

## A TWO TALES OF SYAIRS: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN SYAIR SAUDAGAR BODOH AND SYAIR KHADAMUDDIN

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**Abstract:** *The Johor–Riau Kingdom flourished alongside the emergence of syair, a classical Malay poetic form that became a medium of entertainment and intellectual expression. Notably, women played a significant role in developing and popularising syair, contributing to its cultural prominence. This period also witnessed the rise of highly intellectual women, particularly those associated with the genealogy of Raja Ali Haji, a renowned literary figure in the Johor–Riau tradition. This paper aims to examine the characteristics of Malay women as portrayed in Syair Saudagar Bodoh (1861) by Raja Kalzum and Syair Khadamuddin (1927) by Raja Aisyah Sulaiman. These texts are selected due to the limited scholarly attention given to syair authored by women in academic discourse. Thus, this study seeks to address this gap. Using a descriptive-analytical method, the study examines both syairs through a socio-historical lens. Both syairs are utilised as primary sources. The original version of Syair Saudagar Bodoh is available in lithographic printing, while the transliteration of Syair Khadamuddin by Raja Hamzah Yunus is utilised. Furthermore, this study employs books and journals to support the concrete data. The findings reveal that these works contain elements of women's emancipation, particularly in the selection of spouses and the expected conduct of wives in maintaining household harmony. Religion functions as a guiding framework, preserving the eloquence and elegance associated with Malay women. Syair Saudagar Bodoh outlines the qualities men should consider when choosing a wife, while Syair Khadamuddin discusses women's behaviour in times of marital adversity and the virtues they should embody. Both texts portray women as independent, educated, and assertive in claiming their rights. These representations reflect the lived experiences of the authors, which suggest that women's emancipation was evident in the Johor–Riau Kingdom, distinguishing it from other Malay polities.*

**Keywords:** *Johor-Riau Kingdom, Raja Kalzum, Raja Aisyah Sulaiman, Malay Syair, Women Emancipation*

## Introduction

*Syair* is derived from the Arabic word “shi’ir,” which refers to poetry. The integration between Malay civilisation and Islam has resulted in a strong fusion that encompasses not only politics and administration but also literature. Syed Naquib Al-Attas emphasised his theory that the term ‘shi’r’, which originated from Arabic and influenced the origin of the Malay sha’ir, first arrived in the Malay Archipelago through Sufi literature. (Syed Naquib Al-Attas, 1968). He believed that Hamzah Fansuri was the first Malay man to successfully complete a work on Sufi literature (Syed Naquib Al-Attas, 1968). This is a logical perspective, given that the emergence of Arabs in the Malay world began in the sixteenth century and reached its peak in the seventeenth century (Freitag, 2009). Therefore, most *syair* written in the Malay Archipelago were highly influenced by Islamic elements and values. This argument is further strengthened when examining the two *syairs* in this paper.

Later, Abdul Malik, in his article “Tradisi Perpuisian Kepulauan Riau,” emphasised that poetry began to evolve in Riau Island in 1820. Roff noted that *syair* started to expand into various genres, such as romance, political, and social. It began to circulate throughout the province of Riau. Subsequently, *syair* became more inclusive of all social statuses, including peasants. Zakariya and Oktasari indicated that *syair* was the second most sought-after literary form within society. It became a popular culture form for four centuries, as it was printed to meet the growing demand. The pattern of *syair* tended to be more lenient due to its flexibility in discussing or critiquing relevant issues and contemporary events (Zakariya & Oktasari, 2017). Sa’eda Buang and Kartini Anwar asserted that *syair* can be used to sketch and record historical events, socio-cultural happenings, natural phenomena, and day-to-day occurrences as perceived through the lens of writers and their audience (Buang & Anwar, 2024). However, *syair* is often regarded as entertainment within society, particularly popular for being read aloud (Proudfoot, 2001).

Furthermore, *syair* reflects the attitudes of writers and readers towards rulers or religions in a subtle and non-violent approach. *Syair* can primarily be categorised into three genres, which are historical, fictional, and religious (Abu Hassan Sham, 1995). The rise of fictional *syair* was driven by popular demand, alongside religious and historical *syairs*. Most authors were from Riau dignitaries and royalties (Abu Hassan Sham, 1995). In Riau, the royalties and nobles had the capability to compose *syair*, as they had access to write and publish their works. According to Zakariya, Riau became the main stopover for religious scholars and pilgrims from the Middle East to the Malay world. Thus, the emergence of ulama shaped the culture of Riau’s royalty, establishing royal patronage for religious scholars and Islamic activities (Hafiz Zakariya, 2009). This strong legacy of religious activities fostered the production of great literary works. Interestingly, the princesses had the freedom to write and produce literary works. Prior to Islamisation, Malay literary culture clearly reflected the influence of Arab and Persian cultures. Roff mentioned that:

*“Malay has for long been one of the most important languages of Muslim culture. First Malacca, then Acheh in the heyday of the state’s dominion, with Palembang and later Riau as subsidiary centers, acted as a focus for the intellectual and religious life of a small and pious Malay educate class from whom, together with the ubiquitous itinerants from overseas, came an intermittent stream of manuscript translations of authoritative Arabics on doctrine, law, exegesis and commentary, Sufi mysticism, prayer and a rich popular-religious literature, independent of the Arabic”*(Roff, 1994:44)

