

Engendering a Maqasid Worldview of Gender Roles in Malaysia: A Content Analysis of Che Husna Azhari's *Mariah* (2003) and S.M. Zakir's *a Sword-Fighter's Love* (2009)

BITARA

Volume 8, Issue 4, 2025: 65-82
© The Author(s) 2025
e-ISSN: 2600-9080
<http://www.bitarajournal.com>
Received: 22 July 2025
Accepted: 18 August 2025
Published: 25 September 2025

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Abstract

The discourse on gender roles remains one of the most debated issues in modern Malaysia. While the country's identity is rooted in religious and cultural heritage, a minority continues to promote gender debates through Western liberal philosophies, feminist critiques, and secular paradigms that emphasise individualism and relativism, often diverging from Malaysia's socio-religious foundations. This study contributes to gender scholarship by proposing an alternative framework based on the maqasid al-shari'ah and *watanic* jurisprudence, offering holistic, Quranic approaches to understanding gender. The research employs a qualitative case study design, analysing two Malaysian short stories written in English: Che Husna Azhari's *Mariah* (2003) and S. M. Zakir's *A Sword-Fighter's Love* (2009). Methodologically, the analysis combines the maqasid al-shari'ah with the *watanic* jurisprudential continuum, which contrasts Qur'anic integration of law and revelation with secular dichotomies that separate them. This dual approach enables a contextual reading that is both normatively grounded and culturally coherent. Findings indicate that, when examined through the maqasid-*watanic* framework, gender roles in the texts reflect balance, complementarity, and mutual responsibility, serving as divinely entrusted functions that uphold moral order, social cohesion, and spiritual well-being. This contrasts with secular-liberal interpretations, which often reduce gender to a matter of individual autonomy or power relations. The study argues that embedding maqasid and *watanic* jurisprudence in gender discourse allows for a more coherent and civilisationally authentic worldview, preserving Malaysia's Islamic identity while critically engaging with global debates.

Keywords: Gender role, Maqasid al-shari'ah, Watanic jurisprudence analysis, *Mariah*, *A Sword-Fighter's Love*.



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Cite This Article:

Mohd. Ezamir Azral Mohd. Azrul & Wan Ahmad Fauzi Wan Husain. (2025). Engendering a Maqasid Worldview of Gender Roles in Malaysia: A Content Analysis of Che Husna Azhari's *Mariah* (2003) and S.M. Zakir's *a Sword-Fighter's Love* (2009). *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 8(4): 65-82.

Introduction

Gender roles continue to be a contested discourse in contemporary Malaysia. Scholars note that while the country remains deeply anchored in religious and cultural traditions, certain segments of society approach gender through Western liberal philosophies, feminist critiques, and secularistic paradigms that emphasise individualism and relativism.

It is important to distinguish between the temporal meaning of *secular* and the ideological stance of *secularism*, the latter being described as *secularistic* to capture its normative implications (Husain, 2025). Such perspectives, however, often neglect the Islamic worldview, which conceptualises gender not simply as a social construct but as a divinely entrusted role characterised by balance, responsibility, and complementarity. The resulting disjunction between imported theoretical models and indigenous religious-philosophical frameworks has been linked to growing misconceptions among Malaysian youths, with potentially significant moral, social, and spiritual consequences. In Islam, the roles of men and women are integral to preserving human dignity and social harmony. The Qur'an and Sunnah establish gender distinctions not for hierarchy or subjugation but to fulfil complementary responsibilities in accordance with the *maqasid al-sharī'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law). Within this framework, gender roles are essential for protecting faith (*dīn*), preserving lineage (*nasl*), and safeguarding dignity (*‘ird*), thereby linking gender discourse directly to the preservation of the common good.

However, human rights narratives in Malaysia have often marginalised this *maqasid* worldview, adopting interpretive models shaped by globalised secularistic ideologies. Literature, as both a cultural reflection and a medium of critique, provides an important space to explore these tensions. The short stories *Mariah* (2003) by Che Husna Azhari and *A Sword-Fighter's Love* (2009) by S. M. Zakir depict gender roles within the Malaysian socio-religious context while also engaging with broader questions of identity and morality. This article does not aim to offer a detailed doctrinal analysis.

The current study combines *maqasid* analysis with *watani* jurisprudence methodology to address this tension. *Watani* jurisprudence shifts legal and epistemological inquiry towards a Qur'anic worldview by contrasting two models of authority: the continuum, which integrates divine revelation with governance and social order, and the dichotomy, which separates law from metaphysical foundations. (Husain, 2017). When combined with *maqasid*, this approach provides a dual critique: exposing the limitations of secular paradigms while reconstructing gender roles that align with *tawhidic* unity, indigenous ethos, and divine sovereignty.

There is a pressing need for an alternative framework that re-engages gender discourse with Islamic epistemology. By employing the *maqasid al-sharī'ah* and *watani* jurisprudence, this study aims to reconstruct a worldview of gender roles that is both faithful to Malaysia's cultural-religious identity and responsive to contemporary challenges. Accordingly, this study pursues three main objectives, to highlight the representations of male and female roles in the selected texts. To evaluate these portrayals through the *maqasid* principle, and to reconstruct alternative gender roles consistent with both *maqasid* objectives and the *watani* continuum framework. This integrated approach contributes to Malaysian gender discourse by proposing a spiritually grounded, culturally coherent, and socially relevant worldview.

