God's Gift: Narratives of Disability in Malay Popular Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The synthesis of literature and popular culture helps literary scholars form inferences about the challenges preoccupying society's collective psyche. It is therefore no stretch to assert that popular fiction, particularly popular fiction that has garnered sufficient traction to be adapted into a popular telenovela with a sizable following, is reflective of the general public's perceptions on any given issue. Having garnered sufficient attention, it is then capable of influencing, to some extent, those same public perceptions. The malleability of public opinion in reaction to what is broadcast or written is a valuable instrument for comprehending cultural paradigms. It is important, then, to analyse telenovelas and the novels upon which they are based in order to put a metaphorical finger on Malaysian attitudes toward disability. This article will focus on two Malay books that have been converted into telenovelas with the same names due to their popularity. These novel-based perceptions will then be compared to real-world experiences of caregivers and family members of children with autism in order to demonstrate that, while autism may appear to be a life sentence, children with autism are also perceived as God's gift. Additionally, while it is necessary to acknowledge how disability shapes our perceptions of what it means to be mocked for our insignificance and disability, the concepts of forgiveness and repentance appear the Malay worldview, with the implication that forgiving others' faults exemplifies a human virtue.

Keywords: autism; disabilities; forgiveness; Malay popular fiction; repentance

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's current administration prioritises areas of study to ascertain and unpack the daily problems of Malaysians, particularly those that fall into the lower B40 group. Among the clusters that have been developed is one on Societal Harmony and Happiness. The main study priorities in this field include migrants and refugees in Malaysian society, substance addiction, and ethnic harmony. In the Health and Wellbeing cluster, the primary research paths are health and well-being of the B40 and older populations, with the adjoining Education cluster cell located on its northern boundary (Noor Hasnah, n.d.).

The purpose of this article is to examine the topic of childhood disability from the perspective of Malay popular fiction. Childhood disability is a common subject in the selected

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popular Malay fiction titles: families in the B40 category parenting children diagnosed with impairments, such as autism, who may or may not have access to proper healthcare and education modalities. Given that a society's welfare may reasonably be measured not just in economic terms but also in subjective terms that are relatable to each individual in the society (Angner, 2012), it makes sense for the government to pay attention to these aspects in order to better serve the *rakyat*. This fuels the political power cycle, since raising the nation's general happiness index earns the public's favour which converts into votes in the next general election.

The fusion of literature and popular culture enables social scientists to make observations on the issues that are preoccupying the collective psyche of society. It is thus not too much of a stretch to assert that popular fiction, particularly popular fiction that has garnered enough traction to be turned into a popular telenovela with a sizable following, is reflective of the general public's perceptions on any given issue. Hypothetically then, popular fiction that has garnered sufficient traction must surely be capable of influencing, to some extent, those same public perceptions. The malleability of public opinion in response to what is broadcast or written is a useful tool for social researchers in shaping or reshaping societal paradigms. It is therefore critical to analyse telenovelas and the books on which they are based to put a metaphorical finger on Malaysian disability views.

To begin, and for the purpose of brevity, this article will focus on portrayals of childhood disability in two Malay novels that have been adapted into telenovelas of the same titles owing to their popularity. These perceptions, as portrayed in the novels, will then be contrasted with real-world experiences of caregivers and family members of children with autism to demonstrate that, while autism may appear to be a life sentence, particularly for those in the B40 category - as depicted in the novels in which the autistic child meets an untimely demise - children with autism can indeed enjoy a brighter, higher quality of life. Also, while it is pertinent to acknowledge how disability colours our perception concerning what it means to be mocked for insignificance and disability, the notion of forgiveness and repentance appear to permeate the Malay worldview, and that to forgive others' faults is to exemplify a human virtue.

CONTEXT

7 HARI MENCINTAIKU (2011)

7 Hari Mencintaiku (hereafter known as *7 Hari*) was written by Siti Rosmizah Semail, a lawyer-turned-television producer-turned-novelist who goes by the pen name Siti Rosmizah. The book was released in 2011 and sold through its sixth printing within a year of publication. By 2016, *7 Hari* had been published 16 times in total during a five-year period. This is indicative that the publishers believed the book had successfully piqued popular interest. This notion is reinforced by the fact that the year the novel entered its 16th printing was also the year the novel was turned into a 28-episode single-season drama series. According to a story published in *MyMetro* - the online version of the *Harian Metro*, a local entertainment daily - the show's total popularity peaked at 12 million viewers, with an incredible five million turning in to see the last episode on December 22, 2016 (Gun, 2017). The series' popularity has also been demonstrated by its six prizes at the 2017 Anugerah Drama Festival in Kuala Lumpur (Siti Nurlisia, 2017).

