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Gender Subversion in *Syair Khadamuddin*: A Gynocritical Study of Sabariah's Character

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Abstract

This study investigates the subversion of gender norms in *Syair Khadamuddin*, a 19th-century Malay narrative poem authored by Aisyah Sulaiman, through a gynocritical framework that emphasizes dialogic exchanges among female characters. The research addresses the problem of patriarchal dominance in classical Malay literature, which typically marginalizes women's voices and upholds male-centered moral codes. In contrast, this rare female-authored *syair* offers a distinctive portrayal of women who actively negotiate their roles in relation to marriage, sexuality, morality, and obedience. Guided by Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, the study focuses on dialogic episodes in which women critique their husbands' behavior, question the limits of obedience within Islamic and social contexts, and share their personal experiences. Using textual analysis, the research uncovers moments of female agency, where moral reasoning and collective consciousness emerge as acts of subtle resistance. The findings reveal that the character Sabariah, alongside other women, constructs a counter-narrative of female virtue based on ethical deliberation rather than passive submission. These female-centered dialogues challenge the conventional representation of women as silent or subordinate, positioning the *syair* as a dialogic space of empowerment. The study concludes that *Syair Khadamuddin* exemplifies how classical texts authored by women can inscribe gendered resistance from within patriarchal genres, thus enriching feminist literary discourse.

Introduction

Classical Malay literature has long been dominated by male authorship and androcentric perspectives that reinforce patriarchal values, often portraying women as passive, obedient, and morally bound to traditional domestic roles (Braginsky, 2009; Sweeney, 1987). Within this corpus, women's voices are not only marginalized but often constructed through the male gaze, which limits the possibility of female agency and critique. While feminist scholarship in Malay literary studies has recently begun to challenge these canonical (Salleh, 1997; Yusoff, 2016), the presence and contribution of female authors from the classical period remain underexplored. One such rare instance is *Syair Khadamuddin*, a 19th-century narrative poem written by Aisyah Sulaiman, which offers a unique opportunity to examine how a woman writer navigates and potentially subverts gender norms from within a male-dominated literary tradition.

This article situates *Syair Khadamuddin* within the framework of gynocriticism as formulated by Elaine Showalter, emphasizing the textual space where women's voices and experiences become central, rather than peripheral (Jun-feng, 2011; Rahaman, 2010; Rani, 2013). While previous studies on

syair have often focused on structure, morality, and Islamization (Matheson, 1979; Teeuw, 1980), few have paid attention to the dialogic strategies employed by female characters, especially in works authored by women. This study argues that the dialogic interactions among female characters in *Syair Khadamuddin* function as a narrative mechanism to resist patriarchal ideologies by foregrounding moral reasoning, collective reflection, and subtle critique of gender norms.

The central research question posed in this study is: How does *Syair Khadamuddin*, through its female-centered dialogues, construct a counter-narrative to dominant patriarchal values in classical Malay literature? In addressing this question, the study highlights a scholarly gap in feminist literary criticism of syair, where female-authored texts are rarely analyzed for their subversive potential. By focusing on the voices and agency of women within the syair's narrative structure, this article contributes to the state-of-the-art by demonstrating how classical texts can house gendered resistance and how literary discourse authored by women may offer alternative visions of female virtue and power. This research thus brings a novel perspective to the intersection of gender, authorship, and narrative in classical Malay literature.

Methodology

This study aims to analyze gender subversion in *Syair Khadamuddin* through a qualitative literary text analysis, applying Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism as its primary theoretical framework. Gynocriticism positions women as cultural and narrative subjects, focusing not only on the representation of women in literature but also on how female authors write their own experiences and construct expressive spaces distinct from male-dominated literary traditions (Showalter, 1984).

The analysis concentrates on selected passages of the *syair* that feature dialogues among female characters, particularly the scene of a women's gathering in which issues such as marriage, obedience, and the treatment of wives are openly discussed. These female-centered dialogues are examined as dialogic structures that reflect collective female consciousness and act as forms of discursive resistance to patriarchal norms.