Problem Statement

Malaysian youths increasingly display misconceptions regarding healthy and functional gender roles. Contemporary narratives on gender, shaped by Western liberalism, feminist critiques, queer theories, and popular culture, often disregard Malaysia's socio-religious values and spiritual foundations. These imported discourses promote relativism and individualism, which weaken the normative balance between male and female roles within the Malaysian context.

The consequences are evident in the growing prevalence of problematic behaviours among youths, including rising cases of underage sexual activity, teen pregnancies, and exploitative relationships. Reports highlight a disturbing trend where consensual sexual activity now involves individuals as young as early adolescents, underscoring a systemic failure of current approaches to address the root causes of this crisis. Such developments reveal that existing policies and educational strategies have been largely reactive, focusing on regulation rather than addressing the deeper issue of how gender roles are understood and lived by the younger generation (Peredaryenko & Heng, 2025).

This situation signals not only a social crisis but also an identity crisis. The Islamic worldview—rooted in harmony, complementarity, and moral responsibility—has been overshadowed by Western narratives that privilege individual autonomy over collective values. Unless addressed, this imbalance risks eroding the moral fabric of society and alienating Muslim youth from their own civilisational heritage.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative case study design, analysing two Malaysian short stories written in English: Che Husna Azhari's *Mariah* (2003) and S. M. Zakir's *A Sword-Fighter's Love* (2009). The analysis combines the *maqasid al-shari'ah*, focusing on the preservation of *dīn* (religion), with the *watani* jurisprudential continuum, which contrasts Qur'anic integration of law and revelation with secular dichotomies that separate them. This dual approach enables a contextual reading that is both normatively grounded and culturally coherent.

The conceptual framework for this study positions *maqasid al-shari'ah* and *watani* jurisprudence as complementary lenses for literary analysis. *Maqasid* establishes the normative foundation by grounding gender roles in divine objectives—particularly preserving faith, lineage, and morality—while *watani* jurisprudence introduces an epistemological dimension that distinguishes between the continuum and dichotomy models of law, authority and morality. Together, these frameworks guide the critical reading of literature, exposing the shortcomings of secular-liberal approaches and reconstructing alternatives rooted in *tawhidic* unity and ethics (Husain, 2025; Wan Husain, 2023).

The framework operates in three stages, Identification – recognising gender roles as portrayed in the selected texts. Evaluation – analysing these portrayals through *maqasid* principles, particularly the preservation of *dīn*. Reconstruction – proposing alternative models of gender roles aligned with both *maqasid* objectives and the *watani* continuum framework.

This integration ensures that the analysis is literary and jurisprudential, advancing a methodology that harmonises Islamic legal philosophy with cultural expression.

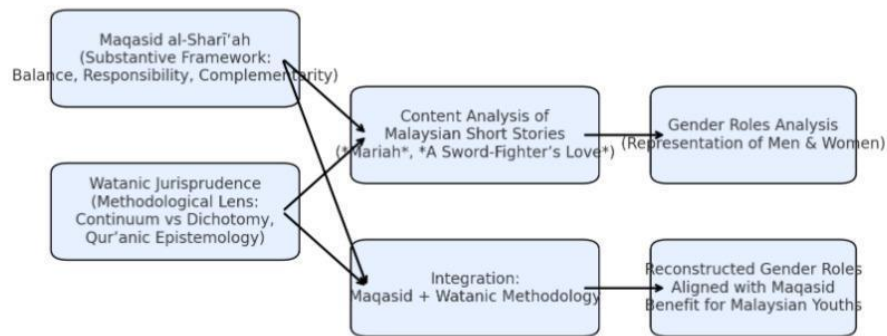


Table 1: Conceptual Framework

Gender Roles Analysis in the Selected Texts

Applying a maqasid al-shari‘ah approach to Malaysian literature in English provides a helpful framework for addressing the gap in understanding gender roles. Literature acts as a cultural mirror: it captures a society’s essence, expresses its people’s emotions, examines urgent issues, and reveals the moral concerns of its era. Therefore, it becomes a valuable tool for exploring how gender is understood, negotiated, and challenged within Malaysian society. Indeed, literature “... embodies the heart of a nation’s culture ... depicts [the people’s] mores and behaviours [and] reflects the social reality of a community.” (Quayam, 2007)

This study analyses two Malaysian short stories—Che Husna Azhari’s *Mariah* (2003) and S. M. Zakir’s *A Sword-fighter’s Love* (2009)—to explore how gender roles are portrayed and problematised. These texts provide insight into how questions of gender and intimacy are embedded within Malaysian society’s lived experiences. Using a maqasid perspective of gender criticism, the analysis highlights how literary narratives can clarify the ethical purpose of gender relations by emphasising balance, responsibility, and complementarity between men and women.

However, to capture the full depth of these representations, the maqasid framework must be complemented by *watanic* jurisprudence analysis. While the maqasid approach provides the higher objectives of Islamic law—such as the preservation of lineage and dignity (morality) — *watanic* jurisprudence situates these objectives within Malaysia’s indigenous governance traditions, historical experiences, and civilisational identity. It provides the analytical tools to examine how literature negotiates between universal Islamic principles and the socio-cultural realities of the Malaysian nation (*watan*).

By combining maqasid al-shari‘ah with *watanic* jurisprudence, this study demonstrates that gender roles in Malaysian literature are not merely literary tropes or social constructs. Instead, they are expressions of a society grappling with modern challenges while anchored in transcendent norms and a distinct civilisational heritage. This dual framework allows for a richer reading of the selected texts, revealing how literature can serve as a space for both cultural critique and the reaffirmation of Islamic values in shaping gender discourse.