7 Hari is the narrative of Mia, a spoiled affluent girl who marries Khuzairi as a result of a sequence of sad yet synchronistic circumstances involving her father. The novel idolises Khuzairi as the ideal of Malay manhood, whose speech, conduct, and lifestyle are genuinely impeccable. They settle in a little hamlet in Pahang, several hours north of Kuala Lumpur. This is in stark contrast to the life to which Mia has been accustomed. By the end of the novel, Mia has developed

into the ideal wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, whom everyone adores. Siti Rosmizah, perhaps in the spirit of inclusivity and disability awareness, introduces Buntat at the beginning of the novel as a side character who initially appears as comic relief, but is then shown to ask, in his childlike innocent way, questions that force adults like Mia (and readers) to pause for inward and occasionally uncomfortable reflection. Regrettably for Buntat, Siti Rosmizah arranges for him to die tragically just as Mia begins to love him. The sorrow of his passing allows Siti Rosmizah to infuse the novel's last chapters with regret and grief.

***PEMBANCUH KOPI MR VAMPIRE* (2015)**

The other work analysed in this article is *Pembancuh Kopi Mr Vampire*, a 2015 book by Aii Fariza (henceforth *Mr Vampire*). The novel's drama adaptation was released as a 30-episode telenovela on channel HyppSensasi 116 in 2017 after capturing the hearts and collective romantic imagination of Malaysia's younger female demographic, as evidenced anecdotally by the 3.81 rating out of a possible 5 stars from 140 readers left on goodreads.com by mostly all-female group of reviewers. Be that as it may, it is the character of autistic Nazrul that is of relevance to this study. In an unsettling parallel to *7 Hari*, Nazrul dies in the hospital after being run over by a car at the end of *Mr Vampire*. Irsyad and Nuzul, the main male and female leads, are devastated by his demise, and their grief is eased only when they share the joy and excitement of Nuzul's pregnancy.

Given that both *7 Hari* and *Mr Vampire* have reached a sizable portion of the Malay community, it is very possible to assert that both readers and viewers were aware of Buntat and Nazrul as special needs children. Disregarding the apparent blithe understanding of autism depicted on television, it is perhaps more significant to examine how Malaysian society has accepted or rejected people with special needs. A headline in *The Star* newspaper on November 21, 2017 asserts that '…Malaysians don't understand disability' (Indramalar, 2017), citing a UNICEF study on perceptions of childhood impairment in Malaysia (UNICEF, 2017). The report emphasised several areas of childhood disability that must be addressed, including understanding and differentiating disability categories (physical, behavioral, mental, and intellectual), stigma experienced by the disabled and their caregivers, discrimination and lack of inclusivity in the education system, which leads to loopholes through which the disabled slip, and opportunity limitations in mainstream society, as well as adverse preconceived cultural perceptions of people with disabilities.

Among the strategies for managing childhood impairment in society are the establishment of venues for handicapped voices to be heard. Lizzie Velásquez and Nick Vujicic, international social media stars who are differently abled, have gained favourable worldwide recognition. Malaysia's home front features autistic young artist Wan Jamila Wan Shaiful Bahri (ArtJamila), whose work has been featured in several installations, including one at the Bank Negara Museum and Art Gallery, as well as physically disabled athlete and published motivational speaker Zhariff Affandi, and also paralympian swimmer Jamery Siga. Their narratives help to encourage inquiry into the daily reality of fictional characters such as Buntat and Nazrul.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourses on disability follow a pattern of fear to empathy, pathological understanding and finally acceptance of participation in society (Moore & Slee, 2012). First, disability is seen as an abhorrent imperfection. Frequently, disabilities are seen as God's punishment for the parents' misdeeds. As a result, disabled people are seen as a threat. This rhetoric generates fear and hatred

towards the disabled, resulting in extermination, sterilisation, institutionalisation, exclusion, mockery, misinformation, confinement, and concealment. Second, disability is perceived as a personal tragedy, and disabled people are thought to need mercy. This rhetoric evokes feelings of pity and compassion that result in institutionalisation, soliciting a socially acceptable duty, the expectation of individual heroism to overcome limitations, segregated schools, and humiliation. Third, disability is seen as the product of flawed or disordered individual pathology, which is the medical explanation of disability. This is the result of a birth defect, an accident, or a disease. Then, medical professionals are consulted for their expert diagnosis, intervention, and therapy to cure, rehabilitate, or normalise the patient. Fourth, disability is an assessment of socially generated impediments. In other words, disability is the burden that people must bear, the difficulties that they will face because of society's unwillingness to accept difference. The reaction to this discourse results in modifications to the architectural, legal, political, economic, social, and cultural structures and relationships of society, so that individuals may exercise their citizenship and participation rights.

