

## Decolonization of Feminism in the Malayan Nationalist Movement: A Case Study of Ibu Zain and Shamsiah Fakeh

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### Abstract

The misrepresentation of Southeast Asians throughout history was often the results of the White Man's burden doctrine practiced by Western colonialists, which clouded their perceptions of Southeast Asians, resulting in claims that Southeast Asians were inferior. This Eurocentric idea has distorted the representation of colonized nations in general. However, the worst Eurocentric fallacy is regarding Muslim women in Southeast Asia. They were not only misrepresented but also intimidated by the patriarchal nature of orientalism. Muslim women were, and indeed often still are, viewed as vulnerable victims that need to be saved from their men, making them quarry of double oppression. The most unfortunate part is even many modern white feminists still subscribe to these Eurocentric ideas. Thus, this paper aims to decolonize this narrative by illustrating the history of women's involvement in politics from the time of the Malay Sultanate until post-World War II Malaya. This research also explores women's participation in the far-right and far-left political movements in Malaya, with special references to Ibu Zain and Shamsiah Fakeh. We demonstrate the independence of Malayan women and affirm that they were well-presented in Malayan politics over this period of time.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, Malay Nationalism, Malay Women's Movement, Ibu Zain, Shamsiah Fakeh

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## Introduction to Decolonizing Feminism

The right and left Malay nationalist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Malaya highlighted the struggle of one gender – that is, men – rather than fairly discussing the experiences of all. The narration of the struggles and contributions of the nationalists also focused on men, which reduced and de-emphasized the participation of women in the nationalist movement. In fact, women played an important role in ensuring the Malay nationalist movement was able to build a national consciousness among the public. The contribution of women was one of the main factors that resulted in the success of the Malay nationalist struggle, together with the emancipation of women during the pre-independence era. In the twentieth century, women's emancipation in Malaya was based on nationalism and socialism, in accordance with the theory of third-world feminism. Women were agents of social change but were often depicted as victims. Particularly during colonial rule, women were closely associated with the struggle against imperialist administration and rule. This phenomenon is one of a kind because it originated as social change brought about by economic imbalance that later served as the impetus for a nationalist movement. This is very different from how women were emancipated in the West. The issue with the Eurocentric lens, including in white feminism, is that it tends to see everyone all around the world as having the same experiences. The fact that other parts of the world were still struggling to end colonial rule and did not view the issue of women's emancipation as something of immediate urgency is something that Western ideas tend to ignore.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this research is to redress and decolonize the narrative of two important figures in the right and left wings of the Malayan nationalist movement: Ibu Zain and Shamsiah Fakeh.

## The Origin of the Eurocentric Narrative

Eurocentrism was consolidated in 1492 upon the colonization of the Americas.<sup>4</sup> This act divided the world into two opposing geographic determinism,

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<sup>3</sup> Rahim, A. A2012. . *Shamsiah Fakeh (1924-2008): Kajian Terhadap Perjuangan Wanita Islam di Tanah Melayu*. Master Thesis. (Universiti Malaya) 38-39

<sup>4</sup> JM Blaut in his work 1492: The Debate on Colonialism, Eurocentrism, and History has elaborated immensely on this theory. Blaut explained the Western mindset that Europe was the most important civilization and was in the middle of the world and how this has been fuelled by the 'discovery' of the American continent. He elaborated on this theory by arguing that this so-called 'European miracle' was a phenomenon brought about by Europe's central geographic location after the discovery. Proponents of Eurocentrism argue that democracy, technology, and freedom all originated in Europe and were later spread throughout the world through colonialism. The world was depicted as a passage

where the orient was the opposite of the occident. Eurocentrism can be defined as an ideological worldview that is tilted toward the West. By the seventeenth century, the West experienced a scientific revolution that had begun with the rediscovery of ancient Greek philosophy. This marked the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, which sparked the idea of secularism and separated the church from politics. The nineteenth century was therefore an age of transition for Victorian England, where the medieval construct of society was deconstructed. This action becomes the foundation of Eurocentrism, with Christianity, philosophy, nationalism, racism, and social Darwinism all solidifying factors in its foundation. To acquire raw materials and markets in the nineteenth century, the British began to expand its territory overseas. This Eurocentric worldview led to a form of *noblese oblige* to develop the uncivilized people they conquered.<sup>5</sup>