Text 1: “Mariah” by Che Husna Azhari (2003)

Azhari’s short story follows the tale of Mariah, a widow who makes her way through life with no ill will to anyone, selling her foodstuff to the people of the small village town of Molo. She catches the eye of the village Imam, who, while enraptured by her beauty, reminisces about his first love, who was married to another. A chain of events is set in motion as the Imam’s wife, Cik Yam, hears rumours of the Imam frequenting Mariah’s establishment, and comes to a head when the Imam seeks to make Mariah his second wife. Mariah, a pariah among the womenfolk in the village, gains recognition from them because of this union and embarks on a new journey as the Imam’s new wife.

The story questions the female gender role among Malaysians, not from the perspective of Western liberal and feminist values that embrace fluidity and non-conformity in these choices, but rather from an Asian Muslim viewpoint, educated in the knowledge of Islam but rooted in cultural expressions of this knowledge. Mariah, a seller of Kelantanese food items such as nasi kerabu, nasi belauk, and nasi dagang, is shown to be very popular among the men of Molo. They become restless while waiting for her arrival “every morning at seven sharp” and grow excited when they spot her, so much so that: “All eyes were fixed on a figure entering the scene. It was a woman. She was carefully balancing two large basins on her head, her hips swaying happily to the rhythm of her movement. That particular gyrating seemed to mesmerise the men and keep them rooted to their spots” (Azhari, 2003, p. 3)

In this case, no women are ogling her, only men, which reinforces a common stereotype of male behaviour when encountering a woman or women of interest, typical in Malaysian society. Moreover, how she is described objectifies her for the viewing pleasure of the men. Initially, she is only ‘a’ figure, but once it is confirmed that it is her, she becomes ‘the’ figure. In the first instance, she is seen as valueless, a random person unworthy of the men’s recognition; the latter renders her worthy of their attention, leading to her objectification.

There is also a subtext of promiscuity implied here. Gutierrez finds that men as a social group maintain and perpetuate the subjection of women and children to prostitution, which is a gender-based form of violence (Gutierrez, 2014). This subjection is visible in Azhari’s short story, specifically the one imposed on Mariah by the men. It is important to note that at this point, she is widowed. This is significant for the men, as they “seem to want to partake of her nasi more because of her unmarried state.” (Azhari, 2023, p. 4). Her not being with a husband implies that she is free and open, very much like a fantasy that is being fulfilled for these men; by not cooking for her husband, she is cooking for them since they paid her for her food, and in this instance, for her ‘figure’ as well. Here, the issue of the woman’s sexuality is normalised, as the men are seen to be visibly attracted to the opposite sex, and not towards any men among them. Not only that, but these men are married and therefore are ‘cheating’ on their wives with their sexualisation of Mariah. Near the end of the text, Mariah marries the Imam, ending the men’s lustful expression of their sexuality towards her, and supposedly towards their wives as well – through her agreeing to the marriage, she nullifies this un-Islamic relationship, for as the Imam’s wife, she abrogates the previous value they set upon her as a widow and makes them see her as her own person. Thus, the first component of the *hajiyyat* maqasid is preserved.

Azhari also provides an alternative response to the common typification of women and men in their respective gender schemata. There is, of course, the character of Mariah. The work

celebrates her femininity, masculinity, and, more importantly, humanity. She is punctual, graceful, possesses an easy mannerism and a beauty that is bewitching, for

Mariah would easily pass for a beauty in her late twenties ... tall and well-proportioned and moved gracefully. No, not gracefully, but sensuously. Her face was unlined, her complexion fair, and her very dark, very black eyes appeared to glow. Mariah always had on a short kebaya, which accentuated her well-proportioned curves (Azhari, 2003, p.5).

Though Mariah may ultimately be a trophy wife for the Imam, the short story celebrates her womanhood. When she looks at the Imam on her wedding night, she "... realised how physically attractive the Imam was: tall, well-built and with measured movements." (Azhari, 2003, p. 5). Mariah's sexuality is not silenced here. She is not an unwilling partner in a union, but an active participant who feels what she feels and responds to her experiences. This is a powerful statement in the work that affirms the strength of women in general, while emphasising the preservation of the *din* component of maqasid al-shar'iah.

Additionally, Azhari's masterful writing, while making Mariah the central character, manages to make the reader focus more on the exploits of Cik Yam, the Imam's first wife, who is another character that challenges contemporary normalisation of sexuality and gender roles from a maqasid perspective. Cik Yam's characterisation represents the archetypal quality of a woman, yet simultaneously questions them; she is good at cooking and household management, portrayed in the short story as attributes of success, yet her inability to bear children is seen as a flaw (Azhari, 2003, p. 7). She is shown to be the voice of reason and intellect against the womenfolk's accusation of Mariah bewitching or drugging their husbands without evidence as well as a suave diplomat who works with the Imam to maintain propriety in the village and is unafraid to make known her dissatisfaction with the Imam for visiting Mariah's stall (Azhari, 2003, p. 7), yet when the Imam confesses his desires to marry Mariah and seeks Cik Yam's permission to do so, Cik Yam ridicules herself and her commitment towards being "*the loving devoted wife, the model housewife ...*", saying she is "wretched" (Azhari, 2003, p. 7). Like Mariah, Cik Yam expresses herself in the short story without censorship, highlighting the gravity of women in her position who face concerns of polygyny, "*... that dreaded thing most feared by women ...*" (Azhari, 2003, p. 7). The short story celebrates her individuality and strength, as shown by her treatment of Mariah. At the same time, she might be inclined to be petty towards Mariah (certainly the womenfolk of Molo would be more than willing to assist Cik Yam, given their feelings towards Mariah). However, she welcomes Mariah (Azhari, 2003, p. 7). In her attitude towards the Imam's attraction to Mariah and Mariah herself, Cik Yam undoes the socially prescribed gender norm of women as vengeful and jealous, instead celebrating that her feelings are human and hers to experience, not for society to dictate. This, arguably, is a manifestation of healthy and sustainable gender roles, especially when viewed from the perspective of preservation of *lineage* and *dignity* as put forth in the maqasid framework of gender roles.