The first issue is the underrepresentation of disabled people on television and the marginalised positions they often play when they do appear, which mirrors the ostracism and dehumanisation that are prevalent in many real-world communities. The second is disability's social construction. Through the intricate mechanics of media portrayals, disability discrimination is formed. The knowledge generated via the creation of media material provides significance to pre-existing prejudices, particularly in situations when information to the contrary is scarce. Society impacts the content of media, and media likewise influences society. A wide corpus of personal narratives from the area of disability studies demonstrates that persons with impairments of all ages commonly describe being viewed as objects of dread, sympathy, curiosity, contempt, or anger by their families and communities (Bear, 2015). Beyond these explicit interdependent interactions, negative stereotypes of disabled people as heartbreaking and wretched cripples, perennial children, aberrant misfits, dangerous creatures, and societal burdens permeate popular television programmes, literature, and films (Mintz, 2007). The consequence of such portrayals degrades individuals who are impaired.

More recent approaches towards studies on disability have focused on a sense of community rights (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018; Goodley et al., 2019). The revolution occurring for those with physical and mental limitations-their portrayal in the media, their use of the media to achieve group goals, and their use of the new online media to communicate with others with limitations and the non-disabled world illustrates this change more than anywhere else. The media has contributed to the rising sense of community among those with disabilities. Fortunately, as society's understanding grew, it became clear that these preconceptions were erroneous. The television started to represent people with impairments more accurately and sympathetically. Less often, the stereotypes were observed. This new generation of disabled individuals has made it plain that they do not want to be defined by their disability. They want to be recognised as individuals whose lives are complicated by a disability. This attitude is accompanied by the feeling that they have been bullied for too long and that it is time to act against derogatory connotation. Along with the shifts in self-awareness, a new appreciation for the respect these people deserve emerged in the media.

Our endeavour to analyse current Malay literature deepens our knowledge of the many ways in which individuals with disabilities are shown by expanding our expertise beyond the scope of this short analysis to measure the patterns of depictions. In the perspective of Malay Muslims, both those who can care for themselves and those who need assistance are gifts from God. The

stark contrast between feelings of dread or disgust for such a person and the acceptance shown by the society might provide light on how these representations interpret the position of disabled people in Malay communities.

CONCEPTS: FORGIVENESS AND REPENTANCE

Before proceeding with the analysis of Malay popular fiction, it is perhaps useful to dwell on the conjoined notion of forgiveness and repentance to contextualise its usefulness within Malay cultural discourse. While comprehensive accounts of forgiveness and repentance that expose the intricate Malayness are quite implausible at this juncture, a range of approaches to forgiveness that foreground the popular novels will be reviewed to position our investigation in relation to existing reformulations of forgiveness and repentance. The force behind forgiveness and repentance comes from the Malay worldview, usually referenced as Malay *adat* (customs). The central idea behind Malay *adat* is a progression of an understanding of tradition, religion, and thoughts. Malay *adat* which values harmony and peaceful coexistence is so important that severe, fatal consequences may be expected should the Malay *adat* be violated or disrespected (Banks, 1976). As Zainal (1995) succinctly summarises it, forgiveness, and repentance centre on two of the many fundamental issues: reconnoitering politeness and canceling out sins. Firstly, the delicate Malay folktales centralise forgiveness and repentance because they accentuate compliance with the Malay ideals of compromise, tolerance, and modesty (Idrus et al., 2017). The practice of forgiveness and repentance to "uphold peace and harmony in their relationship" (Zainal, 1995, p.15), adds 'resolution' to the disheartening conflicts and torturous routes, encouraging one to be "sensitive and gentle" (Zainal, 1995, p.4); as such they are usually employed to attenuate negative portrayals of individuals, particularly their involvement in physical and emotional aggressions. Secondly, forgiveness and repentance value the practice of offsetting atrocities and sins. It has been said that "God's infinite goodness posits mercy, forgiveness and benevolence" is equated with "His wrath and severe, strict and unrelenting justice" (Idrus et al., 2017, p.213). These accounts create an overpowering sense of hope and compassion about forgiveness and repentance as 'tools to dispense justice.' As such, they bring to light the power of closure to stories and look for ways to depart from countless sufferings and human vulnerabilities. Forgiveness, as argued by Johansson and Lalander (2012), permeates a realisation that stories are not exposed as merely "a market enterprise of some sporadicity of being deviant, of being essential troublemakers" (1079), but rather recurring snapshots of moral responsibility that accompany the portrayals of Malays and Malayness.