Eurocentrism gave the rise to Orientalism, where a group of scholars trained by the West helped prolong colonialism by gathering and managing the necessary corpus of knowledge. Mythical ideas regarding the East were created to demonize Asian cultural systems. In order to retain and justify the existence of a colonial empire, the colonial Orientalist synthesized this knowledge. The ‘Orientals’ were seen as without voice, unable to represent themselves and thus in need of being represented. Due to the hegemony involved in this discourse, there is no distinction between pure knowledge and political knowledge. The lack of contextual understanding of events resulted in negative and stereotypical representations of the East, with Western standards used as a yardstick to evaluate the East, oftentimes resulted in the Orient being identified as backward. This became the established narrative to use when discussing the East.<sup>6</sup>

### Decolonizing the Colonial Eurocentric Narration of Women

The Western legacy of androcentrism<sup>7</sup> and misogyny is built within its culture. Western feminism dealt with this heritage critically and constructively within its own terms. They do not, as a recourse, suggest adopting another culture and abandoning of the entire Western heritage. However, when it comes to the ‘innately’ and ‘irreparably’ misogynistic practice of a native people, the remedy in their advocacy seems to be the wholesale adoption of Western culture and the

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and Europe was in the passage, where everything advanced and whatever else outside non-Europe did not.

<sup>5</sup> Asilatul Hanaa Abdullah. 2021. *Colonial Historiography: A non-Western Perspective of the Larut Wars (1861-1875)*. Ph.D. Thesis (International Islamic University) 70-79.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 79-81.

<sup>7</sup> Androcentrism means part of men centred patriarchal construct

abandonment of one's own culture. With colonial domination, this rhetoric become insistent and pronounced. The issues of nationality and culture were permanently forged in the context of these two issues.<sup>8</sup>

The economic and political agenda that came with colonialism produced the dissemination of Western ideas. These ideas were introduced and actively disseminated by Orientalists and servants of the empire(s). The quintessential Western narrative of Islam is of its Otherness and its inferiority. The Western narrative of Muslim women originated from the deduction of clerics that poorly understood Arabic texts, coupled with tales of crusaders and travellers. In addition, a male point of view dominated these narratives, since travellers had limited access to Muslim women. This European narrative often garbled and misconstrued the late nineteenth century Western colonial narrative that runs together these tales and Eurocentrism. Colonial feminism viewed women with the same inferiority as their male counterparts, but for women, they differed in their specific inferiority, each tailored to fit a particular culture they sought to dominate.<sup>9</sup>

The Muslim women was, and still is, characterized as deprived of a voice, hence the colonial feminist requires to speak for them. This is where the Muslim women's voice is methodically silenced and obstructed from being heard. The patriarchy and colonial forms of oppressions are not separate but rather joined – legally, economically, and scholarly – thus even writings on women become authoritarian to their cores. Colonial feminists, based on this atmosphere, manage to make a sweeping statement that all the experiences of the colonized peoples are the same. The men cannot speak while the women are in the shadows. Women are subjected to double subjugations, while men are portrayed only to be saved from the monarchs, women are represented as needing to be saved from the men. The women are denied autonomous agency, the possibility to speak and act for themselves on their own terms; they are represented as submissive objects. Protection of Muslim women from Muslim men is the establisher of a good society in imperialist thinking.<sup>10</sup> The language of feminism was appropriated in the service of assault by the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment, particularly on Islam. The rhetoric of the colonizer substantiated and gave an aura of moral justification to carry out the colonial feminist narrative.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmed L. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University) 128-130.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 149-159