Abu Hassan Sham stated that most of the writers were fluent in Arabic, and this consciousness inspired them to produce *syairs* similar to *One Thousand and One Nights*, using the Middle East as the setting (Abu Hassan Sham, 1995). This statement is further supported by Zaaba, who observed that many stories in the Arabian Nights were familiar and pleasing to the ears of Malays literate in Arabic. The stories were frequently repeated among friends, indicating that Arabian Nights was popular and well-received in Malay society during that period (Hussain, 1974). Mulayka Hijjas highlighted that the close connection to the Middle East is a significant aspect of identity for Penyengat (Hijjas, 2011). Strong evidence is apparent in the usage of character names in these two *syairs*, which tend to feature Arabic names rather than usual Malay names. For instance, Malik Hasani and Siti Sianah in *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*. The Islamisation of the Johor-Riau Sultanate is quite intact, as reflected in the assimilation of Arab influences in literary writing and culture. Most of the literary works produced in the Johor-Riau tradition employed titles derived from the Arabic language. Even though the titles of these *syairs* are in the Malay language, the storyline is heavily influenced by an Arab setting. For example, Muscat, Yaman, and Damsyik are featured in the storyline. Similar to *Syair Khadamuddin*, written in 1927, Raja Aisyah used names such as Khadamuddin, Siti Sabariah, Hasan, and Ali. The word 'Khadam' translates to 'a servant' in English. Additionally, 'sabar' is derived from Arabic, representing someone who has great patience. In this *syair*, the character of Siti Sabariah is portrayed as someone who is struck by calamities following her husband's death and how she copes with her grief. The names 'Din' and 'Siti' are popular in Southeast Asia, suggesting that over time, there has been a fusion of Arabic and Malay names.

Abu Hassan Sham stated that the responsibility for the dissemination of knowledge relied on the rulers (Abu Hassan Sham, 1995). As these rulers were exposed to pursuing knowledge from a young age, the culture continuously grew within the palace walls, where most of the royalty and nobility living in the palace were literate and knowledgeable. In existing manuscripts such as *Tuhfat An Nafis* and *Silsilah Melayu dan Bugis* (Genealogy of Malay and Bugis Princes), it is evident that the descendants of Raja Ali Haji (1809-70), including his son and daughters, followed in his footsteps to become writers themselves, such as Raja Hasan, Raja Kalzum, and Raja Safiah. A significant influence within the palace walls, as a centre of literary activities, encouraged female members to read and write. Even Encik Kamariah, the caretaker of the royal children of Sultan Mahmud Shah (1844-1857), had the opportunity to compose a memoir. She wrote *Syair Sultan Mahmud*, a narrative detailing the achievements of Sultan Mahmud (Gordon, 1999). According to Ding Choo Ming in his prominent work, *Raja Aisyah dan Imej Kepengarangannya*, numerous factors contributed to the emergence of a rich literary tradition in the Malay-Riau Archipelago. Firstly, noble families and elites were directly and passionately involved in literary and cultural pursuits. Secondly, the activities of writing, copying, and transliterating were considered pleasant and enjoyable by the people. Thirdly, the Malay-Riau society of that time loved to read and listen to hikayat, *syair*, oral stories, and history (Ming, 1994). Sa'eda Buang and Kartini Anwar conducted research on *syair* in the contemporary life of Singaporean Malays. In this study, they emphasised the importance of *syair* reading as a communal activity, encompassing religious classes, cultural endeavours, and entertainment. There were experts in storytelling, singing, and playing musical instruments (Buang & Anwar, 2024). Proudfoot believes that a *syair* recital serves to retain one's political power (Proudfoot, 2002, as cited in Buang & Anwar, 2024). Literature such as *syairs* and *hikayat* represents a dynamic integration between the palace royals and society, highlighting the image of Riau as an intellectual hub. Both rulers and the people possessed a literary consciousness, which distinguished them from any other kingdom. This represented a paradigm shift for a Malay kingdom, particularly in breaking traditions related to women.

Consequently, the establishment of the Rusydiah Club encouraged female writers to be involved in Johor-Riau literary work. With the availability of the printing press, it became easier for them to produce numerous *syair*. Although their works were fewer than those of male writers, it suggests that there was no bias or gender discrimination within this kingdom. According to Zakariya and Oktasari, Raja Aisyah Sulaiman was an active writer in the Rusydiah Club with her husband, Raja Khalid Hitam. Additionally, Badriah Muhammad Thahir was one of the translators and a member of this intellectual club (Zakariya & Oktasari, 2017). It can be concluded that both genders enjoyed this literary freedom without bias or discrimination. For the Johor-Riau Sultanate, numerous *syairs* were produced in Pulau Penyengat. The royal women were highly privileged, being descendants of Raja Ali Haji, known to be an intellectual progeny. This paper aims to examine the characteristics of Malay women as portrayed in *Syair Saudagar Bodoh* (1861) by Raja Kalzum and *Syair Khadamuddin* (1927) by Raja Aisyah Sulaiman. These texts have been selected due to the limited scholarly attention given to *syairs* authored by women in academic discourse. Consequently, this study seeks to contribute to bridging this gap. The findings reveal that these works contain elements of women's emancipation, particularly in the selection of spouses and the expected conduct of wives in maintaining household harmony. Religion functions as a guiding framework, preserving the eloquence and elegance associated with Malay women. *Syair Saudagar Bodoh* outlines the qualities men should consider when choosing a wife, while *Syair Khadamuddin* discusses women's behaviour during marital adversity and the virtues they should embody. Both texts portray women as independent, educated, and assertive in claiming their rights. These representations reflect the lived experiences of the authors and suggest that women's emancipation was evident in the Johor-Riau Kingdom, distinguishing it from other Malay polities.

### Methodology

Using a descriptive-analytical method, the study thoroughly examines both *syairs* through a socio-historical lens. Both *syairs* serve as primary sources. The lithographic version of *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, which is available online, and the transliteration of *Syair Khadamuddin*, undertaken by Raja Hamzah Yunus and also accessible online, were used in this study. In addition, books and journals were employed in this study to support the concrete data.