Furthermore, from the perspective of maqasid al-shari'ah's first dimension, which is the preservation of the two elements, the short story significantly contributes towards the upholding of this dimension via the beautification and realignment of sexuality and gender schemata to

Islamic values, through the issues it raises with the character of the Imam. An Imam is a respected spiritual figure in Islam, for the imam is not only a household leader but also of the community, as seen in the short story. The Imam, for all his piety and religious lifestyle, is very much a flawed character. This is important, as the short story humanises the spiritual element attached to the Imam; his spirituality does not make him flawed. His humanity does. Because of this, he makes choices and acts in ways that reflect his flaws as a human first, and as an Imam second. There are many examples in the short story that show this quality.

Firstly, the Imam cannot reconcile himself with the *qadr* or predetermination by Allah. While he enjoys his marriage to Cik Yam, he nevertheless feels the pang of not having any children with her. The short story describes his feelings about this, as seen when,

The Imam looked at his wife with obvious pride. There was not a living man in Molo who did not envy him for having such a devoted wife. But then, quick as lightning, as always, he would look around at his empty house and let out a sigh. Why couldn't his wife bear children like other women? Some women, it seemed, have the fecundity of rabbits, but not his wife. Like all men of his generation, it never occurred to him that he could be the culprit in his wife's supposed inability to bear children. As far as he was concerned, bearing children was a woman's job, and if she didn't, there was something wrong with her. Fertility had nothing to do with men (Azhari, 2003, p. 4).

In this instance, the Imam is described as displaying stereotypical masculine shortsightedness in several ways. According to him, his wife is devoted to him, yet the reader is left wondering how much of the same sentiment is reciprocated towards Cik Yam. Second, he wishes for children, much like his wife does, yet he blames her and her fertility for her disability to bear children, even going so far as to compare Cik Yam to other women as animals regarding this ability. He shifts any blame, either implied or stated, to his wife in this matter, even though, as an imam, his responsibility is to weigh all options and act in accordance with the guidance of Islam; again, the text seems to draw attention, from a maqasid perspective, on how culture defines a person, not their faith. She is the root cause of the issue, not him. The short story addresses this concern directly, as the narrator calls out this fallacy in thinking. This is inspirational to young readers, as it provokes them to note how this occurs and how it should be responded to by submitting to Allah's will and plan, or *qadr*.

Secondly, the Imam's motivation as a spiritual leader is questioned. The short story describes how Mariah reminds the Imam of his first love, the daughter of the Sheikh he trained under in Pattani. It is her beauty that captivates him, and nothing else. This implies that the Imam tends to fall prey to his desire, highlighting the influence that (beautiful) women have over him. Readers should therefore consider: which love is more significant to the Imam? Is it his love for the religion, or his love for women? The short story provides some insight into this dilemma. The Imam's initial motivation for pursuing his studies under the Sheikh appears dubious, as it stems from succumbing to the pressure his own father exerted on him to become a religious scholar. He decides to stay only when he sees the Sheikh's daughter, then devotes himself to his studies to gain favour with the Sheikh in the hope of marrying her. When she is promised to another, the Imam refuses the Sheikh's request for him to succeed him, saying, "If

it were not for the agony of seeing his beloved as somebody else's wife, he would have stayed" (Azhari, 2003, p. 4), and leaves for Malaysia.

This instance shows the significance of intention in our daily actions, for intention determines our sincerity in these actions. The Prophet PBUH states:

إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ، وَإِنَّمَا لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مَا نَوَى

Meaning: Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what they intended (Bukhari, 1955, Hadith no. 1907) (Riwayat Bukhari and Muslim)

This *hadīth* stresses the quality of *ikhhlās*, or sincerity in our deeds, and whether they are acceptable to Allah (Badawi, 2020, p. 16). Thus, by interrogating the Imam's motivation in his studies and future choices, the short story makes the reader come to terms with how the quality of an action or choice is incumbent upon how it is executed and how sincere intention validates this action or choice in the sight of Allah, thereby promoting and preserving the maqasid of Islam's shar'iah, namely the first quality of preservation of *din*.

These portrayals of Mariah, Cik Yam and the Imam serve to make the reader conscious of concerns over Islam and its relationship with the gender narrative, particularly regarding sexuality and gender roles, by addressing these issues head-on. It also raises awareness in the reader to take careful stock of what impact such roles have over both women and men and how both sexes inevitably play their roles in society, and strive towards a more fruitful exchange to affect the outcome of such issues better.