<sup>10</sup> Riach G.K, A Macat. 2017. An Analysis of Gayatri Chakravoty Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak (London: Macat International) 44-46.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed L. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University) 150

Eurocentrism presented the West as having superior hands in emancipating women. Thus, colonialism acted to co-institute modernity. Modernity is only apparent with the advent of colonialism. The history of colonized peoples posits the core ontological differences. Via the employment of secularism, Western ideas are used to analyse women's role in colonised societies. While it is important to understand the Western Eurocentric worldview in discussing this phenomenon, it is important to decolonize the Western idea of feminism. However, it is also crucial that historians substitute these narratives with their own local narratives.<sup>12</sup> The narrative where women are silenced and powerless must be replaced by highlighting Malay women's participation in politics. This is the intention of this paper.

### Malay Women and Politics

Western sources represented Malay women as dominated by Malay men, while the common narrative was that during feudalism, politics was controlled by men. This situation side-lined women.<sup>13</sup> Women's involvement in politics was highlighted only in nationalism following exposure to colonial education. This is true in terms of political parties, although women's participation in court politics is ignored. The objective of this discussion is to highlight women's political participation, which dates back to the feudal era, and to show that women's leadership was not something cultivated by the West, but rather an inherent feature possessed by Malay women.

Malay women, particularly those of noble lineage, were permitted to be involved in court politics. The appointment of these women was based on palace structure; upon the demise of a sultan without a male heir, a woman could be made heir.<sup>14</sup> The daughters of Malay nobilities were also responsible for political stability. Women with leadership prowess would be honored with the title *Seri Kandi*. This title was to show a women's active participation, bravery, and intellectual capability in handling crises in the Malay courts.<sup>15</sup>

In the modern era, the Malay women's involvement in socio-politics begins as early as the 1920s. However, the political awareness of Malay women at that time

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<sup>12</sup> Asilatul Hanaa Abdullah. 2021. *Colonial Historiography: A non -Western Perspective of the Larut Wars (1861-1875)*, 139-140.

<sup>13</sup> Ruzy Suliza Hashim. 1996. 'The Question of Succession: The Role of Women in Traditional Malay Court Politics', *Deep South V.2.N 3*, 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Mazinah Abdul Muin. 1996. *Wanita Melayu dan Kegiatan Sosial, Latihan Ilmiah, Jabatan Sejarah (University Malaya)*: 12-13

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

was rather slow, not radical, and unorganized. Their aim was to increase Malay living standards. However, this movement did not only purely focus on the role of traditional women as wives and mothers, but also established the seeds of political and social awareness, particularly on the subject of poor living standards, poverty, and education. This spirit was inherited from the *Seri Kandi* of the Malay courts, only now this spirit touched the ordinary people after World War II, this which marked the shift in Malay women political awareness. The horror of the war changed Malay women's perspective as well as their participation in politics.<sup>16</sup> Malay men started to appreciate Malay women's involvement as political agents, realizing that women could be mobilized as active political actors considerable grassroots support.<sup>17</sup>

Imperialism and colonialism were perpetrated in Malaya even before the twentieth century. The Portuguese occupation of Melaka from around 1511 was the benchmark for imperialism and colonialism in Malaya. This was followed by the exchange of colonial power to the Netherlands (1641), British (1824), and Japan (1941), ending with the British from 1945 before Malaya was declared an independent and sovereign country in 1957. Thus, for 446 years Malaya was colonized, significantly impacting the socio-political roles of the Malays in Malaya.<sup>18</sup>

The transition of Malay political culture in the colonial era began with the rise of nationalism, which emerged as a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the British administration. This awareness was further strengthened when Malays who had received religious education in the Middle East or secular education at institutions of higher learning abroad began returning to Malaya. These individuals came forward to contribute ideas to Malayan society, with many becoming important people in mobilizing nationalist movements and political organizations. The pioneers of this group were mostly educated in the Malay stream such as at the Sultan Idris Teachers College (SITC). Among the figures involved were Ibrahim Yaakob and Ishak Haji. Their political movement can be classified as left-wing nationalism, pioneered by the establishment of the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM), and later sustained by *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM) and its affiliates

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<sup>16</sup> See Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied. 2013. 'Against Multiple Hegemonies: Radical Malay Women in Colonial Malaya', *Journal of Social History* vol. 47 no. 1:154.

