The textual evidence above shows that Cendana enters the battle with considerable self-awareness. Her motivations to lead “*the best army*” immediately position her as a character with ambition, purpose, and leadership aspirations, qualities traditionally associated with male heroic figures. The act of travelling across regions and defeating “*warriors, local champions, and town heroes alike!*” further demonstrates her active participation in shaping her own destiny rather than remaining confined within conventional expectations of femininity. Through Burke’s framework, her actions demonstrate empowered agency. Her pursuit of martial excellence is not motivated by dependency upon male figures but emerges from her own aspirations and capabilities. Simultaneously, this passage reveals traces of resistance agency, particularly in her frustration toward the recurring question, “*Have you defeated Nirnama?*” Despite her achievements, she realises that her identity and accomplishments continue to be measured against a male figure. Her expression of disdain suggests dissatisfaction with a social structure that grants legitimacy to her strength only through male recognition. At the same time, this scene reveals a deeper psychological struggle. Cendana does not merely seek victory over Nirnama as an individual. Rather, she seeks acknowledgement of her own worth and authority. Her desire for recognition suggests an internal conflict between external validation and self-defined identity.

“We womenfolk will not be insulted or be imprisoned in our own homes and treated as nothing more than objects for men’s gratification!” declared Cendana, adamant in her beliefs. Her movements came to a halt.”

(Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 106)

This excerpt further reinforces Cendana’s desire for recognition and autonomy as she openly articulates her opposition to patriarchal structures that cast women as subordinate and objectified subjects. Her declaration in the passage reflects a direct challenge to social expectations that confine women within restrictive gender roles. Unlike her earlier frustration concerning external recognition through martial achievement, Cendana’s resistance here expands into a broader critique of gender relations and institutionalised male dominance. Through Burke’s (2012, p. 5) framework, this scene represents one of the clearest manifestations of resistance agency, where women actively challenge established norms and structures that constrain their identities and experiences. Her vocal rejection of practices that reduce women to passive objects demonstrates not only dissatisfaction with the existing social order but also a conscious attempt to redefine women’s position within it. The use of collective language through the pronoun “*we womenfolk*” is particularly significant, as it shifts her concerns beyond individual struggles and positions her as speaking on behalf of women as a broader social group.

From the perspective of *Takmilah*, this battle scene is a significant aspect of Cendana’s early stage of ethical and spiritual development. Although she possesses remarkable courage and confidence, her motivations appear closely tied to worldly recognition and personal validation. This is when the role of the male protagonist becomes particularly significant in this scene, as Nirnama’s response introduces an Islamic perspective on gender relations grounded in the teachings of the *Qur’an* and *Hadith*. His statement, “*Your spouses are garments for you, and you are garments for them,*” followed by “*Men and women each have their roles; we’re meant to complete each other, not overpower the other*” (Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 105), does not merely function as a rebuttal to Cendana’s frustrations but rather reframes the discussion. The use of the metaphor “garments” suggests protection, support, closeness, and interdependence between men and women. This moment reflects the principles of *Takmilah*, particularly in its emphasis on balance, ethical refinement, and the movement towards *insan kamil* (a perfect human being). The narrative does not dismiss Cendana’s earlier resistance towards oppressive treatment of women; instead, it is redirected toward a more holistic understanding of justice and human relationships grounded in *tauhid*. This narrative does not position women’s agency as opposition to men but rather presents agency as operating within a framework of mutual complementarity where both men and women contribute toward the pursuit of truth (*al-Haqq*), beauty (*Jamal*), and goodness (*al-Khayr*).

“Why not just, you know, take it off? Seems like such a hassle for you to fix it every time the wind blows,” asked Nadim. They boy held back from asking for quite a while, before giving in to his annoyance over it.

Cendana shook her head, a sweet smile etched across her face. “Well, both my father and mother raised me with the teachings of Islam. One of the religion’s most important rules is the covering of the *awrah*.” The womenfolk are only allowed to expose their face and palms.”

(Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 156)

In this scene, Cendana's response to Nadim's suggestion reveals an important dimension of her agency, expressed through religious commitment and self-discipline. When Nadim proposes that she remove her headscarf for practical reasons, Cendana refuses and explains her position with certainty. Her response conveys neither reluctance nor submission to external pressure; rather, it demonstrates a personal conviction grounded in her internalisation of Islamic teachings. The decision to maintain her headscarf despite the inconvenience suggests that her adherence to faith emerges from internalised belief rather than forced submission. This scene can be interpreted as compliant agency according to Burke's (2012) framework. Cendana's agency is expressed through voluntary adherence to religious principles rather than resistance against them. She does not negotiate or reject the practice of covering the *awrah* (parts of the body that are compulsory to be covered); instead, she consciously embraces it as part of her identity and moral worldview. Her statement highlights the significance of family upbringing and religious education in shaping her understanding of selfhood. This interpretation can be supported by Khan's (2024) study of Islamic education and children's identity formation, which found that early engagement with Islamic teachings can foster a strong Muslim identity and a sense of belonging to the Muslim community. Although Khan's educational context differs from Cendana's fictional circumstances, its findings help illuminate how her upbringing may have enabled her to internalise religious values and subsequently exercise agency through a self-determined commitment to them. From the perspective of *Takmilah*, this moment reflects a process of self-refinement and spiritual consciousness. Her submission is not portrayed as weakness or passivity but as an ethical act grounded in *tauhid* and obedience to divine teachings. The novel presents women's submission not as a loss of autonomy but as an intentional act of faith contributing toward the pursuit of human perfection (*insan kamil*).

Throughout her journey to establish herself as the most renowned female warrior, Cendana gradually reveals her identity and background to her male companions within the narrative. She is revealed to have originated from a royal lineage whose kingdom was destroyed by the primary antagonist, forcing her and her people to flee and seek refuge deep within the jungle. This traumatic experience becomes a defining factor that shapes her identity and influences the woman she eventually becomes in the novel. Her determination, resilience, and relentless pursuit of recognition are therefore not merely driven by personal ambition but are also rooted in the desire to reclaim what was lost. After her long journey in search of strength and recognition, Cendana finally returns to her hometown with the intention of persuading her people to join the ultimate battle against the villain, Jagat the Holy.

Cendana laughed and shook her head. "I embarked on a journey to prove myself."

"Prove yourself?" Queen Siti Banun asked.

"Aye," Cendana replied, casting her gaze around. She attempted to stare into each pair of eyes belonging to the men present. "For the prime warriors of Sekebun Serendah belittled your daughter's call to rise up and fight," she added.

All feel silent, their cowardice and feebleness hidden behind their eyes.

(Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 542)

This scene marks an important development in Cendana's character as her agency moves beyond personal ambition toward collective responsibility. It reveals a deeper motivation rooted in confronting the dismissal and marginalisation of her voice. The following scene strengthens this situation:

"Pardon me, my Princess, if at that time, I prioritised the safety of all of us over your Highness's will. *Panglima* Hamzah responded to Cendana.

"Aye, but you did also speak that I, being a woman would have a lesser chance of my call being heeded if I were a man," Cendana retorted.

"My Princess called for an assault on Indera Kayangan. It is no trifling duty. We need a resolute leader, but our present strength cannot even make a dent!" *Panglima* Hamzah defended his stance.

"Surely, the call could not come from a woman, could it?" Cendana teased with a smirk.

(Hilal Asyraf, 2023, p. 543)

This scene reveals that her initial desire to prove herself is not an individual pursuit of fame but also a response to social perceptions that undermine her authority as a woman. Through Burke's framework, this moment between Cendana and her people demonstrates resistance agency, as she openly challenges the assumptions and attitudes of the male warriors who refuse to acknowledge her capabilities. Her act, directly addressing the men and exposing their cowardice, represents an active challenge to established gender expectations and power relations. Cendana asserts her position and confronts those who question her legitimacy. Significantly, her gaze directed toward "*each pair of eyes belonging to the men present*" symbolically reinforces her refusal to remain invisible within a male-dominated environment. This scene reflects the principle of truth (*al-Haqq*), as she exposes moral weakness and calls attention to the responsibility of defending justice and protecting society. Her criticism of the men's cowardice is not portrayed as an attempt to establish female superiority over men, but rather as an ethical response to the failure of individuals to fulfil their responsibilities. Cendana asserts her agency toward the pursuit of human perfection.