Text 2: "A Sword-fighter's Love" by S. M. Zakir (2009)

S. M. Zakir's short story, selected for Muhammad Haji Salleh's anthology of multicultural stories of Malaysia, seems to draw from the Japanese feudal times and the concept of the 'ronin'- masterless individuals of the warrior class, called the 'samurai'- with a code of honour. It narrates the life of Saf, a swordfighter married to the blade and the duties that come with it. Initially a warrior serving the local landlord, he gains recognition as the most feared swordfighter in the land, only to lose his position once the landlord dies. As a result, he resorts to living life as a thief and hired hand until he meets Hasya, the daughter of the man Saf had previously killed, who was leading an insurrection against the king of the land. Though his interactions with Hasya,

Saf learns what life means when it is directed towards an ideal greater than the love for the sword. Ultimately, this lesson is solidified in Saf when Hasya's demise comes at the edge of his sword, ending her life and freeing him to embark on a quest to better appreciate this higher ideal (Zakir, 2009, p. 193).

The short story is filled with examples of un-Islamic ideas about gender roles. However, as the story unfolds, these ideas are addressed and reconciled in terms of maintaining the lineage and dignity aspects of maqasid al-shari'ah. Saf is initially shown as the ideal example of masculinity. He is not only a sword fighter but also described as "feared by every warrior"

(Zakir, 2009, p. 182). The story makes no mention of women's eligibility to be warriors. Additionally, the land operates under a patriarchal system, as Saf works for a male landlord who, in turn, serves the King. Even when Saf becomes a mercenary and a robber after his landlord dies without leaving a male heir, he continues to display overt masculine, aggressive bravado, for

As someone who has never known any other job except to draw the sword, Saf now became a mercenary. Saf and the other warriors who shared the same fate had now become warriors without a leader. They became either robbers or wage earners for any work that involved the reckoning of swords. For Saf ... it was nobler to become robbers than to become farmers ... [and] would rather die than become workers with hoes and sickles. They all shared one ambition – to die as warriors! (Zakir, 2009, p. 182)

The text questions concepts such as 'nobility' and 'honourable' by examining whether earning modest but honest wages is preferable to exploiting others to survive in a life lacking values beyond heroically dying in battle. It presents another example of un-Islamic portrayals of the male gender role. Saf's inability to accept what is seen as weakness but ultimately more honourable in the long-term forces him to commit evil acts to survive. From an Islamic standpoint, this attitude towards life exemplified by Saf is contrary to the commands of Allah, as evidenced by the following verse from Surah Luqman, Chapter 31, verse 17.

يَبْنَىٰ أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَانْهَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأَصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا أَصَابَكَ ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ عَزْمِ الْأُمُورِ

Meaning: O my dear son! Establish prayer, encourage what is good and forbid what is evil, and endure patiently whatever befalls you. Surely this is a resolve to aspire to.

Saf does not patiently endure his present conditions; instead, he chooses to strike out at others and take advantage of the weak rather than work honourably to make a living.

This situation changes when Saf and Hasya encounter one another. Hasya is the daughter of the insurrectionist who aimed to topple the king's authority, whom Saf had previously murdered. Before this fateful meeting, Saf is always shown to be motivated by the need to overpower his opponents and prey in displays of superiority, yet Hasya alters this quality in Saf. He notices other emotions and feelings within himself, other than his aggression, seen here when he himself acknowledges

... the sensation that had crept through his body became stronger. And the bad thing was that this feeling diluted and weakened the aridness and violence that had been in him all this while. Saf felt weak and helpless. Has he ever had any feelings like this before? (Zakir, 2009, p. 182)

This shows that being male does not mean displaying only masculine characteristics. There are other emotions and feelings that can be embraced, not as a sign of weakness, but as a positive step towards greater self-understanding and appreciation of others who influence the self.

Hasya also demonstrates growth in this aspect; initially, she is portrayed as a weak and frightened girl, but she evolves into someone who challenges Saf to question the meaning of life and the values he can derive from it. She becomes the catalyst for change, breaking free from tyrannical control, rather than Saf. Through her interactions with him, Saf realises that being emotional is not a sign of weakness and that it is safe for him to empathise with others, which he had never learned under his former master's guidance.

Not only that, but Hasya manages to persuade Saf to abandon the way of the sword for a nobler calling—serving God. In the process, Saf sheds his overreliance on his sword, a symbol of materialism and flawed gender roles, for an ideal that brings him more peace and meaning in life than ever (Zakir, 2009, p. 182). However, proper understanding of this comes at a cost—namely, Hasya's death. Her demise is profoundly influential, transforming Saf into a better person—more in tune with his feelings and connection to God. Perhaps the short story implies that growth requires the contributions of both male and female individuals and the gender roles they each uniquely and respectively fulfil. Saf learns to cry and begins to appreciate the love he bears for the deceased Hasya, evidenced by how he *"never expected that love could burn so intensely!"* and that he is *"surrounded by the fire of love that burns up [his] very existence."* (Zakir, 2009, p. 182). In the end, Saf throws away his sword—an earlier symbol of flawed masculinity and oppression for himself and others—and embraces how he truly feels. Additionally, the sword can be seen as a metaphor for an unrewarding form of sexuality; if he is bound to it, he can never experience true satisfaction, since the sword represents a kind of sexuality that can only cut, not comfort. Therefore, Hasya's role in the story—particularly in how she drives change in Saf—significantly contributes to arguing for alternative portrayals of male and female domesticity and hostility, especially within the discourse surrounding sexuality and gender roles.