<sup>17</sup> Karim WJ, 1992. *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam* (Boulder: Westview Press): 100

<sup>18</sup> Milner RS, 1978, *Politics and Government in Malaysia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press,) 38-39. Additional explanation on British colonial policy, see on Donna J. Amoroso. 1998, 'Dangerous politics and the Malay nationalist movement', 1945-47. *South East Asia Research*, NOVEMBER 1998, Vol. 6, No. 3, 254-256. See also Mustapha Hussain & Insun Sony Mustapha. & Jomo K. S 2005. *Malay nationalism before UMNO: the memoirs of Mustapha Hussain*. (Cheras, Kuala Lumpur : Singapore): Utusan Publications & Distributors ; Distributed outside Malaysia by Singapore University Press, 91&92.

such as *Angkatan Pemuda Insaf* (API) and continued by *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (AWAS).<sup>19</sup>

### The Malay Nationalism

The Malay nationalist movement's existence was clearly because of the agenda for the national liberation of the Malays from the colonial powers. An early nationalist movement appeared through mainstream media and literature to preach politics through religious consciousness among the Malays. The early 1900s witnessed the educated Malays elite actively establishing organizations related to literature, education, and welfare to inspire changes in Malayan society.<sup>20</sup> A major shift in political consciousness among the Malays gradually occurred during the 1930s to 1940s, whereby many political organizations appeared as a form of direct opposition to and criticism of colonial policies.

### The Origin of the Right & Left Wing Movements in Malaya

There is no exact definition of what is meant by right-wing, since this term was coined by the colonial narration. In the discussion of right-wing and left-wing movements in Malaya, let us quote from Malaya second Deputy Prime Minister Tun Dr. Ismail:

“Freedom Fighters in those years were divided into two groups. One group believed that freedom could only be achieved through revolutionary means, whereas the other group believed in the constitutional processes British colonialists had two alternatives, namely either to agree to grant independence to the moderate group or to take firm action in a continuously combative manner in the face of 'armed struggle. The British government decided to concede to the nationalist group which chose the constitutional path and possessed the basis for compromise with other ethnic communities in this country. Indeed, independence was achieved by the moderate group, but history has also shown that the radicals' nationalist group also

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<sup>19</sup> Mohd Faidz Mohd Zain. 2011. 'Pengaruh Nasionalisma Melayu Mewarnai Budaya Politik Melayu Dalam UMNO', *Jurnal Melayu* (7): 193-216.

<sup>20</sup> Donna J. Amoroso. 1998. *Dangerous politics and the Malay nationalist movement, 1945–47*: 254. See also Radin Soenarno. 1960. 'Malay Nationalism, 196-1941', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Mar., Vol. 1, No. 1, Nationalism in Malaya),6-8.

made its contribution toward the achievement of independence.”<sup>21</sup>

The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time p 211

Therefore, the colonial interpretation of ‘right-wing’ in the case of Malaya simply meant a diplomatic struggle that was nevertheless receptive toward colonial influence, and was, importantly, ready to protect the interests of the colonizers after independence.

On the other hand, the term ‘left-wing’ emerged to discuss the Malay political progress during the post-Second World War period. The term was also crucially used to mark the character of the Malay political standard; that is, whether the movement was pro-colonial or otherwise.<sup>22</sup> The emergence of various political groups following the 1930s marked the Malay consciousness regarding their political rights. The KMM (est. 1938), for instance, had become the pioneer for all nationalist movements in Malaya. KMM is regarded as the main root of the Malay nationalist movements after the Second World War in Malaya. Therefore, the existence of various right-wing groups was inspired by the establishment of the KMM and its role in the political alternation.