### Literature Review

The existing literature should not be neglected even though the work of women writers is quite scarce in the academic corpus. In his book *Syair-Syair Melayu Riau*, Abu Hassan Sham narrates that Johor-Riau served as the centre for the development of Malay *syair* prior to the enthusiastic thirst for knowledge from the rulers. He also mentions the existence of Pulau Penyengat and various *syair*, particularly religious *syair*. Furthermore, he narrates that women in Penyengat were able to escape from the stereotype of secluded maidens or housewives (Abu Hassan Sham, 1995). Mulayka Hijjas portrayed the women of Penyengat as progressive, breaking free from the shackles of tradition (Mulayka Hijjas, 2011). This period reveals that Malay palace women were educated and produced literature that later became popular among the society. The female writers and their writing were mentioned in a short description, necessitating further analysis. Mulayka Hijjas' book, *Victorious Wives: The Disguised Heroine in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Malay Syair*, is an important piece of literature in this study. This book discusses *syairs*, which depict the portrayal of women disguised as men to express their feelings or address various problems. The book highlights *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, focusing primarily on the character of Khatib Muda and the importance of reason (*akal*). However, this book does not address the images of women. A journal article written by Hijjas, entitled "Not Just Fryers of Bananas and Sweet Potatoes:

Literate and Literary Women in the Nineteenth-Century Malay World,” describes the condition of women and the culture of literacy in Johor-Riau. Hijjas rejects the statement that they were illiterate and uneducated, as commonly portrayed in modern corpus. The article discusses the existence of *syair* written by women and the culture of borrowing books. Additionally, the article presents clear findings regarding women’s literary culture and writing practices. It also briefly mentions that the heroine in *Syair Saudagar Bodoh* memorised the Quran, although her character and qualities are not discussed in depth. *Syair Saudagar Bodoh* has received little academic attention, particularly regarding its author, Raja Kalsum, and its content compared to the works of Raja Aisyah Sulaiman.

Besides Mulayka, Ding Choo Ming critically analyses the infamous writer, Raja Aisyah Sulaiman. In his book, *Raja Aisyah Sulaiman Pengarang Ulung Wanita Melayu*, conversed with Raja Aisyah Sulaiman and her authorial image, which is more individualistic in approach, in contrast to traditional authorship. The book narrates the life story of Raja Aisyah and highlights her role as a prominent advocate of women’s emancipation. Furthermore, this book places greater emphasis on the transitional period of writing from traditional to modern writing than on the socio-historical perspectives contained in the *syair*. However, Ming focuses more on *Hikayat Syamsul Anuar* compared to *Syair Khadamuddin*. In addition, Ming, in his article “Wajah Terbuka dan Hidup Tertutup: Gender dan Seksualiti dalam Karya Sastera Melayu Riau Pinggir Abad ke 19,” compares the work of two females, Khatijah Terung and Raja Aisyah Sulaiman. This comparison highlights the contrast between a royal and a commoner. Both had produced two significant literary works that were more advanced than any other works. Nonetheless, there is no existing literature comparing *syairs* written by the descendants of Raja Ali Haji.

Zurita Mohd Yusoff, Normadiyah Daud, Tengku Fatimah Muliana, and Syh Noorul Madiah wrote an article entitled “An Analysis of the Concept of Obedience to the Husband based on the Poem Khadamuddin by Hajah Aisyah Sulaiman from Riau.” This article suggests that the *syair* hints at marital problems; however, it does not provide solutions to the issues described. Furthermore, this article discusses the religious context more extensively than the social context. Musliha Sumiyadi and Tedi Permadi, in their article “Analysis of the Dimensions of the Character of Malay Women in *Syair Khadamuddin* by Raja Aisyah Sulaiman,” explore the characteristics of a woman as a wife, a virgin, and a woman. However, the explanations are presented in a superficial manner, and the data needs elaboration. This article also mentions the work of Raja Ali Haji and his views on women. Lastly, an article entitled “Proses Kreatif Raja Aisyah Sulaiman Sasterawan Perempuan Feminis Melayu Zaman Peralihan” focuses more on literary technicalities rather than describing *Syair Khadamuddin*. It highlights the young age of Raja Aisyah, which influenced her writing during her growth within the palace environment. In conclusion, most of the existing literature discusses Raja Aisyah compared to Raja Kalsum and her writing works. Hence, this study is crucial for identifying similarities and uncovering new insights within women’s literature.

### Two Prominent Writers In The Johor-Riau Sultanate

Raja Ali Haji produced an intellectual legacy, with his talent for writing extending beyond the first generation. This legacy continued through to the fourth generation, where the penetration of colonialism that emerged in the Johor-Riau Sultanate marked the decline of glorious writers from Johor Riau. In this paper, I will introduce two prominent women: Raja Kalsum, the daughter of Raja Ali Haji, and Raja Aisyah binti Sulaiman, his granddaughter. Both have their own stories, which can be reflected through their writing style.

Raja Kalsum was not as popular as Raja Aisyah Sulaiman, and little is known about her due to limited sources compared to those for Raja Aisyah Sulaiman. She was the daughter of Raja Ali Haji and the third descendant in her family. She had two other siblings, Raja Hasan and Raja Safiah, both of whom produced *syair*. Raja Hasan wrote *Syair Burung*, while Raja Safiah wrote *Syair Kumbang Mengindera* (Helmiyati, 2008). Raja Kalsum married her cousin, Sayid Usman, the son of Raja Salihah. She managed to produce a *syair* titled *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, published in 1861, which is a fictional *syair* related to the setting of commerce and trading. At the time of its publication, the Riau court was becoming more self-consciously Muslim (Proudfoot, 2001). This shift is evident in the usage of Arabic names for the characters in the *syair*, such as Siti Sianah and Malik Hasani. Furthermore, the setting, which includes Muscat, Yaman, and Damsyik, indicates the ‘Arabisation’ consciousness portrayed in the literature.