When viewed from an Islamic perspective, Zakir's short story further adds to the current analysis of how sexuality and gender roles within the gender narrative are addressed. One key element that the work focuses on is the notion of forgiveness. The Qur'an states:

قُلْ يٰٓاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ اَسْرَفُوْا عَلٰۤى اَنْفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوْا مِنْ رَّحْمَةِ اللّٰهِ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوْبَ جَمِيْعًا اِنَّهٗ هُوَ الْغَفُوْرُ الرَّحِيْمُ

Meaning: Say, "O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful." (Surah al-Zumar 39:53)

Here, Allah confirms that those who serve Him must not despair over their misdeeds but instead trust in Allah and His mercy and forgiveness. In the short story, Saf is arguably not on a path of self-enlightenment per se, but rather on a journey towards redemption. This idea of forgiveness and redemption is central in discussions relating to sexuality and gender roles, for it recognises how true forgiveness and lasting redemption can only come from Allah.

Another significant Islamic value highlighted in the short story is the awareness of *tawhīd*. The core message repeated by all the Prophets and Messengers of Allah, peace be upon them all, is the message of *tawhīd*. Their primary mission is to establish *tawhīd* in opposition to *tāghūt*. This is evident from the following verse of the Qur'an:

وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ فَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ هَدَى اللَّهُ وَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ حَقَّتْ عَلَيْهِ الضَّلَالَةُ فَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُكَذِّبِينَ

Meaning: And We certainly sent into every nation a messenger, [saying], “Worship Allah and avoid Taghut.” And among them were those whom Allah guided, and among them were those upon whom error was [deservedly] decreed. So proceed through the earth and observe how was the end of the deniers (Surah al-Nahl 16:36).

Tāghūt can refer to shirk, or the association of Allah as God with His creations, which is the opposite of *tawhīd*. Where *tawhīd* leads to Allah's forgiveness and Paradise, shirk results in His wrath and Hell, as it is the one sin Allah will not forgive (Surah an-Nisa, 4:48) without sincere repentance from the wrongdoer. Therefore, from an Islamic perspective, shirk is the gravest misdeed a person can commit. At the same time, *tawhīd* forms the foundation of Islamic beliefs and practices and plays a key role in shaping ideas about sexuality and gender roles within the gender narrative.

In the short story, Hasya discusses with Saf about the issue of governance and authority in this world, considering a *tawheedic* perspective. In their exchange, Hasya explains how

We are all actually being oppressed ... by those in power. We are all oppressed citizens. ... We must not allow this to continue. We must struggle to change ... this life of cruelty and oppression. Every human being in this world has equal rights in the eyes of God. Only cruelty denies this truth. ... We should return to God's teachings. Only then will truth and justice prevail. As long as we continue to ignore God's decree and truth, we will forever remain lost and drift astray. We will never be able to change anything. In the end we will be cruelly enslaved (Zakir, 2009, p. 189-190).

In this example, Hasya calls Saf to *tawhīd*, a fundamental element of Islamic faith, and in the process, abandons *shirk* practices. Initially, Saf has trouble accepting this, as his God is the sword, which grants him life and shapes his understanding of it. However, he comes to reject the sword, understanding that it is not God, but only a “lifeless and powerless piece of steel”. Hasya guides him to this realisation. In the end, Saf gains recognition and validation of his choice to serve God, stating how “... his soul became fresh and alive. Free without any master but God”, and this would not be possible without Hasya. This exchange blurs the lines of traditional gender roles of what is masculine and what is feminine, thus presenting a contradictory perspective of contemporary gender narratives, by emphasising a discourse on gender that is equal and just, under the banner of *tawhīd*.

This story depicts life as embracing change, while also highlighting that such change is achieved through specific means to serve purposes. From the perspective of *maqasid al-shari'ah*, the story centres on the changes Saf undergoes to realise his life's purpose, while also giving due attention to Hasya's transformation from a position of weakness to strength. This demonstrates to readers how gender roles work best when they are complementary rather than objectifying, especially when there is an element of submissiveness to a higher authority, namely God's, thereby reinforcing the first dimension of *maqasid al-shari'ah*. Ultimately, Saf is neither superior to Hasya nor subordinate to him. They complement one another, which may be the story's main message, making it a valuable medium for engaging with issues of sexuality and gender roles within the gender narrative in Malaysia.

The Gender Narrative in Conflict with Islam?

Islam, from a Western perspective, is a complex issue when it comes to gender. Sharif el-Tobgui stated that the religion has "...no room ... for the new direction in which the liberal culture appears to be dragging the West and, through its coercive ideological apparatus, the world as a whole" (Yaqeen Institute, 2025). An example supporting his statement can be seen in an incident where Western University of Ontario, Canada, published a poster celebrating Canada's International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia on 17 May 2022. The poster aimed to promote love but sparked opposition from Muslims, who protested an image that depicted, among other things, two hijab-wearing women about to kiss. Naturally, this incident prompted responses from supporters of Muslims, defending their standing against such portrayals of Islam, as well as supporters of the LGBTQ+ community. They argued that many Muslims are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and efforts to silence them are problematic, especially considering Islam's dogmatic and rigid views on gender, which starkly contrast with Western perspectives.

While on the one hand, the Qur'an, the primary source of Islamic knowledge and rulings, makes strong claims of divine origin (Surah al-Takwir, 81: 27) and universal applicability for the betterment of all mankind (Surah al-Imran, 3: 3-4), current events like the one mentioned earlier tend to portray Islam and Muslims as obstacles to what the West considers civilisational progress and efforts towards modernisation worldwide (Huntington, 1993). Perhaps no more unmistakable evidence of this exists than how the West perceives issues of sexuality and gender roles, and its opposition to Islam's supposed stance on these matters.