From the declaration of the Malayan Union until the Malayan Emergency period, the left-wing Malayan nationalist movements were labelled as radical and dangerous. Thus, their disagreement with the British policy was transformed through anti-colonial propaganda; they were declared as a threat to British interests as well as to Malayan society. However, Rustam has argued that the left-wing groups’ character was progressive and socialist, thus their concerns were essentially for the social benefit of the people of Malaya. They were labelled as radical, as their demand was to seek for direct independence, based on the view that Malaya was fully undermined by the British policy.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the ‘leftists’ were unable to catch a glimpse of co-operation, either with the ‘rightists’ or with the rejected colonial regime.

### **The Malay Women in the Nationalist Movement**

Following the British policy, British colonial rule appeared to be applied exclusively to the man. The Malay women had become the victim of the patriarchal practices whereby their right to education was ignored, as were many other rights.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/911>

<sup>22</sup> Yeo Kim Wah. 1973. ‘Anti-Federation Movement in Malaysia’, *JSEAS* 4, no.1 (Mar): 34.

<sup>23</sup> Rustam A. Sani. 2008. *1944-2008, Social roots of the Malay left: an analysis of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda*. Petaling Jaya: SIDR, 27-33. See also Raden Soenarno. 1960. ‘Malay Nationalism 1896-1941’, *JSEAS* 1:1, (Mar): 20



However, there were several Malay women who fought for their right to education, thus their minds were enlightened and they became unafraid to speak out for their rights. In the case of the nationalist movement in Malaya, education among the Malays built the consciousness of nationalism among the ordinary people. Hence, education played a crucial role for Malay women to induce themselves in the nationalist movement.<sup>24 25</sup> This can be seen in the writing of *Bulan Melayu* Magazine

“We already know that there is no other medicine for ourselves and the Malay race but education, are we better off than yesterday? Look, even the *Sakais* <sup>26</sup>already in school” - *Bulan Melayu*, June 1935, p. 26.

The early wave of women’s participation in the Malayan nationalist movement can be traced back to the Japanese Occupation (1941-1945). Women’s involvement became significant when the main objective for their participation in the movement was closely related to women’s rights and nationalist issues. Many historians agree that the ideology of Malay nationalism became the key factor for women’s participation in the movement. Their position in the movement showed how important their roles were in building the national consciousness, particularly among Malay women.<sup>27</sup> Although they had a common agenda, the two main figures of this research manifested their struggles in different ways in the movement, to the success of which they dedicated themselves.

This research presents the figures of right-wing women nationalists and left-wing women nationalists in Malaya as crucial to decolonizing the narrative regarding their social status and their contribution to the struggle. The narrative for these figures is based on their memoirs as the main discussion on the decolonization of feminism among women in Malaya during that period. In the case of Ibu Zain, her thoughts were reflected through the movement of *Kaum Ibu* in

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<sup>24</sup> Rustam A. Sani. 2008. *1944-2008. Social roots of the Malay left: an analysis of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> In pre-Independence Malaya, Malay women were far behind in terms of education compared to men. Even though the number of women obtaining an education was increasing every year, the amount is still not significant when compared to the number of men. In the 1928 census, only 9,560 girls were enrolled in school compared to 46,244 boys. See: *Bulan Melayu*, Jun 1930, p 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Sakais* are a tribe of aboriginal Malay

<sup>27</sup> Khoo, Kay Kim. 1994. ‘Malaysian Women’s Participation in Politics: A Historical Perspective’. In *Malaysian Women Creating Their Political Awareness*, 1-7. Haas, R. & Rahmah Hashim (eds.) (Kuala Lumpur: Asian Institute for Development Communication) The consciousness of the women’s emancipation as women too can be part of the contributors for the nationalist movement.