In what follows, we are not interested in the ways in which forgiveness and repentance are individually or collectively defined and reconceptualised, but rather illustrate and contextualise some of the many ways in which they are related to the two popular texts, *7 Hari* and *Mr. Vampire.* As argued by Idrus, Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Raihanah M.M. (2015), even though modernity and media landscapes in Malaysia have undergone alterations in cultural emphases, power, and position in daily narratives, Malay adat idealisation remains prominent in television fiction (customs). Therefore, the novels and successful drama fiction that followed demonstrate the realities of the Malay world. These transparent relations between forgiveness and Malay world(s) conditioning the popular fiction make available narratives of what it means to be accountable for good and detrimental deeds. Some trivial insights that could be grasped from *7 Hari* and *Mr. Vampire* may reveal reconciliation, responsibilities for past actions, and the undoing of sins, just to name a few. Therefore, describing forgiveness is an important characteristic of these popular

texts as they unlock guilt and reveal withdrawals from a distrustful world, much that is significant about Malayness.

"STRATEGIZING" FORGIVENESS AND REPENTANCE: DEMOCRATIC HABITS OF MIND

It is thus necessary to expand on the lens of democratic habits of mind as it is this lens that we draw upon to excavate the notions of forgiveness and repentance as expressed in *7 Hari* and *Mr. Vampire*. While readings on this lens have been widely discussed, a thorough, conclusive description of the framework falls outside the scope of this work. Democratic habits of mind as a concept depicts the dynamics in which individuals value and emphasise human-specific characteristics notwithstanding what is offered in people's lives might reveal multipolarity of dimensions, stagnation, failures, sorrow, shame, and guilt. According to Jack Mezirow (2000), democratic habits of mind is exemplified by "respect for others, self-respect, desire to accept responsibility for the common good, willingness to welcome difference, and willingness to approach others with openness" (p. 14). "Openness to various points of view: empathy and tolerance," Mezirow adds, demonstrates "concern for how others think and feel" (p. 14), creating diverse perspectives that contribute to one common ground and cohesive alliance in establishing interpersonal ties. While these are attitudes that are necessarily based on active listening, flexibility, reciprocity, and cooperation, they also represent tolerance, equality, and logic. Fostering this dialogue in literary studies engages in an active dialogue that will illuminate "the significance of an experience" (Mezirow, 2000, p.14). Across the board, democratic habits of mind have been employed to accentuate agency (Jarvis, 2009, p. 4), bolster multiculturalism (Chang, 2007, p. 188), problematize and restore cultural diversity (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006, p. 107), bifurcate environment and ecology (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2006, p. 107), and flesh out works emphasizing sexuality (Trimble, 2009, p. 52), just to name a few. By centralising democratic habits of mind, we will be able to destabilise what we know concerning the ideals, the goodness, and the reasonable and incorporate norm deviancy, human flaws, and irreplaceability. However, in what ways does democratic habits of mind as a lens expand on the labor of literary works in the likes of *7 Hari* and *Mr Vampire*?

This paper contends that as we sift through *7 Hari* and *Mr. Vampire*, these pages invariably demonstrate what it means to cancel out faults and sins. As such, we feel obligated to engage with the way autism is presented and thus constructed in these two novels. From reading and reflecting to analysing multiple fragments of concerns in disability, the novels examine the impact this nexus has on our professional work as observers of society, and hence social scientists of social issues. These novels illustrate the growing dominance of a particular worldview regarding the degree to which forgiveness and repentance point to the moorings of empathy and compassion. This possibility, thus, coincides with Mezirow's lens of democratic habits of mind in that it gives an alternate paradigm of justice in terms of forgiveness and repentance when and the extent to which they occur. By employing democratic habits of the mind, we propose an alternative paradigm of fairness and equality in the context of forgiveness and repentance in which everyone, perfect or not, guilty or not, has an equal opportunity to engage in a space of respect and recognition of dignity. In the middle of the twenty-first century's violent, chaotic sociocultural reality, democratic habits of mind could create "windows" into the greater appreciation of love and draw on components of reconciliation. Through this lens, individuals who make spaces with special-needs person are afforded with the opportunity to share their stories, indicating their dedication to a mission of moral and cultural self-improvement.