Because the West is a global leader and trendsetter, many countries around the world conform to the pressures of Western idealism, positivism, and relativism, and adopt similar standards and attitudes towards Islam and its proponents, regardless of how evidence and research present alternative testimonies to the West's truths about Islam. France, for example, has long been involved in neutralising the Islamic worldview with its harsh stance on Islamic practices and values, to the extent that it appears to be legalising Islamophobia (Pamuk, 2021). Similarly, Sri Lanka has followed suit with its own form of Islamophobia, through its government's actions to outlaw the wearing of the burqa and the shutting down of more than 1000 Islamic schools (Ganguly, 2021).

There has been a resurgence of Islamic ideals across the Muslim world in the 1960s and 1970s, launched against the yoke of a coloured worldview of Islam that has persisted for a

millennium (Yousif, 2004). Yousif finds that the melting pot model, which has been commercialised globally, aimed initially at cultural homogenisation, but instead deems minorities who are unable or unwilling to change their values for those of the majority (the West) as unfit to modernise. Hashemi links this phenomenon to the 'Islamic exceptionalism' thesis, a popular opinion among prominent scholars that Muslim societies are 'resistant to modernity.' (Hashemi, 2013). This has cemented the modern-day stereotype of Islam and Muslims; according to Reza Aslan, this representation is typified in modern media as Middle Eastern individuals who are villains, "who would scream Allahu Akbar before blowing themselves up ... or the good Muslim who dies three minutes into the movie." (Vox, 2017). One wonders whether these movies show the discerning audience why such individuals are motivated to do their deeds, or if they are merely dramatic propaganda designed to propel the narrative. While many of these misrepresentations occur within Western civilisation, Islamophobia and related incidents remain a global concern (Abbas, 2004). There is little doubt that such portrayals of Muslims in the media are dangerous and damaging, especially to young Muslims who see their religion and values portrayed in this manner. These representations cause ripple effects, inevitably impacting these youths negatively.

A prominent issue affecting these youths today is sexuality and gender roles, or gender schemata as termed by Sandra Bem (Zurbriggen, 2016), who developed gender schema theory (GST) to highlight society's role in shaping and enforcing how children identify gender, either masculine or feminine. Within the gender narrative, this identification is regarded as a cultural construct, influencing individuals' information organisation into lifelong schemas related to behavioural regulation and decision-making, including norms around sexuality and gender (Boellstorff, 2006). Modernity shifts perceptions of these aspects, from acceptance of heterosexuality to normalisation of homosexuality and sexual fluidity (McKinney, 2020). Additionally, gender schemata, traditionally binary, are increasingly fostering the idea of gender fluidity—suggesting that one's sexuality and gender are flexible and can evolve, rather than being fixed and unchanging.

In erasing the presence of God in reality, what Seyed Mohammad Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilisations" refers to as ignoring the sacred in the modern world, Western feminism effectively makes man the remaining standard by which everything is measured, in terms of gender and gender roles. This inevitably leads to man being upheld as the ideal standard of comparison, flawed as he is, making woman's humanity incomplete until she overthrows the man and, in the process, becomes the new man, the new standard that, while different in appearance, still exhibits the same flaws (Abidin, 2015).

The reality of Islam is that it regards both men and women as equals, with their level of faith being the differentiating factor (Surah al-Hujurat, 49: 13). A Prophetic *hadīth* affirms this:

إِنَّمَا النِّسَاءُ شَقَائِقُ الرِّجَالِ

Meaning: Truly, the women are the sisters of the men. (Sunan Abū Dawūd, 2009, Hadith no. 236).

This *hadīth* refers to a situation where a person, male or female, must perform the ghusl bath (purification of the body with water) if there is evidence of 'wetness' or the secretion of bodily fluids other than urine from the reproductive organs resulting from a sexual dream

(Ash'ath, 2008). Within the context of this paper, it emphasises that men and women are both equally responsible for carrying out specific actions and duties appropriate to their gender as prescribed by the shari'ah, as acts of worship towards Allah. Therefore, the equality of men and women from a worship perspective does not imply physical similarity or equal treatment, as suggested by Western feminism.

Fostering A Maqasid Mindset of Gender Roles in Malaysia: A Response to Contemporary Gender Narratives

How then do the youths of Malaysia embrace this modern take on gender schemata? The answer lies in how the relationship between these youths – either Muslims or non-Muslims – and Islam is manifested.

A productive exploration of Islam and gender involves questioning why a social construct like gender and its related concepts need to be elaborated through the theological framework of Islam. One possible answer is that this benefits all of humanity, not just Muslims. Auda (2018) explains that when Islamic shari'ah (rulings) are communicated to the public using the methodology of maqasid al-shari'ah (the higher objectives of Islamic rulings), they are more effective in clarifying the wisdom behind Islamic laws and the good aims they pursue. This approach aligns more closely with modern social values such as human rights and civilisation development. The government has utilised the maqasid al-shari'ah movement in Malaysia as part of its 2020 policy, notably through the publication of Minda Maqasid by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). JAKIM also created a module called Modul Minda Maqasid, which aims to achieve three goals: firstly, to raise awareness of the importance and relevance of the maqasid al-shari'ah worldview among the public; secondly, to foster a 'maqasid mindset' focused on attaining the ultimate goal, which is the pleasure of Allah alone; and thirdly, to show how to apply maqasid al-shari'ah in daily life based on an understanding of *maslahah* (benefit) and *mafsadah* (harm) (Jakim, 2025). In essence, analysing gender and its related concepts through the lens of maqasid al-shari'ah can give the public a clear and straightforward interpretation and implementation of gender as intended by Allah the Almighty. This can help increase awareness of gender and its implications for society.