Raja Aisyah Sulaiman Ibni Ali Haji was born in 1869 at the palace known as Kampung Baru in Pulau Penyengat. She was the grandchild of Raja Ali Haji and was raised in a highly intellectual and privileged family. It was believed that she was the fourth and final generation of the Riau-Lingga’s writers to survive. She was cared for by her grandfather and married his cousin, Raja Khalid Hitam, a famous dignitary associated with the palaces in Johor, Terengganu, and Pahang. Owing to her upbringing in the palace, she was actively involved in writing and literary pursuits. During her lifetime, she managed to write three *syairs* and one *hikayat*: *Hikayat Syamsul Anuar* (1890), *Syair Seligi Tajam Bertimbal* (1929), *Hikayat Syariful Akhtar* (1929), and *Syair Khadamuddin* (1929). She was the only writer to publish extensively because she did not have any children. Most of her time was devoted to writing, accompanied by her caretaker. Her husband frequently travelled to Singapore, Johor, and Japan for business dealings and to build political alliances with the Japanese to eliminate the Dutch (Ming, 1994). As described by her caretaker, Raja Halimah:

*He also said that her master, among other things, was seen as optimistic, strong-willed, fond of reading, deeply faithful, individualistic, and self-confident. His master rarely left the house; instead, he preferred to stay confined in his room, either reading or writing, from day into night* (Ming, 1994: 121).

The historical background and personal experiences of both writers shape their immersive writing style. Firstly, they lived during a time when manuscripts possessed a strong oral tradition. This tradition was sustained behind the palace walls, where education and intellectual progression were evident. For instance, Raja Ali Haji often invited ulama from around the world to Pulau Penyengat to educate the royalty. Ding emphasises that the Riau-Lingga palace placed significant importance on education and teaching (Ming, 1994). It is no wonder that this tiny island has successfully produced numerous writers, both men and women. Once, it was believed that Raja Aisyah Sulaiman served as a teacher within the palace. It was also believed among the palace residents that the tradition of learning from scholars was a vibrant culture, especially for the children of caliphs, sultans, ministers, military leaders, scholars, and wealthy families (Muhammad & Abdullah, 2023). It can be inferred that Raja Kalsum and Raja Aisyah were exposed to learning with scholars, which contributed to their development as influential women within the palace, prominent among the royal families and palace attendants.

Raja Aisyah was able to write eloquently due to her strong passion for writing and knowledge, as well as her strong character, both mentally and physically, since her teenage years until her husband’s demise (Anggraeni & Wiyatmi, 2018). Furthermore, her caretaker often delivered

books to Raja Aisyah. It is likely that she loved reading books borrowed from Khutub Khanah Marhum Ahmadi, which was located in Masjid Raya, Pulau Penyengat (Ming, 1994).

Secondly, the lingering impact of Westernisation during the colonial period began to infiltrate Johor-Riau. Anggraeni and Wiyatmi believed that the Malay people were starting to establish a mutual connection with the European colonial officers (Anggraeni & Wiyatmi, 2018). However, Matheson argued that in the mid-nineteenth century, Pulau Penyengat was experiencing modernity, democracy, and new progression originating from the Middle East (Matheson, 1979, as cited in Ming, 1994). It is important to emphasise that Raja Aisyah Sulaiman had a gruelling experience when Johor-Riau was dealing with the Dutch penetration and on the verge of collapse and division. The political changes impacted the writing of authors in Riau. The nineteenth century witnessed the transitional period of literary progress in the Johor-Riau kingdom. During this time, autobiographies and travelogues started to emerge, with writers becoming more courageous in expressing themselves. A notable example was Abdullah Munshi. Writers had begun to shift their writing style to an individualistic and expressive approach. *Syair Khadamuddin* proved to be a poem that addresses women's emancipation in an implicit manner. Uniquely, Islamic elements in literary works remain untouched and linger within the writers' writing style, especially when describing God's divine attributes.

This demonstrates that the Johor-Riau Kingdom emphasised the importance of gender equality and avoided bias in the learning and writing process. It also indicates that a primary factor in the development of the Malay civilisation in Johor-Riau was the intellectual progression enjoyed by both men and women. Virginia Matheson describes Johor-Riau as a Malay Renaissance, where the activity of knowledge production was active and apparent (Matheson & Andaya, 1979). Murad Merican, in his writing, specifically identifies Pulau Penyengat as a centre of Malay Enlightenment, highlighting the birth of Malay intellectuals and learned people from this small island (Merican, 2025). Furthermore, *hikayat* and *syair* had become highly sought after in society, serving as both entertainment and moral stories.

It might not be a surprise that women are learned individuals. Abu Hassan Sham mentioned that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Pulau Penyengat did not depict women as backward, submissive, or alienated. The image of women being unable to write or read was absent from Pulau Penyengat. Instead, it produced highly intellectual women with progressive education and learning (Sham, 1995). Additionally, women were not confined by the traditions and protocols of the royal palace, where only men had the opportunity to learn, read, and write. (Hijjas, 2011).

Regrettably, this *syair* is not as popular as Raja Aisyah Sulaiman's *Hikayat Shamsul Anuar*, which has been studied comprehensively by Ding Choo Ming. Mulayka Hijjas, in her book 'The Victorious Wives,' discusses Raja Kalzum's work, emphasising the transition of women disguising themselves as men to find their voices. However, the narrative of the hero in *Syair Saudagar Bodoh* has not been thoroughly discussed.

## Representation Of Women In *Syair Saudagar Bodoh* And *Syair Khadamuddin*

### **Syair Saudagar Bodoh**

*Syair Saudagar Bodoh* is a story about a merchant who remains nameless throughout the *syair*; instead, he is referred to by the writer as the Young Merchant (*Saudagar Muda*). He was raised in a wealthy family with an extravagant house and countless gems, jewels, and stones. This life

of luxury, filled with gold and lavishness, caused him to lose the ability to think clearly, making him foolish and simple-minded. For instance, he married hundreds of women yet failed to maintain any of these relationships. He was deceived by his first wife, which resulted in bankruptcy. He subsequently married the most beautiful woman, Siti Sianah, the daughter of Malik Hasani, who was his adopted uncle. Because of his foolishness, his wife was unbothered and instructed him to travel to Yaman to sell hundreds of camels. Due to his ignorance, he was scammed by the Yemeni merchant and felt too ashamed to return to his wife and father-in-law. Eventually, his wife, Siti Sianah, came to rescue her husband by disguising herself as *Khatib Muda*. Unfortunately, her husband did not recognise her until the end of the *syair*, when Siti Sianah revealed herself to him.