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We hope that the remainder of this paper will contribute to this discussion on what it means growing up autistic and establish its links to the broader elements of literary studies. Our goal in what follows is to further characterise various responses at personal and public levels concerning the notions of disability and analyse these from the prism of democratic habits of mind. At this point, we will recontextualize this perspective to imply that novels such as *7 Hari* and *Mr. Vampire* provide prospects and venues to deploy different, multifaceted self-practices, and we will look at some of the numerous examples with which shame, guilt, and vulnerability are dealt. In other words, these novels expose various moods, meanings, and conjectures to abnormality, failure, and imperfection that may bolster the relationship between self, identity, and resilience. By focusing on democratic habits of mind, an alternative model of understanding could be developed so individuals, autistic or not, have equal opportunities to engage in a space of honouring and restoring dignity.

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AS DEPICTED IN *7 HARI* AND *MR VAMPIRE*

Our starting premise is that both Siti Rosmizah and Aii Fariza's conceptions of childhood impairments are highly likely to reflect the broader Malaysian public's opinions of disabled children. Thus, it is plausible to assert that both writers have advanced images of disabled children that are consistent with the Malay-Malaysian worldview. Thus, from a cosmic or religious perspective, one may begin to grasp the Malay worldview in relation to childhood defects.

In *Mr Vampire*, Nazrul is characterised as a chosen child of heaven (*anak syurga*; p.645); following his death, he appears in a dream to his eldest sister, Nuzul, clad in a white robe, laughing and smiling, the polar opposite of the shattered body she had held in her arms at the time of his death. Nuzul and her husband, Irsyad, are devastated by Nazrul's death. They feel his loss intensely; this sorrow is laced with regret, survivor's guilt, and a wish to turn back time, particularly on Irsyad's side as he had bitterly resented Nuzul's great devotion to her special needs baby brother (p.678). In retrospect, Nazrul's autism increased his value to those who loved him. In *7 Hari*, Buntat, who Mia, the shrewd protagonist, describes as "slow" (*lembam*) and whose body is "covered in scabies" (*berkudis*) (p.415), selflessly sacrifices himself for Mia, whom he likes despite her pettiness, after she is nearly run over by her crazed ex-boyfriend, Khalil. As with Buntat, whom Mia dismisses as "having the mind of a child" (*otak macam budak-budak*) (p.18), Mr Vampire's Nazrul is seen similarly, although Aii Fariza's description is marginally kinder: "[Nazrul's] physical appearance looks normal, but his intellect is impaired. This *syndrome* [original italics] is comparable to a disease that cannot be treated. Forever. Datin Maziah made up her own facts" (*tubuh [Nazrul] nampak normal, tapi akalnya berlaku kecacatan. Penyakit syndrome [original italics] macam itu mana boleh sembuh. Kekal untuk selamanya. Datin Maziah menggoreng fakta yang otaknya sendiri bikin)* (p.278). A notable parallel between the two stories is that both characters are autistic children who die young tragically. Nazrul/Buntat both portray children's experience of death as a merciful release from a lifetime of worldly suffering, whether bodily discomfort or mental torture at the hands of a harsh society. This reinforces the commonly held belief that having a disability implies a gloomy future, a stance that contradicts the testimony of individuals such as motivational speaker Nick Vujicic, Malaysian artist Art Jamila, para swimmer Jamery Siga, and speaker and author Zhariff Affandi. To recapitulate, the novels emphasise the recurring themes of sorrow, guilt, mourning, and regret on the side of those left bereaved following the children's deaths. Siti Rosmizah and Aii Fariza appear to have connected the general notion of guilt on the side of mourning caregivers with childhood disability and an

early, pure, spotless death as befits a martyr, one of God's elects, when they represent children with disabilities, namely autism.

The Bahasa Melayu phrase "*terpilih*" [God's chosen/elect] is commonly used to refer to a child born with a handicap or to a family scenario in which a disabled family member must be cared for. Within the framework of being one of God's chosen people and being singled out for divine testing through the experience of disability, there are two broad explanations for such testing: disability as divine punishment and disability as a test of faith.