The data consists of textual excerpts from *Syair Khadamuddin*, which are analyzed using thematic discourse analysis to identify recurring patterns of meaning related to fidelity, rejection of domestic violence, resistance to forced marriage, and female solidarity. In addition to thematic concerns, attention is given to narrative structure, poetic style, and language choices that support or disrupt conventional gender ideologies.

The analysis is contextualized within the socio-historical framework of 19th-century Malay literature and informed by critical dialogues with existing scholarship on women's writing in the Malay world. Through this methodological approach, the study seeks to uncover the subversive strategies enacted by female characters in the *syair* and to demonstrate the contribution of *Syair Khadamuddin* to feminist literary discourse in the Southeast Asian context.

Finding and Discussion

Analysis of *Syair Khadamuddin* reveals several important findings related to the representation of women and resistance to patriarchal norms. Three major findings emerge from the text:

1. **The Presence of Dialogue among Female Characters as a Space for Collective Discourse**

   The text presents an extended scene involving conversations among several women—wives, widows, and housewives—gathered in a single assembly. They openly discuss their experiences within domestic life, including symbolic violence, their husbands' betrayal, and the social expectation of absolute obedience.

2. **Sabariah as an Empowered and Autonomous Subject**

   Sabariah is portrayed not merely as a loyal wife, but also as an autonomous figure who chooses not to remarry, raises her children independently, and resists both social pressure and provocation from those around her. Her loyalty is depicted as a conscious and deliberate choice rather than an act of passive submission.

3. **Solidarity and the Emergence of Gender Awareness among Female Characters**

   These dialogues reflect the development of collective awareness regarding gender injustice. Several female characters, who initially accepted absolute obedience as natural, begin to question the legitimacy of their husbands' behavior and express regret over their previous unquestioning submission.

In addition, here is Sabariah's strategy of subversion in Khadamuddin's poem, which combines aspects of narrative action, symbolic meaning, and theoretical interpretation based on gynocriticism.

Table 1. Sabariah's narrative strategy

No.	Sabariah's Narrative Strategy	Forms of Action/Speech	Subversive Meaning	Gynocritical Interpretation	Verse
1	Refusing to remarry	Rejects marriage proposals from nobles and relatives despite persistent pressure	Rejects the role of widow as a social-transactional object; preserves the integrity of love and bodily autonomy	A rejection of patriarchal structures that control women's bodies and destinies	Banyaklah datang si bangsawan Hendak meminang berulang-ulang Sabariah diam tidak berkenan Cinta yang satu tiada hilang
2	Raising and educating her son independently	Consoles and educates Hasan with moral values, piety, and a sense of justice	Affirms the role of women as moral and educational agents, not merely domestic caretakers	Women as intellectual and spiritual inheritors, beyond biological functions	Diajarnya Hasan si anak tersayang Tentang adab dan hukum yang terang Supaya hidup tiada menyimpang Berpegang pada iman nan lapang
3	Leading female-centered conversations during the gathering	Facilitates open dialogue among women on obedience, domestic violence, and male leadership	Creates a collective space for women's shared experiences and challenges to absolute obedience	Realization of a "female textual community" (Showalter) within the narrative	Berkatalah janda dengan suara pilu "Mengapa nasibku begini selalu?" Sabariah menjawab dengan kalbu "Taat tiada harus membuta seru"
4	Expressing sorrow as a form of moral strength	Publicly and poetically expresses grief,	Emotions are not signs of weakness but sources of	Repositioning female emotion as a	Malam berdoa si istri setia Tangisnya jatuh tiada sia-sia

		longing, and prayers to God	spiritual and moral resilience amid social pressure	resistive force in the narrative	Di hadapan Tuhan ia berkata "Lindungi aku dan Hasan tercinta"
5	Avoiding direct interaction with male suitors	Delegates Hasan to represent her in meetings; avoids direct contact and subtly declines	Exercises control over her public and private spaces, asserting narrative authority over her body and dignity	Representation of female autonomy and agency in navigating social space	Sabariah tahu datang yang hendak Disuruhnya Hasan menyampaikan cakap Sopan menolak tiada menolak Menjaga harga dan batas yang tetap
6	Practicing selective and spiritual obedience	Submits to divine commandments rather than societal pressures; refuses forced marriage or social dictates that conflict with her beliefs	Asserts spirituality as a source of ethical autonomy, not a tool for patriarchal justification	Feminine ethics grounded in active spiritual subjectivity rather than passive compliance	Bukan kerna adat aku menolak Tapi kerana iman menjadi galak Tuhanlah tempat patuhku bertolak Bukan suara yang memaksaku galak