The characteristics of women are described and depicted in *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*. Raja Kalsum depicts the image of a perfect woman, as narrated by Malik Hasani to *Saudagar Muda* when he almost gave up remarrying. The first representation of women appears when Malik Hasani tried to introduce his daughter, Siti Sianah, to his foster son, the young merchant (*Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, 1880: 11):

*Malik itu adalah anaknya  
Seorang Perempuan sangat eloknya  
Bijak laksana dengan baktinya  
Kitab quran semua didapatnya  
Terlalu fasih berkata-kata  
Amal ibadat terlalu nyata  
Parasnya elok bagi dapat*

*now Malik Hasani had a daughter  
of great beauty  
discretion and loyalty  
who could recite the Quran by heart  
and who was soft-spoken  
with a face as beautiful as a painting  
and who was devoted to religious duties*

This stanza highlights the beauty and humility of his daughter, who was a religious person and possessed a high intellect, reflected in her ability to read the Al-Quran and speak softly and gently. These are the characteristics that a Malay woman should possess. It can be assumed that, as a member of royalty who grew up within the palace, she not only had the ability and exposure to the three basic knowledge areas of reading, writing, and understanding but was also quite religious. Reading the Quran and attending religious discussions have shaped her mind and values, enabling her to speak with full eloquence and rationality.

After the young merchant confessed to his uncle that he had failed in marriage by marrying 100 women, he sought advice from his foster uncle, Malik Hasani, who is also known as Siti Sianah's father, regarding the characteristics of a humble woman. Malik Hasani said in the stanza (*Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, 1880: 12):

*Cari Perempuan yang bijaksana  
Rata dilahirkan kemana mana  
Mencari Perempuan barang di mana  
Jikalau orang hendak beristeri  
Perempuan Budiman inilah cari  
Akal sebarang tuan mencari  
Jadilah dapat Perempuan pencuri  
Adapun Perempuan didalam makrifat.  
Hendaklah cukup serba empat  
Jikalau mungkin sudah didapat  
Baharulah sempurna seperti sifat*

*if one wishes to take a wife  
the prudent woman is the one to look for  
of course there are women of all sorts,  
so there may be women who are thieves  
there is in fact an art to choosing women  
they should be complete with the four qualities  
if you find one like that  
she will be as perfect as her nature*

..

|                                           |                                       |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Adapun Perempuan sempurna makrifat</i> | <i>A women with perfect qualities</i> |
| <i>Putihnya iaitu adalah empat</i>        | <i>had four whites</i>                |
| <i>Hitamnya itu cukuplah empat</i>        | <i>complete with four blacks</i>      |
| <i>Panjangnya empat pendeknya empat</i>   | <i>four longs, and four shorts</i>    |

..

In this stanza, Malik Hasani emphasises the significance of the number four in each characteristic that the young merchant must find. The Malay people always associate this numeral with various religious aspects, such as the total number of the Prophet's companions in Islam, the four imams, the requirement of four witnesses in marriage and serious accusations like adultery (*zina*), as well as the permissible number of wives men can marry. According to Isabella Bird in her travelogue,

*“Mohammedanism undoubtedly brought with it a large introduction of Arabic words, and the language itself is written in the Arabic character. The Malays can hardly be said to have an indigenous literature, for it almost entirely derived from Persia, Siam, Arabia and Java. Arabic is their sacred knowledge.”* (Bird, 2010:32)

In *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, Malik Hasani described four characteristics that women should possess (Syair Saudagar Bodoh, 1880: 13):

|                                            |                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Adapun Perempuan sifatnya begitu</i>    | <i>A women who has these qualities</i>                            |
| <i>Pertama putih badannya itu</i>          | <i>first has a fair white skin</i>                                |
| <i>Kedua hatinya putih tertentu</i>        | <i>and second a pure white heart</i>                              |
| <i>Adapun putih yang ketiga kan</i>        | <i>the third white</i>                                            |
| <i>Mata putih dengan cahayanya</i>         | <i>is her sparkling eyes</i>                                      |
| <i>Ke empat putih dua belah kukunya</i>    | <i>the fourth her twenty nails</i>                                |
| <i>Ketaplah empat sudah putihnya</i>       | <i>-those are the four whites</i>                                 |
| <br>                                       |                                                                   |
| <i>Yang hitam itu empatlah juga</i>        | <i>There are four blacks too:</i>                                 |
| <i>Pertama rambutnya hitam belaka</i>      | <i>first her jet black hair</i>                                   |
| <i>Mana yang hitam tidak terhinga</i>      | <i>then her deep black eyes</i>                                   |
| <i>Bibir matanya hitam sifat ketiga</i>    | <i>the third black is the rims of her eyes</i>                    |
| <i>Yang keempat itu keningnya hitam</i>    | <i>the fourth is her black eye-brows and</i>                      |
| <i>Dahinya rata bagi berendam</i>          | <i>her hairline, which is clean-cut as if it has been trimmed</i> |
| <i>Sekalian sifat baharulah khatam</i>     | <i>this ends the list of qualities</i>                            |
| <i>Disanalah tempat hadrat yang dendam</i> | <i>in which yearning and desire are located</i>                   |

The first two stanzas describe the characteristics of a charming, beautiful, and attractive woman, focusing on her physical appearances. A learned person is reflected by her hygiene, health, and physical well-being. The “four whites” in the stanza indicate white skin, a pure heart, sparkling eyes, and white nails. White skin refers to having fair and well-hydrated skin, while a pure heart symbolises someone who has goodness and empathy towards others. Sparkling eyes represent emotional depth and attractiveness, as humans are able to perceive emotions in one another's eyes (Allen Walker et al., 2015). In fact, we can assess an individual's health by looking at their eyes. Yellowish eyes may indicate hepatitis and liver problems, while red eyes are signs of inflammation or allergies (Mukamal, 2025). Additionally, healthy nails should be pink in colour and a slight white tip. Yellow nails may indicate a fungal infection, whereas bluish nails suggest that the body is not receiving enough oxygen. (Sachdev, 2024).