UMNO, while Shamsiah Fakeh's journey of struggles shifted her from AWAS to the PKM's 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment.

### **The Right-Wing Malay Nationalist: Ibu Zain**

Around the years 1946-48, *Persatuan Kaum Ibu* arose as a division within UMNO that struggled for Malay women, aiming to unite them and fight for women's rights. This was despite the existence of many women's associations at the time, including *Kaum Ibu Rembau* under Halimahton Abdul Majid, *Perikatan Melayu Perak* led by Puteh Mariah Rashid, and *Persatuan Kaum Ibu Selangor* under the leadership of Saleha Mohammed Ali. They all called to strive against the implementation of the Malayan Union. In 1946, the call was made to unify these organizations; by 1947, *Persatuan Kaum Ibu* changed its name to *Jabatan Kaum Ibu* and again in 1949 to *Pergerakan Kaum Ibu*. Alongside being a machination for UMNO, *Persatuan Kaum Ibu* developed women's political awareness and awareness on importance of women's participation in politics. It was a strong women's movement that endeavoured for women's rights.<sup>28</sup>

Ibu Zain, whose full name was Zainun Sulaiman, was the second women to lead *Persatuan Kaum Ibu*. She was chosen for this due to several factors. First, she was the holder of the title of the 'Mother of Malay Women's Liberation', which was assumed via her struggle to uphold the position and dignity of women in Malaya before the Second World War. Ibu Zain played a crucial role in acting as a preacher to women, aiming to help raise awareness among Malay women who were beginning to be influenced by the Japanese military culture, particularly regarding behaviour and morals, which many saw as contrary to the teachings of Islam. Ibu Zain also helped to restore the spirit and spirituality of Malay women that was compromised as a result of the humiliation and degradation brought upon them by the Japanese army, with its despicable attitudes that reduced women to little more than sex slaves. Secondly, Ibu Zain was a nationalist fighter among the *Kaum Ibu* in Malaya until the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. She was in line with Dato 'Onn Jaafar who at that time was fighting hard for Malay independence. Ibu Zain joined the Malay Movement of Johor, led by Dato 'Onn, in 1946 to 1949, with the main purpose of opposing the British plans for the Malayan Union and demanding the independence of Malaya. Third, Ibu Zain was the earliest female author and writer in Malaya, with the publication of *Bulan Melayu* magazine in June 1930. She was responsible for leading the women's-themed magazine until November 1941,

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<sup>28</sup> Ramlah Adam. 1977. 'Sejarah Awal Pergerakan Kaum Ibu', *Jernal Sejarah*, Universiti Malaya Jilid XI 100-17.

when, due to the outbreak of World War II, the magazine ceased publication. Thus, a study of Ibu Zain and her thoughts on women in the Malay sphere is pertinent in decolonizing feminism. She proved that a woman possessed her own agency to emancipate herself while staying true to one tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Ibu Zain was born on 22 January 1903 in Kampung Nyalas, Melaka, and received her early education at Kampung Belanda Methodist Girls' Primary School, in Tengkeru, Melaka. She considered a pioneer in the field of women's education and leadership, starting her career as a probationary teacher at Bandar Maharani Girls' School, Muar, before being as a visiting teacher for Batu Pahat and Muar District Girls' Schools. In 1927, Ibu Zain took on a greater responsibility when she was entrusted to be the Supervisor of all girls' schools throughout the state of Johor. She laboured to improve the standard of education in the nation despite also being active in voluntary organizations, establishing the Federation of Malay Female Teachers in 1930 and leading the organization for 19 years. Ibu Zain also established the association of *Ibu Sepakat* in 1945 during Japanese Occupation of Malaya, when Japanese belligerency towards women was rampant. The establishment of *Ibu Sepakat* connected Ibu Zain to the political arena, when the group joined the movement led by Dato 'Onn Jaafar in resisting the colonialists, meaning that, indirectly, *Ibu Sepakat* also made it easier for Dato 'Onn Jaafar to increase the pressure against the British. Ibu Zain's political career intensified when she was appointed as the Head of the National Donation Collection for the Peninsular Malay Movement in 1949. Later, she was appointed as the second leader of *Persatuan Kaum Ibu* from 1950 to 1953, and in 1959, Ibu Zain was chosen as Johor State Representative representing the UMNO party. A year later, she was elected as the representative for the South Pontian constituency. Ibu Zain's struggle and devotion, however, came to a halt when she sadly passed away on 2 April 1989 due to stomach cancer.<sup>30</sup>