Discussion of this study identifies several key findings from the gynocritical reading of *Syair Khadamuddin*, highlighting the ways in which the text challenges patriarchal norms and foregrounds women's agency within a classical Malay literary context. Three main dimensions emerge from the analysis: the construction of female voice, the role of women-centered dialogue as counter-discourse, and the emotional narrative as a cultural strategy of resistance.

1. Female Voice and Gynocritical Repositioning

Using Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, this study positions Sabariah not as a mere representation, but as a subject who actively negotiates her gendered position (Jun-feng, 2011; Showalter, 1984). Her refusal to remarry, commitment to independently raising her son, and initiation of collective dialogue demonstrate a reconstruction of female agency. Unlike the idealized submissive female characters in male-authored *syair* such as *Syair Siti Zubaidah* (Matheson, 1979), Sabariah emerges as an autonomous moral figure grounded in spiritual and ethical authority.

2. Dialogic Spaces as Counter-Discourse

The *syair* includes an extended women's gathering scene that serves as a dialogic space for collective reflection on domestic life, obedience, and the abuse of male authority. These female characters articulate dissent against absolute submission and begin to question the moral legitimacy of patriarchal expectations. In line with Showalter's notion of a "female textual community," these dialogues become spaces of shared resistance, creating discursive alternatives within a traditionally male-centric genre (Nodeh & Pourgiv, n.d.; Petković, 2014; Showalter, 1984; Tarigan et al., 2021).

3. Emotional Narrative as Cultural Resistance

Sabariah's expressions of sorrow, longing, and spiritual devotion are not framed as weakness but as moral protest. The text reconfigures emotion as a source of strength, enabling ethical self-

determination and resistance to social pressure. This challenges common portrayals of emotion in classical literature as feminine fragility, instead positioning affective experience as a tool for reclaiming agency (Arba'iyah, 2021; Avery, 2024; Fang, 2011; Gilbert & Gubar, 2000; Whidden, 2013).

4. Women as Agents of Social Meaning

By centering female voices and moral reasoning, *Syair Khadamuddin* disrupts conventional narrative structures where women are often objectified or silenced. Sabariah speaks for herself and builds solidarity through discourse, forming a collective female identity that counters dominant gender ideologies. This reorientation marks a significant intervention into the patriarchal narrative traditions of classical Malay literature (Hussain et al., 2020; Indayana et al., 2022; Jamian, 2016; Ming, 2015; Rahman, 2020).

Conclusion

Syair Khadamuddin, authored by Aisyah Sulaiman, offers a unique intervention in classical Malay literary tradition by presenting women not only as characters, but as narrative agents who construct meaning, build solidarity, and resist patriarchal constraints. Through the lens of gynocriticism, the study reveals that Sabariah is portrayed not merely as a faithful wife, but as an empowered and morally independent woman who navigates social pressures with critical awareness.

One of the most significant contributions of the *syair* lies in its dialogic structure, which foregrounds female-to-female conversations as spaces of mutual reflection and resistance. These dialogues function as counter-discourses, enabling women to question the legitimacy of imposed obedience and articulate ethical alternatives.

In reading *Syair Khadamuddin* as a subversive literary text, this study highlights the emancipatory potential embedded within female-authored classical works. It demonstrates that traditional poetic forms can accommodate progressive gender discourses when appropriated by women writers. This work expands the scope of feminist literary criticism in the Malay world and calls for greater scholarly attention to the contributions of women authors in shaping local literary and cultural consciousness.

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