In *Mr Vampire*, Puan Sri Ayuni rejects Nuzul as a prospective daughter-in-law because she feels, based on a rather erroneous common view of autism in Malaysian culture, that autism is a genetic condition that might potentially affect her grandchildren, thus lowering her social status. In what has been described as a divine twist of fate, her flawless son temporarily loses his vision and mobility in an accident. Aii Fariza warns against divine vengeance as retribution for Puan Sri Ayuni's arrogance, stating through the character of Puan Sri Ayuni herself that Irsyad's accident and subsequent disabled body are God's punishment for scorning a special needs person. Puan Sri Ayuni is filled with remorse and guilt, realising that the penalty God has exacted upon her family must be paid. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Aii Fariza presents the character of Nuzul as a contrast to Puan Sri Ayuni's frightened, disassociated view of persons with disabilities. Nuzul exemplifies the compassionate Islamic attitude towards disabled people, which views the afflicted individual as a divine blessing from God rather than a social burden. For instance, when Nazrul makes a scene in public on the day of Nuzul and Irsyad's engagement, Irsyad calms him down by taking him to the carp pool (p.264). Irsyad emphasises that Nuzul is not to be faulted for Nazrul's reaction to the throng; he is unconcerned about the boy's reaction, knowing that it is unavoidable, Irsyad displays compassion as well as a progressive understanding of autism in terms of how to deescalate social situations that have gone awry.

Both Aii Fariza and Siti Rozmizah seem to exaggerate and perhaps even gloss over the autistic child's challenges. Buntat and Nazrul, as well as their caretakers, will never have to manage the puberty difficulties of young adults with special needs. Buntat, portrayed as the village idiot, roams free in *7 Hari*. Readers/viewers first impressions of Buntat are of an unclean, perpetually hungry, bald-headed youngster whose particular buddy is a goat. Because he has a different understanding of how the world works in contrast to the people around him, he faces rejection and mockery from society, beginning with his own mother, who rejects her baby boy due to postpartum stress brought on by the death of her beloved daughter, Ayu, in an accident shortly after Buntat's birth. Siti Rozmizah has Buntat ask seemingly infantile questions that cut straight to the emotional core of the problem e.g. when he asks the distressed Khuzairi, "Buntat loves Mia, mother loves Mia. Do you love Mia too? (*''Buntat sayang kakak [Mia], mak sayang kakak. Abang doktor pun sayang kakak?'* p.278). By presenting nearly rhetorical questions of such intimate nature, Buntat simultaneously challenges and upends seeming inviolate societal mores, forcing Khuzairi to consider an answer not just for Buntat, but also for himself. In contrast to Buntat's chatty personality, Nazrul is portrayed as a high-functioning autistic youngster with limited verbal abilities. As with Siti Rosmizah's Buntat, Aii Fariza relies on Nazrul's piercing clarity and singular perspective to cut through conventional social niceties to act as society's conscience. Much as the child's voice of Truth in the fable of the Emperor's New Clothes, Nazrul expresses the unspoken and unfiltered thoughts of Nuzul's family, who, unlike Nazrul, are able to stifle their innermost thoughts and sugarcoat their responses to Irsyad. Nazrul's reluctance toward Irsyad, as seen by the autistic child's excruciatingly drawn-out utterances, "Big brother is bad" (*'Abang...long...jahat'* (p.382), upset Irsyad and force him, like Khuzairi in *Mr Vampire*, to pause for unpleasant self-

reflection. Buntat and Nazrul portray children with autism as combining aspects of honesty and candor with youthful innocence tempered by intuition and inner knowledge in order to provoke real self-examination from people around them.