Among Ibu Zain's notable contributions were her writings on Malay women, known as *Konsep Keperibadian dan Kesantunan Wanita Melayu*. The essence of being a Malay woman, from the perspective of Ibu Zain, was based on the elements of personality and decency. The symbol of the Malay woman's personality is formed based on her duty as a Muslim – to strengthen her Islamic faith by seeking religious knowledge first before other sciences. The personality of Malay women is also interpreted through the wisdom of their minds, especially in their efforts to defend

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<sup>29</sup> Yassin, K.M. 2019. Konsep Keperibadian dan Kesantunan Wanita Melayu Menurut Perspektif Ibu Zain. *International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy, and Language*, 2(6),0 1-13.

<sup>30</sup> <http://malaycivilization.com.my/exhibits/show/tokoh-pemikir-alam-melayu/ibuzain>, accessed 15 May 2022.

Eastern cultures and customs from being tainted with destructive and misleading perverse Western cultures. This is based on the way Malay women behave and speak, which is described as full of tenderness and gracefulness. Their decency is also refined through the way they adorn and fashion themselves, such as through the traditional *baju kurung*, which is said to have its own value of beauty and uniqueness. Then this must continue to be preserved and inherited for the benefit and guidance of future Malay women.<sup>31</sup> Thus, despite Ibu Zain's active participation in politics while promoting women's emancipation, her work is a testament that Malay women's feminism operates differently from those of the West: it operates within the framework of Malay culture, which is guided by Islamic teaching. Emancipation does not exist outside this framework, rather it exists in a vacuum.

### The Left-Wing Malay Nationalist: Shamsiah Fakeh

Shamsiah Fakeh's life story is an example of an ordinary Malay woman's life during the British colonial period. The social and economic status of the 'common' Malay people during this time were very low as the result of the British double standard policy. Shamsiah was born to a poor family in Negri Sembilan in 1924. Although she experienced an early marriage, Shamsiah was fortunate to obtain basic education, unlike many other common Malay women at the time. She had the opportunity to receive religious education in an Islamic school in Sumatra as well as in Kuala Pilah.<sup>32</sup> Her religious understanding and the influence of the Indonesian nationalist movement contributed to her struggle for nationalism and women's emancipation in Malaya, becoming one of the most reputable 'leftists' in the history of Malayan nationalism.

The combination of religious lectures as well as the influence of significant members of the *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM) led Shamsiah to become close to the nationalist movement. Between 1945 to early 1946, Shamsiah officially participated with PKMM, and her fiery speeches brought much support and helped built the national consciousness among the Malays, especially women. Speeches made by Shamsiah helped women to speak up about their dissatisfaction and the

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<sup>31</sup> Yassin, K. M. 2019. 'Konsep Keperibadian dan Kesantunan Wanita Melayu Menurut Perspektif Ibu Zain'. *International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy, and Language*, 2(6), 1-13.