The phrase “four blacks” refers to black hair, black eyes, black eyebrows, and hairlines. Malays biologically have naturally black and shiny hair. They also have black eyes, eyebrows, and hairline. It is uncommon to see Malays with hair colours such as brownish, red, or brunette. The characteristics associated with black hair and features are primarily viewed as physical attractiveness and beauty compared to a person’s character.

Malik Hasani continues in the *syair* (Syair Saudagar Bodoh, 1880: 13):

|                                          |                                                          |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Pertama Panjang pula dinyatakan</i>   | <i>I am advising you as best I can</i>                   |
| <i>Sifat yang boleh kita berahikan</i>   | <i>while keeping it as brief as possible</i>             |
| <i>Sebelum kita bicarakan</i>            | <i>I'll explain the longs next</i>                       |
| <i>Janganlah lagi tuan lengahkan</i>     | <i>they are qualities which can stir up passion</i>      |
| <i>Pertama rambutnya itu</i>             | <i>the first is long hair</i>                            |
| <i>Panjangnya lampai tubuhnya itu</i>    | <i>then a long slender figure</i>                        |
| <i>Ketika Panjang akal tertentu</i>      | <i>third is a broad mind and long view</i>               |
| <i>Keempat Panjang jari itu</i>          | <i>and the fourth is long fingers</i>                    |
| <i>Sifat yang pendek diberikan pati</i>  | <i>now to detail the shorts</i>                          |
| <i>Tabiat Perempuan yang bakti</i>       | <i>which make up the nature of a wise and loyal wife</i> |
| <i>Jikalau sudah kita dapati</i>         | <i>if we find them</i>                                   |
| <i>Barulah sampai maksud dihati</i>      | <i>we have fulfilled our aim</i>                         |
| <i>Pertama pendek pandangannya</i>       | <i>First is demure, that is short of gaze</i>            |
| <i>Kedua Perempuan pendek langkahnya</i> | <i>restrained, or short of gait</i>                      |
| <i>Ketiga pula pendek suaranya</i>       | <i>discrete, or short of voice</i>                       |
| <i>Keempat pendek pendengarannya</i>     | <i>and last discerning, or short of hearing.</i>         |
| <i>Jikalau demikian itu</i>              | <i>if these are all present</i>                          |
| <i>Perempuan budiman sifatnya tentu</i>  | <i>the woman truly has refined characteristic</i>        |
| <i>Matilah kita dikakinya itu</i>        | <i>she is be worth dying for</i>                         |
| <i>Tambahan sabar barang suatu</i>       | <i>or bearing any hardship</i>                           |

The usage of adjectives such as “long” and “short” denotes characteristics and attributes. The four instances of “long” represent her hair, her height, her broad-mindedness, and her long fingers. “Broad-minded” refers to a person who is open-minded and willing to understand different ideas, opinions, and cultures. Height indicates that a woman has good nutrition. Meanwhile, the four instances of “short” refer to being short-sighted, which means she does not investigate other people’s affairs or meddle in others’ businesses. Additionally, the concept of having short steps suggests that a woman should stay at home and only go to certain places that are beneficial to her. These characteristics are already narrated in the Quran, Surah Al-Ahzab, verse number 33:

وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَىٰ وَأَقِمْنَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا ٣٣

“Settle in your homes, and do not display yourselves as women did in the days of ‘pre-Islamic’ ignorance. Establish prayer, pay alms-tax, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah only intends to keep ‘the causes of’ evil away from you and purify you completely, O members of the ‘Prophet’s’ family!”

Furthermore, the *syair* highlights that individuals should be soft-spoken in their manner of talking and expressing themselves. Lastly, short of hearing, which implies not hearing anything, does not bring any benefit, as women and gossip cannot be separated. It can be concluded that all these attributes align with Islamic principles aimed at guarding and reserving women's chastity. Furthermore, this indicates the expected behaviour of royal princesses and inspires other commoners to behave like morally upright women.

In this poem, Raja Kalzum uses numerous metaphors to portray how to find good women. During the nineteenth century, men remained dominant, as reflected in Malik Hasani's portrayal and indication of good women, unlike Siti Sianah. The heroic gestures of Siti Sianah are revealed towards the end of the *syair*, suggesting that this *syair* was written specially for women. Initially, the *syair* narrates the representation of women, while at the end, it shows the heroic actions of Siti Sianah in solving her husband's problem. This indicates that women should possess both physical attractiveness and a capable mind.

The next characteristics are those considered foul and ill-mannered for a woman. The *syair* states the behaviour of *Saudagar Muda*'s first wife (*Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, 1880: 5):

|                                           |                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Selama menjadi bini saudagar</i>       | <i>once she had become a merchant's wife</i>              |
| <i>Sombong takbur laku dan khabar</i>     | <i>She became arrogant and haughty in words and deeds</i> |
| <i>Tutur dan kata terlalu longgar</i>     | <i>ill-mannered in speech</i>                             |
| <i>Memandang diri mulia dan besar</i>     | <i>and regarded herself as high and mighty</i>            |
| <i>Duduk memakai sehari hari</i>          | <i>She spent all day trying on clothes</i>                |
| <i>Kain antlas dan kain celari</i>        | <i>of satin and silk with gold threads</i>                |
| <i>Makan minum kambing biri biri</i>      | <i>while drinking and eating spring lamb</i>              |
| <i>Perangai dan bongkak tidak terperi</i> | <i>Her conceit and arrogance were indescribable</i>       |
| <i>Kain sutera basahan mandi</i>          | <i>even her bathing cloth was of silk</i>                 |
| <i>Timbanya emas perak bersendi</i>       | <i>or satin threaded with gold and silver!</i>            |
| <i>Memakai kasut bertatah pudi</i>        | <i>Her feet, in slippers chased with diamond glitter</i>  |
| <i>Memijak tanah haram ta sudi</i>        | <i>never deigned to touch the ground</i>                  |
| <i>Jikalau orang datang ke rumahnya</i>   | <i>When someone came to visit</i>                         |
| <i>Pura pura tidak dipandangnya</i>       | <i>She pretended not to see them</i>                      |