At this stage in the analysis of Buntat and Nazrul's personalities, it would be acceptable to reflect on their interactions with the inhabitants of their respective worlds. Buntat's birth mother does not recover from her daughter Ayu's death. As there is no mention of Mak Andak seeking professional treatment for postpartum depression or the post-traumatic syndrome disorder (PTSD) symptoms that cumulatively contribute to her mental breakdown in the novel, it is possible to infer that in Malaysian society, mental illnesses that do not manifest physically as physical ailments do not generate the same level of urgency to seek treatment as do physical ailments. This has deprived Buntat of the mother he needs, in the instance of Mak Leha and Buntat. Pak Andak, his father, has had to rely on the community to assist him in raising his child. Fortunately, he is employed by the kind Khuzairi, who is torn between his passion for goat husbandry and his day work as a medical doctor at the clinic he co-owns with his closest friend, Zaidi. Khuzairi and his family adore Buntat; they ensure that he is nourished and clothed, as well as having his basic needs met. When Buntat's physical safety is threatened, his foster mother, Mak Leha, rushes to his defense: "Hey! Who are you to hit him? I have looked after him since he was a baby; I never flicked him, but you dared to pull the boy's ear" (*Hey! Siapa kau yang nak pukul dia? Aku bela Buntat tu dari kecik sampai besar, tak pernah aku jentik pun dia, tapi kau berani pulas telinga budak tu* (p.227-228). In a more benign interaction, kind people from metropolitan Kuala Lumpur express more than a passing interest in Buntat's future. When Mia's closest friend, Sofi, hears about Buntat's living situation, she quickly looks to improving his present circumstances. Buntat is sent to live with Sofi's Uncle Man who becomes his benefactor. Uncle Man ensures that he gets the opportunity to receive an education (p.320-321). Clearly, Siti Rosmizah's goal is to demonstrate that education, or, more broadly, city life, is the means to redeem individuals who have spent their whole lives as misfits on the outskirts of the kampong society. When Buntat returns to the kampong during a school break, he is considerably fairer in complexion, with well-combed hair, clean teeth, and the ability to correctly reply to the Muslim greeting (p.632). Being accustomed to Buntat's chattiness, Khuzairi and his family are relieved that his speech has improved in clarity (p.639). Buntat dies when he is run over by Khalil, Mia's ex-boyfriend. Mia, who had grown to adore the child, establishes Yayasan Roziah in memory of her foster mother and Buntat to assist families with differently-abled children following his death. She frequently takes his biological mother to visit his grave (p.933). Buntat may not have accomplished much during his lifetime, but he leaves a legacy that the author would have us think will improve the lives of children with disabilities through the charitable foundation established in his memory. Mia's initial hatred and contempt for Buntat had turned into an unbreakable love and a profound respect for his heroism in defending her against Khalil, a sacrifice that had cost him his life.

In *Mr Vampire*, Nazrul is also lavished with love and devotion by Nuzul, who, although not being his biological sister, takes on the responsibility of caring for him and his sisters following their parents' deaths. Irsyad, Nuzul's fiancé, is also understanding of Nazrul's autism and had shown the child a great deal of care from the time they first met. Nazrul is also treated well by Abang Safwan, a family friend (p.365). When Safwan wrestles Nazrul in the muddy paddy field, he does not treat him as though he were frail; he treats him like he would have any other child. By normalising the child's autism spectrum, Aii Fariza demonstrates to readers that Safwan demonstrates an inclusive attitude while engaging with Nazrul. As a result, Nazrul is highly loved, cared for, and welcomed by those who have come into in his life following the death of his parents

(p.368). Aii Fariza also examines the other side of the coin, when society treats Nazrul and his family poorly due to a misunderstanding of autism, as demonstrated by Puan Sri Ayuni's prejudice against Nuzul for having an autistic brother, and when the older children in the kampong bully and mock Nazrul for being different. Unfortunately, the bullying event culminates in disaster when the youngsters wrest his painting of his beloved Nuzul from his grasp and throw it out of reach. The piece of paper flies into the centre of the road, and when Nazrul runs to grab it, he is struck by a car. The implicit warning in this bullying incident teaches society that showing unkindness, discrimination, and bullying toward its people with disabilities would only result in further tragedies. Using the context of forgiveness and repentance raises questions regarding humanistic aspect, and they magnify understanding and empathy. Forgiving is equated with how the self participates in constructive worldviews in terms of how to use dilemmas and experiences to evaluate reasons for justifying mistakes, atrocities, and violence. "These profound senses of reasonable agreement and the capacity to seek understanding" (Idrus et al., 2019) are perpetuated in the broader themes of individuals' deviation, sinful or otherwise, that may permit readers to come to terms with human beings' vulnerabilities.

AUTISM IN REAL LIFE

To strike a balance between real-world autism experiences and those represented in *7 Hari* and *Mr Vampire*, one book, *Do You Know Autism?* stands out because it chronicles the first-hand accounts of autistic Malaysian children as told by their caretakers. The fundamental concerns discussed in both *7 Hari* and *Mr Vampire* are contrasted with responses from *Do You Know Autism*?