<sup>32</sup> Shamsiah Fakeh. 2007. *Shamsiah Fakeh, dari AWAS ke Rejimen Ke-10*. Petaling Jaya: SIDR, 15-19. Shamsiah got married at the age of 16. It was a common practice of the Malays during that time to send the daughter for an early marriage if the number of siblings was high, especially among the poor villagers.

importance of women directly associating themselves with national issues, rather than as just silent supporters.<sup>33</sup>

Shamsiah was appointed as the leader of the women wing's in PKMM to replace Aishah Ghani in [1947. The PKMM's women wing then became known as the League of Aware Women or *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (AWAS). During her position as AWAS' leader, Shamsiah's struggle not only focused on dogmatic issues, but also the apprehension of women's emancipation, based on her experiences as a traditional Malay woman and a commoner. She argued that women in Malaya had been undermined by feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism. In this sense, women were easily manipulated by men, thus Malay society was bound to the ancient custom and religious rules.

The involvement of Shamsiah with *Pati Komunis Malaya* (PKM) in 1948 indeed was a transitional form of expression against the colonial government. Through AWAS, she attended training camps and officially became a member of the PKM's 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment. The 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment narrowed down Shamsiah's activities, and she became a guerilla who fought the colonial government through armed struggle.<sup>34</sup> Although she was involved with communism, she retained her religious beliefs until the end of her life in September 2008.<sup>35</sup>

The contributions of Shamsiah Fakeh were therefore clearly for the sake of national liberation as well as for women's emancipation. Moreover, her actions inspired many Malay women – from then until now – in the struggle to be free from imperialism and colonialism. Shamsiah's own struggle was derived from an unpleasant series of divorces, which stimulated her awareness of the importance of women protecting themselves from feudal and customary oppression.<sup>36</sup> Her involvement with the nationalist movement showed and taught that women could make their own decisions and be equally significant to hold important positions in political affairs. During her leadership in AWAS, she encouraged the members to speak up for their rights. Although, as the high committees of PKM had warned her, she unwillingly compromised her tolerance of the double standards of male dominance in PKM policy. Despite all this, Shamsiah managed to stand decisively to

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 33-35. The 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment was the PKM's Malay wing's combatants as the PKM's effort to attain more support from the Malay community during the Malayan Emergency period.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 52-56,65&66. The training camp was conducted by PKM in June 1948, as a special training camp for the Malay members. The recruitment formed a special guerilla for the Malay community known as the 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment on 1 February 1949.

<sup>35</sup> Shahidan Jaafar. 2009. 'Komunisme tidak mengubah agama Shamsiah Fakeh', *Al-Islam* January 2009: 34-36.

<sup>36</sup> Malayan Security Service, Political Intelligence Journal No. 10/1948, MS Indian Ocean S. 251 in Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Against Multiple Hegemonies: Radical Malay Women in Colonial Malaya*, 171.

counter the inequality of gender, both internally and externally. Therefore, we can conclude that Shamsiah's viewed that the struggle for national liberation should be prioritized as a necessary step for women's emancipation.<sup>37</sup>

Although the legacies of Ibu Zain and Shamsiah Fakeh should not be directly compared, as their journeys differed, they both reveal that the notion of equal rights for both genders in the political status quo must be highlighted, maintained, and commemorated, especially by the post-independent generations.

## Conclusion

The response to women's roles in the Malayan nationalist movement had a significant impact on the struggle for the country's liberation. Women's participation in the nationalist movement also allowed them to articulate women's rights and socio-educational issues in their struggles. This action undeniably attracted much support from women for the movement. This became a '*serampang dua mata*' ('double-edged sword') for women's emancipation throughout the political arena, as they were able to give their views and were handed a significant position in the movement. In the cases of Ibu Zain and Shamsiah Fakeh, both figures were given political roles at the same time as they were fighting for women's emancipation. Despite the priority at the time being given to the struggle for independence, the essence of women's emancipation within it cannot be overlooked. Hence, their position in the movement is a clear manifestation of the brave and strong Malay women, who cannot be contemplated as weak and compliant under the dominant colonial patriarchal point of view of that period.

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<sup>37</sup> Shamsiah Fakeh. 2007. *Shamsiah Fakeh, dari AWAS ke Rejimen Ke-10*: 44-45.

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