This stanza clearly highlights certain characteristics that women should avoid. Snobbish behaviour, practising a lavish and extravagant lifestyle, and using foul language are considered obnoxious and mischievous. As we can analyse here, the wife was enjoying her life by using her husband's wealth, including wearing extravagant jewellery, eating lamb's meat and milk, and donning herself with gold-thread satin and silk, which is similar to the lifestyle of a royal. In today's world, this trend is known as hedonism culture. Hedonism refers to a pattern of thinking that suggests maximising pleasure as the best and most desirable way of living. This culture is centred on the human desire to attain excessive luxury, such as spending extravagantly beyond one's financial terms (Hamzah et al., 2021). This shows that this *syair* remains relevant in modern times, as its message and advice are timeless. An extravagant lifestyle will attract snobbish and arrogant attitudes. Furthermore, the rise of social media has resulted in measuring wealth by luxury items and opulent lifestyles.

### Syair Khadamuddin

*Syair Khadamuddin* is an autobiographical *syair* written by Raja Aishah Sulaiman after her husband's death (Ming, 1994). This *syair* was published by Matbaah al-Ahmadiyah in 1927 in Singapore and reflects her tragic life, where she lost her husband at a young age. It narrates the life of Siti Sabariah, who was Raja Aisyah in real life. To cope with her sadness and depression, she frequently invited her friends for gatherings. During these gatherings, the women would share their marriage problems with Raja Aisyah Sulaiman. Since becoming a widow at a young age, her beauty and intellect sparked interest from the king and various dignitaries who wished to marry her. Due to her loyalty and faithfulness to her husband, Khadamuddin, she preferred to be alone and did not remarry. She often pretended to be ill to avoid marriage proposals (Ming, 1994). This *syair* served not only as entertainment but also contained content rich in moral education (Yusoff et al., 2025). However, in this paper, I will emphasise the portrayal of Malay women as depicted by Raja Aisyah in the *syair* (Syair Khadamuddin, 1927: 31):

*Jika demikian ingatlah tuan  
Siapa yang ada anak perempuan  
Hiasi dengan akal perempuan  
Adap tertib baik kelakuan*

*Jangan biarkan Sahaja berlasak  
Di tepi dapur berunggun masak  
Dengan makanan perut diasak  
Akhirnya itu menjadi rusak*

Raja Aisyah first highlights the importance of instilling young girls with *adab* and behaviour. She emphasises that women should be courteous and modest. While recognising that cooking and the kitchen are essential for girls, she warns that excessive eating can lead to diseases. In the *syair*, she continues to describe other characteristics of Malay women (Syair Khadamuddin, 1927: 31):

*Anak Perempuan jaga selama  
Dampingkan dia kepada agama  
Sayangkan bangsa sayangkan nama  
Membanyakkan malu lebih utama*

*Biasakan dia rajin bersungguh  
Di dalam pelajaran jangan bertangguh  
Akal ilmu imannya teguh  
Inilah benteng yang sangat kukuh*

*Ialah juga menjadi perkat  
Perangai yang baik sebatik lekat  
Dosa kejahatan jadi tersekat  
Dunia akhirat dapatlah pangkat*

In these three stanzas, Raja Aisyah conveys that women should be educated and nurtured with religious knowledge. Furthermore, she emphasises the importance of having a strong sense of nationalism, while prioritising humility. In *Syair Khadamuddin*, the description of Malay women begins to link with the element of modernity, where the sense of nationalism is

incorporated within the *syair*. During this period, Raja Aisyah witnessed the downfall of her family's kingdom. She had to move to Singapore from Pulau Penyengat to follow her husband and later moved to Johor after his death. The *syair* mentions that sometimes Siti Sabariah misses her hometown, Pulau Penyengat (Ming, 1994). Thus, the concept of nationalism represents modern thinking that women should possess. According to Linett, modern literature must be daring in order to challenge the convention, as stated in her article:

*“Modernism needed to execute its daring not only in terms of form but also in terms of content: it had to write about women in new ways, particularly by placing the deserved significance upon relationships among women”*(Linett, 2010: 2).

Reflected in the *Syair Khadamuddin*, Raja Aisyah portrayed women as strong individuals who demand their rights and seek education, in contrast to Raja Kalsum's *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*. Raja Aisyah emphasised that the image of women should be hardworking and diligent, with their intellect and faith strong enough to protect them from harm. In addition, she highlighted the importance of adab, knowledge, and faith as a strong fortress. Adab and knowledge are interrelated, as Syed Naquib Al-Attas suggests that the concept of adab encompasses not only individual ethics but also the appropriate arrangement of disciplines, organisations, and knowledge (Mohamed et al., 2025). Furthermore, having a high intellect, good moral character, and excellent conduct can prevent us from committing sins and lead to achievements in both this world and the Hereafter. Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi said the following in *Al-Ikhwan* magazine in 1926:

*“Tinggalkanlah dahulu contoh teladan kegunaan sekalian Perempuan ini pada agama dan kekuasaan mereka itu pada menyemaikan perasaan takutkan tuhan dan memperelokkan amalan”* (Al-Ikhwan, 1926, 77).