(a) a vehement belief that handicapped children are a heavenly blessing in the form of divine testing and that they are certainly destined for paradise in the hereafter. As both books demonstrate, death is a transformative experience in which these martyrs are liberated from their physical and mental disabilities; they return to comfort their loved ones in the purest physical form imaginable – symbolically dressed in white, perfect in form, and capable of communicating articulately (*Mr Vampire*, p.645). While there are certain incorrect mainstream conceptions of handicapped children that are prevalent in Malay culture, such as families with impaired children offending God and thus being punished with the birth of a disabled child, Hood et al. (2012) state that the scientific cause(s) of autism are unknown. Furthermore, none of the book's contributors ascribe having an autistic child to divine vengeance. Instead, Muslim contributor Sophia feels that her autistic son, Faris, is a blessing from Allah for her family. Through her experiences parenting Faris, she has gained an appreciation for the richness of life that she would have missed without him. Sophia is extremely appreciative of Allah's plan for her family, as she refers to it, since she has learned to not take life for granted: 'I love my life exactly as it is, and nothing would convince me to change what I have today' (p.43).

(b) Puan Sri Ayuni's worry that autism is an inheritable genetic disorder (*7 Hari*, p.278). Additionally, these erroneous views include the belief that disabled children, particularly in villages, are permitted to run wild, with little concern for personal cleanliness, and that it is pointless to attempt to comprehend them. By the same token, they are deemed worthless; having fallen short of conventional mental capacity expectations, and no one imagines they might be artistic or even athletically inclined. According to Hood et al. (2012), autism is not an inheritable disease but a neurological issue that results in non-typical behavior because autistic children's brains absorb events and responses differently than non-autistic children's brains. They are thus not without benefit, particularly when early intervention in the form of education and life skills

development occurs. Tom Fields-Meyer, one of the contributors, describes how his autistic child possesses savant-like talents when it comes to connecting dates with individuals and events. As a matter of related interest, Art Jamila and Jamery Siga are just two of several exceptional Malaysian individuals who have become art and sports legends, as well as role models for young Malaysians, via serendipity and the generosity of donors.

(c) In both novels, caregivers oscillate between feelings of love for their disabled family members and guilt and sorrow for not doing more for them. Those who are not connected to the differently abled children view them with contempt as exhibited by Puan Sri Ayuni and Mia Adriana. To offset the animosity and repugnance, both authors infused Buntat and Nazrul's lives with gentle benefactors who, although not being blood relatives, prove to be kind generous as shown by Sofi and Uncle Man (*7 Hari*, p.320). All the contributors to Hood et al's (2012) collection agree that education is critical for the cognitive and social development of their children. Most participants expressed profound gratitude that their families had spent time overseas, since this enabled their children to be placed in educational systems that supported and encouraged both caregivers and children. They observed significant gains in their children's cognitive and social abilities that they believed would not have occurred in the Malaysian educational system. Additionally, they revealed that they had more pleasant interactions with people overseas than they had in Malaysia, adding validity to the 2017 UNICEF study on Malaysia's disabled communities. From the perspectives of forgiveness and repentance, two important points could be raised. In a complex scheme of self and resilience, they present a "window" into the delicate nature between imperfection and the selves. The practice of purification discloses the ideological constructions of recognitions of fault, culpability, and accountability. To deny the faults of others and overlook the imperfection of the self is to deprive one of the promises of equality and compassion. By redressing one's wrongdoings, the stories normalise human beings and permit them to identify with self-reformation that is always in construction.

CONCLUSION

The issue of childhood disability in Malaysia, with an emphasis on autism, may be explored from several angles. This study seeks to extract representations of autism from popular literature to ascertain the prevailing perspective of juvenile impairment in Malaysia. As anticipated, certain prejudices and misunderstandings have evolved, but the prevailing belief is that newborns with impairments are a heavenly gift in the form of divine testing and are destined for paradise after death. As these images demonstrate, death is a transformational process in which these innocent beings are liberated from their physical and mental restrictions; they return to comfort their loved ones in the highest imaginable divine form. The similar feeling of solace is evoked by the real-life experiences of practised carers. By comparing fictional and real-life depictions of disabilities, we have demonstrated that the Islamic scheme of things demonstrates how children who may be limited by their disabilities serve as a moral compass for their family members or community members who view disabled people with fear. Adult characters who have strayed from the tenets of Islam are brought back into the fold by demonstrating love towards disabled people blessed with innocence. Through repentance and forgiveness, the Malay novels increase our understanding and acceptance of disadvantaged individuals.

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