Kamali (n.d.), Auda (2018), and Wani (2017) argue that at its core, the shariah of Islam is based on benefits to the individual and the community. The main reason is how the laws are designed to "... protect these benefits and to facilitate the improvement and perfection of human life conditions on earth" (Kamali, 2025). This design reflects Allah's *Rahmah* (mercy), which can be seen as the primary objective of the shariah. Through the implementation of justice, Allah's mercy is fully realised, fostering a balance between rights and obligations, thereby eliminating all forms of excess and disparities across all areas of life. In addressing the various issues that arise in reality, scholars of maqasid have attempted to classify how maqasid epistemology can be applied; some have examined the approach based on the types of interests (*daruriyyah*, or essential; *hajiyyah*, or complementary; and *tahnisiyyah*, or desirable), levels of importance (*asliyyah*, or primary importance; or *taabiah*, or secondary importance), and the scope encompassed by the rulings of Islamic law (*ammah*, or general scope; *khassah*, or specific scope; and *juz'iyah*, or partial scope).

Although Islam is the religion of the Federation (Husain, 2025), it is surprising that Malaysia's focus on Islamic jurisprudence remains limited to personal spheres such as inheritance, marriage, and kinship, with family institutions based on nuclear families of heterosexual unions. Additionally, the reduced interaction between different social groups, prompted by “religious ustazs” who have discredited such gatherings, has led to a form of Islamic awareness that is more about ‘wearing’ Islam than genuinely ‘living’ it, where Islam is outwardly expressed through clothing like skull caps and headscarves. Therefore, one aspect of Islam’s practical application in Malaysia related to sexuality and gender concerns public opinion and politics, especially regarding appearance and culture. Such perceptions oppose the position of the Malay rulers as the head of religion vis-à-vis the religious authorities that established the Federation of Malaya and later Malaysia (Hussain, 2017).

In Malaysia, however, significant scope remains to align practice with this Islamic reality, especially among its youth. A strict and patriarchal interpretation of Islamic rulings and practices regarding the ‘ideal man and woman’, which is often rooted more in cultural norms than in Islamic doctrine, has been found to hinder the growth and development of Malaysian (Muslim and non-Muslim) women both in the workplace and at home (Vignato, 2006). Consequently, perceptions and enforcement of sexuality and gender roles are held in a particular way in Malaysia, affecting women and, to a certain extent, men, further preventing a comprehensive resolution of issues relating to sexuality and gender roles.

Because of this, it comes as no surprise that such an un-Islamic climate of uncertainty can and does affect Malaysian youths concerning these issues. Razali (2019) has identified major social problems impacting Malaysian youths; they are involved in drug abuse, baby dumping, promiscuity, gangsterism, rape and incest, bullying, and street thuggery, with causes including peer pressure, mass media portraying ‘acceptable’ social behaviour, lack of religious education, and judgmental attitudes in society towards youths deemed problematic or non-conforming to societal demands. All these elements relate to sexuality and gender schemata, especially how gender roles are approached and discussed with youths. In turn, these youths rebel against societal norms regarding sexuality and gender conformity, often reconciling their faith with their sexual and gender choices. Unsafe sexual practices without contraception are increasing, alongside substance abuse (Yun, 2009), street thuggery exemplified by Mat Rempit gangs (Karim, 2009), and the rise of pengkids and tomboy-identifying youths (Wong, 2012) who are outlawed through Islamic discourses. In other words, although Islam is the religion of Malaysia, there appears to be little visible effort to raise awareness of the importance of sexuality and gender schemata from an Islamic perspective among these youths—at least not through strict policing, censorship, or societal stigmatisation of those deemed to deviate from predefined norms shaped more by culture and politics than by authentic Islamic teachings derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Messenger ﷺ.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how gender roles are depicted in selected Malaysian short stories and to analyse these depictions through the combined perspectives of *maqasid al-shari‘ah* and *watanic* perspective. In doing so, it aimed to determine whether Malaysian literature in English can serve as a medium for expressing an Islamic view on gender that is both universal and

rooted in Malaysia's civilisational identity. The findings show that gender roles in the stories are not arbitrary cultural impositions but are connected to preserving dīn (religion/aqidah), lineage and dignity. From the maqasid perspective, gender is presented as a divinely entrusted role based on complementarity and responsibility rather than as a source of conflict or individual assertiveness. From the *watanic* perspective, the texts demonstrate how local values and indigenous traditions interact with modern pressures, reaffirming Malaysia's sovereign approach to gender discourse without needing to conform to Western liberal paradigms of sexuality and gender equality. In addressing the research objectives, this paper argues that Islam offers a comprehensive framework for understanding gender roles that is both rational and ethical, capable of engaging with contemporary debates without undermining its divine foundations. Importantly, the analysis shows that while Islamic principles are clear and coherent, their expression in Malaysia often remains underdeveloped, particularly in engaging with younger generations exposed to alternative worldviews. Literature, as demonstrated in the two short stories analysed, provides a compelling platform for bridging this gap, as it reflects the lived realities of society while embedding them within enduring values. Ultimately, this research affirms that Malaysia does not need to depend on Western models of gender to shape its social fabric. Instead, by drawing from the dual framework of maqasid al-shari'ah and *watanic* jurisprudence, the nation can enhance its discourse on gender in ways that are both faithful to divine guidance and attuned to local context. This approach ensures that the ideals of Islam are not only maintained but also meaningfully promoted through culture, education, and literature—thus sustaining Malaysia's identity as a nation guided by faith, heritage, and intellectual integrity.

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