If I were a man, there would be no doubt. But I cannot change my gender. Nevertheless, I have proved my worth. Sekebun Serendah is no longer alone. Through me, we have forged alliances with the Semutar Putih Kingdom and the Serawa Kingdom. We are not alone in our fight against Jagat," Cendana declared with conviction. She then turned to her mother.

Queen Siti Banun clasped Cendana's hands tightly, "My Princess..."

Cendana interjected with unflinching faith, "...*Bonda* (mother), there is no use in trying to persuade me. I will not change my mind. Whether these able men use their skills for the greater good and improve our situation, or your daughter goes alone to fight tyranny and bring honour to Sekebun Serendah."

(Hilal Asyraf, 2023, pp. 546-547)

This excerpt demonstrates an important development in Cendana's agency and reveals a shift in her motivations from personal recognition to collective responsibility. Her statement, "*If I were a man, there would be no doubt, But I cannot change my gender,*" reflects her awareness and acceptance of the gendered limitations imposed upon her by society. This open acknowledgment is not an act of defeat or submission to her limitation. Following that, she immediately redirects the discussion toward capability and achievement, stating, "*Nevertheless, I have proved my worth,*" suggesting that she refuses to allow social perceptions surrounding gender to define her value and authority. Once again, this reflects Burke's resistance agency, as Cendana actively challenges assumptions that legitimacy and leadership naturally belong to men. However, the scene simultaneously extends beyond simple resistance. Her emphasis on having established alliances with the Semutar Putih Kingdom and the Serawa Kingdom indicates a movement toward empowerment agency, where her actions no longer centre solely on individual validation but demonstrate leadership, strategic thinking, and the ability to mobilise support for collective purposes. Cendana's determination illustrates a gradual movement toward the pursuit of human perfection, where strength is no longer measured solely through martial prowess but through responsibility, sacrifice, and ethical consciousness. Thus, the novel reconstructs female agency not simply as rebellion against social structures but as a process of moral and spiritual development that contributes toward the *Takmilah* ideal of human perfection.

Conclusion

The analysis collectively demonstrates that Cendana's character undergoes a significant process of development in which female agency is continuously negotiated and reconstructed. Initially driven by the desire to establish her worth and gain recognition as a warrior, her journey gradually develops into a broader pursuit of justice, responsibility, and communal welfare. The novel presents that Cendana embodies multiple forms of agency, including resistance, empowerment, and compliant agency, depending on the circumstances and ethical challenges she encounters. Cendana openly challenges gender expectations and patriarchal assumptions that question women's authority and capabilities. However, her resistance is not portrayed as an act of rejecting men or dismantling social structures entirely. Instead, the narrative repositions resistance within an Islamic ethical framework where strength, leadership, and determination are inseparable from faith, moral consciousness, and responsibility. Her agency, therefore, moves beyond the conventional understanding that equates empowerment solely with rebellion and submission solely with passivity.

When interpreted through the Islamic framework, *Takmilah*, Cendana's actions reveal a gradual process of ethical and spiritual refinement. Her journey illustrates a gradual shift from individual pursuit towards moral purpose, reflecting the principles of *al-Haqq* (truth), *al-Khayr* (goodness), and the pursuit of *insan kamil* (the perfected human being). This contemporary portrayal and allusion to Cik Siti Wan Kembang provide an alternative view of this figure within the legendary narratives. Hilal Asyraf resurrects this legendary female figure as an individual capable of exercising agency through strong faith, leadership, and moral conviction. The narrative reinforces the understanding that Islam does not diminish women's contributions and participation within society. Indeed, Islam recognises their potential and actively positions them as meaningful agents in social, intellectual, and moral development.

Ultimately, *Nirnama: The Nameless Warrior* (2023) challenges binary assumptions between submission and rebellion by suggesting that agency within an Islamic framework may emerge through various forms such as resistance, ethical responsibility, spiritual awareness, and

conscious adherence to religious values. Through Cendana, Hilal Asyraf offers an alternative understanding of female agency grounded in *Takmilah*, where empowerment is achieved not through opposition alone but through the continuous process of self-refinement and moral development.

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