The correlation between Raja Aisyah's *syair* and Al-Hadi's writing in *Al-Ikhwan* magazine is merely coincidental. According to Ming, it is related to the movement from the Middle East, as many of the nobles from Pulau Penyengat were sent there to further their studies. This modernisation effort, to some extent, loosened the restrictions imposed on Malay women (Ming, 2006). The *syair* continues (Syair Khadamuddin, 1927: 31):

*Jika tiada akal dan iman  
Jangan diharap ianya teman  
Daripada kejahatan lepas dan aman  
Mesti juga menurut acumen*

*Sebarang rupa ajaran iblis  
Kepada hatinya lekat tertulis  
Hilanglah harum cempaka wilis  
Jadi Nurmala warnanya malis*

*Anak Perempuan bebal dan buntu  
Jahat perangai adab tak tentu  
Wajib menjangkit kepada menantu  
Tidaklah larat rusaknya itu*

*Dan hendaklah dijaga pula  
Campuran anak Perempuan segala  
Yang telah sudah cacat dan cela  
Dicabuli laki-laki entah bila-bila*

*Dan jangan ia dibiasa  
Pergi berjalan suka termasa  
Ini pun satu punca binana  
Hidangan dapat orang menyisa*

*Di situ kerab berkenal-kenalan  
Dengan segala laki-laki yang malang  
Sia-sia Sahaja jaga kawalan  
Mestika terburai sepanjang jalan*

*Hilanglah harga hilanglah guna  
Walau paras lengkap laksana  
Manisan sudah hilang ke mana  
Disambar oleh hilang wilmana*

*Ibarat intan retaklah ia  
Sudah kurang harga dan Cahaya  
Siapa tidak mengetahui rahsia  
Menilainya tentu kena perdaya*

Raja Aisyah metaphorised women as flowers. If the flower is not cared for, its pleasant smell will disappear, and its bright colours will dull. An ignorant woman will exhibit foul and ill-mannered behaviour. Subsequently, Raja Aisyah reminded us to be cautious and to observe boundaries in interactions with men. Apart from flowers, Raja Aishah also likens women to diamonds. A woman who does not guard herself and fails to maintain self-respect will lose her honour and appeal, much like a diamond that has diminished in value. In most of the stanzas, Raja Aisyah emphasised the importance of educated women. This was likely influenced by the wave of women's emancipation that started to spread in Singapore. For example, the book *Hikayat Faridah Hanom* by Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi was published in 1925, earlier than this *syair*. Furthermore, Raja Aisyah herself was an educated woman, having been raised carefully in the palace and nurtured with religious knowledge and education. In this *syair*, after her friends discussed marital problems, she concluded that women should adhere to certain principles (Syair Khadamuddin, 1927: 25):

*Sebenarnya salah kita Perempuan  
Akhirnya tiada 'akal pengetahuan  
Jadi demikian halnya tuan  
Diperbuat laki-laki seperti haiwan  
Inilah kurasakan tiada ilmu  
Menurut seperti peganganmu  
Pelajaran yang baik benci padamu  
Pekerjaan dapur itu pilihmu*

*Walhasil kita betina  
Mahulah 'akal fikir sempurna  
Tiada mudah kita terkena  
Oleh laki-laki empunya bencana*

*Bersungguh-sungguh kita pelajari  
Hak antara laki dan isteri  
Bukannya laki-laki Sahaja diberi  
Menjalankan kebebasan demikian peri*

*Kita Perempuan berhak sama  
Mahulah juga pintak terima  
Tetapi yang bodoh berkena Cuma  
Dicapak laki-laki selama-lama*

Raja Aisyah's writing is quite stern, demonstrating Siti Sabariah's strong personality in upholding the importance of knowledge in eradicating women from the shackles of traditionalist life. She states that women prefer to sit in the kitchen rather than learning. Additionally, her work encourages women to be brave in demanding their rights as wives. These pieces of advice relate to the emancipation of women, showing that her perspective was quite modern and open-minded for a Malay woman in a traditional society.

### Conclusion

Based on these two *syairs*, it can be observed that both authors constructed their works based on their respective life experiences and socio-cultural environments. Raja Kalsum, raised within the royal court and closely tied to a feudal society where Islam was highly celebrated, portrayed the ideal woman primarily through physical attractiveness and strong religious values. Interestingly, the representation of women in the *syair* is narrated through the perspective of Malik Hasani, a male character, demonstrating that although the *syair* is authored by a woman, the image of the ideal woman is still mediated through a masculine 'image' and 'voice'. In contrast, Raja Aisyah Sulaiman, despite being raised in a royal environment filled with care and affection, experienced a significant phase of displacement when she was compelled to leave the palace and *merantau* to Johor Bahru and Singapore. Consequently, her depiction of the ideal woman incorporated elements of nationalism and modernity. Women were not only expected to uphold moral and religious virtues, but also to pursue education to assert their rights as women and wives. Furthermore, unlike Raja Kalsum's narrative framework, the portrayal of women in Raja Aisyah's *syair* is articulated through the voice of Siti Sabariah, a female character, thereby allowing women to represent and speak for themselves directly.

Furthermore, negative representations of women are evident in both *syairs*. In *Syair Saudagar Bodoh*, Raja Kalsum suggests that women who excessively indulge in luxurious and extravagant lifestyles are likely to develop arrogant, prideful, and conceited characteristics. This portrayal may reflect the author's intention to remind members of the royal court, who were naturally exposed to privilege and wealth, to remain humble and grounded despite their elevated social status. During the nineteenth century, *syair* were primarily intended to be recited aloud and functioned as a medium for moral instruction and advice rather than mere entertainment. The recitation of a *syair* served not only as a form of literary expression, but also as a means of conveying ethical values, social norms, and religious teachings to society. In

contrast, *Syair Khadamuddin* strongly emphasises the boundaries of interaction between men and women. Women who engage too freely in social relations with men are metaphorically described as diamonds that have lost their value. This depiction most likely reflects the realities of modernisation and the increasingly open social structure of the period, which raised concerns regarding morality, female conduct, and the preservation of traditional values. However, both *syair* successfully emphasise the importance of literate and learned women, representing women's emancipation from masculinity bias and demonstrating that Johor-Riau has successfully produced women with a learned consciousness, characterised by different thinking and writing styles.

|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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