



The Quest of Identity in Sophia Kamal's Art Exhibition “WUDU”

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the terminology relating to irony and the manifestation of the struggle within the inner thought of a 21st-century Malaysian artist, Sophia Kamal. Her artwork discussed here portrays a significant picture of what it means to be a woman in the 21st century. In her recent exhibition, entitled “WUDU”, Sophia exposed the 21st-century dilemma faced by many modern women, especially the modern Muslim woman, through extensive, fine pieces of colourful and impressive artwork. Sophia's art pieces have contributed to the development of local artwork produced by contemporary women artists in Malaysia by exploring the perception of identity in terms of the female gaze and consciousness from a feminist perspective, which this paper will discuss further. Focussing on the issues of identity and feminism, this paper argues that her art pieces reflect the conflict between traditional culture and postmodern life, thinking and culture that is increasing its visibility in urban Malaysia.

Keywords: Female identity, Malaysian art, postmodern art, Sophia Kamal, women artists

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia's multicultural society, it is safe to say that the definition and expectation of being a woman are rather diversified

across the races, cultures and religions. In general, the conception of the ideal Malaysian woman is stereotypical: she has to dress in a certain way, be able to cook, prepare and nurture children and take very good care of her immediate and extended family. Apart from that, the Malaysian woman must be able to possess and adhere to her religious beliefs and preserve her purity, piety, submissiveness and femininity within the religious and cultural contexts in which she has been brought up. This paper

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is an attempt to examine the complexity of these stereotypical demands on the identity of the Malaysian woman in the context of visual representation and reading of Sophia Kamal's art pieces. Sophia presented her solo exhibition, entitled "WUDU", in December 2015. This paper will examine how Sophia's art pieces can be read as expressing the complexity of the Malay Muslim postmodern female identity.

In art, postmodernism is best comprehended by characterising the principles of modernism of the 1860s to the 1950s that it replaced. Modern artists are very much driven by radical and groundbreaking approaches that are influenced by technology and Western domination. The arrival of Pop Art and Neo-Dada in postwar America denoted the beginning of a response against modernism, and came to be known as postmodernism, giving birth to newer forms of artistic expression such as Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Video Art, Performance Art and Installation Art. Each of these movements is marked by its own unique differences, yet all are associated with revealing a sense of humour, fragmentation, the breakdown of high and low cultural status, deconstructing the idea of authenticity and an emphasis on images.

Postmodernists have dismissed the idea that history and knowledge are the foundation of the interpretation of art; instead, interpretation is avowed to be the grasping of the unexpected and the provisional. The different definitions of art and its interpretation that are rejected

by postmodernists include the notions that artistic developments are goal-orientated, only males make for artistic genius and nonwhite races are second-rate. Apart from this, postmodernism also overturns the idea that the period of an art piece's creation conceives its possible meaning. In contrast, postmodernism makes the viewer the essential determiner of the original meaning of the art piece. In addition, postmodern art also emphasises on undermining creativity to the point of copyright encroachment, even in the utilisation of photos with next to zero modification from the original.

As such, very differing attitudes towards postmodernism have arisen in Muslim countries. As Akbar S. Ahmad points out, "[I]n spite of the flood of literature in the West—on art, architecture, literature—postmodernism has not made much impression on Muslims" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 28), an observation that can be true of postmodern art in Malaysia as well. Akbar's observation suggests that he believes that the Muslim perspective of postmodernism has been generally negative and destructive (Manzoor, 1990), interpreted as a symbol of Americanisation, nihilism, anarchy and devastation (Abu-Rabi, n. d.) that regards America as the Devil (Fischer & Abedi, 1990). As a result, Islam has been the core factor in rejecting any attempts at potential discourse of postmodernism in Malaysia. Mana Sikana made a similar observation, highlighting that only a limited number of Eastern societies are interested in exploring the issue of postmodernism and that there seems to be the feeling that one would be

regarded heroic for rejecting postmodernism (Sikana, 2004, p. 288).

Although the discussion of postmodernism is more apparent in Malaysian literature, such as in the works of Mana Sikana, with regard to the visual arts, the presence of postmodern ideas in Malaysian art have been noted, for instance, in the work of Malaysian art historian, Sarena Abdullah (Abdullah, 2006, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Abdullah (2010b, p. 105) has clearly stated, "Postmodern art strategies have diversified over the years as works increasingly address, engage and comment on the contemporary human condition from social, racial, sexual, ethnic, political, gender, environmental, urban or rural standpoints." In the context of Malaysia, Abdullah (2010b) sees the "postmodern situation" as an indirect result of the cultural and social changes due to the drastic modernisation championed by the New Economic Policy (NEP). Abdullah's examination of postmodernity in Malaysian art practices connects these changes to the changes in Malay society. She pointed out:

As the main beneficiary of the NEP, [the Malay society] has had to undergo various social and cultural changes as it is pushed into modernization or development ideals. Such changes from tradition/feudalistic practices, Islam and modern ideals do not smoothly transfer from one phase to another, but they co-exist at times harmoniously but sometimes full of contradictions. Since the jump from a feudal society

towards a modern one has occurred in a very short time, it has resulted in very conflicting variety of values—ones enmeshed with the traditional, Islam and the modern, which produces a situation I will address as the *situasi percamoden* or 'postmodern situation'. Abdullah (2010a, p. 85)

Indeed, many scholars and researchers in the past have analysed and discussed the issue of Malaysian female identity as a whole in their works and studies. Unfortunately, our initial research has shown that many scholars have focused a lot more on earlier Malaysian artwork in exploring the roles of culture, beliefs, traditions and religion in the creation of Malaysian female identity. Scholars and critics seem to have overlooked the 21st-century artist in the definition of identity. Apart from this, it is clear that the way society perceives a woman's identity in today's context has changed, and this has played a crucial role in shaping postmodern Malaysian society. Previous studies, while examining how norms, culture and practices shaped the identity of the individual, did not address the question of how identity has changed among women artists in the postmodern world.

Talk of feminist art began in the late 1960s, during which questions regarding gender and the female gaze in art began to be debated worldwide. Many emerging women artists and critics created artwork not for the visual enjoyment of a particular audience but rather to question the political and social norms of society about what

the female outlook, gaze and appearance were all about mainly to put an end to the oppression of women. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, women artists no longer suffer from oppression by the male patriarchy as they used to, but rather, women now possess a voice for expressing themselves in vital tones due to changes in contemporary society. Many women now seek to discover who they really are in the social hierarchy. Are they equal to men? Is there such a thing as the freedom of expression? Are they still bound to and by traditional customs and belief systems? If society has really changed, why then are there still women who are being objectified as instruments of pleasure to men? What then does it really mean to be a woman? These are among the few questions raised. Although feminism has contributed to defining the identity of 21st century society in relation to how women's identity is perceived, future research can be done using different theories to analyse paintings by women artists. The present work analyses the notion of identity among 21st-century women as represented in Sophia Kamal's paintings. Future analyses can further analyse the depiction of identity in contemporary society.

This paper will discuss Sophia Kamal's works as a reflection of the complexity that arises from her multiple roles and identities as Malay, Muslim and Malaysian artist of the 21st century. Hasnul Jamal Saidon believes that all Malaysian artists must consider their position in their artistic endeavour. These include their position as artist, Malaysian artist, Malay Malaysian artist, young Malay

Malaysian artist, young and well-informed Malay Malaysian artist and young well-informed and highly networked 21st-century Malay Malaysian artist (Hashim, Abdullah, Noordin, & See, 2003, pp. 48–57). This paper is only a modest attempt at examining Sophia's work, not only from the three positions mentioned above but, most of all, from the fact that she is a woman. Sophia's work, in its full complexity, is certainly entitled to a postmodern reading.

THE POSTMODERN IDENTITY

It is essential that we first begin by discussing how the concept of "identity" itself has evolved over the centuries. Postmodern discourse has redefined the term *identity* by paying closer attention to the identity of the subject. In doing so, it questions the status of European traditional culture and practice, a perspective that contributed to the idea of the postmodern identity. Degele (1998, p.4) argued that in the past century, an individual's behaviour was "more or less socially determined," whereas at the present time, "it is based on choice." Degele also added that "it is not the apparent behaviour itself which has changed, but its meaning." In essence, postmodern identity is shaped by the individual based on his or her self-made choices and decisions as to his or her own identity.

By way of contrast, Malpas (2005, p. 4) suggested that postmodernism seeks to grasp "what escapes these process of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them." Postmodernism, in this way, contradicts the notion that philosophical

logic, reasoning and ideology should be the aim of thought. A much earlier view was put forward by Denzin (1991), who defined the term 'postmodernism' as "living the postmodern into experience, a set of emotional experiences defined by resentment, anger, alienation, anxiety, poverty, racism and sexism and the cultural logics of late capitalism." Denzin went on to redefine postmodernism as

a nostalgic, conservative longing for the past, coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between the past and the present; an intense preoccupation with the real and its representations; a pornography of the visible; the commodification of sexuality and desire; a consumer culture which objectifies a set of masculine cultural ideals; intense emotional experiences shaped by anxiety, fear, alienation, resentment, and detachment from other. (1991)

The question that arises is, what is postmodern identity? Coupled with postmodern times, the postmodern identity is very much affected by the rise of capitalism and globalisation. The postmodern identity simply means that a society no longer practises and develops an original sense of identity; instead, it is constrained by social requirements, etiquette and practices in everyday life. In contemporary society, a number of artists have continued to create images, objects and artwork, each of which demonstrates the capturing of the

representation of the distorted identity of a human being through a particular artwork, highlighting the implicit connection between human identity and the artwork. How the world sees you, how you see the world and how you see others are the principles that have helped artists to create a new dimension of meaning: the very same influences that have shaped their ideas, emotions and expressions.

In the context of Malaysia of the early 20th century, the definition of identity is related to racial identity as a direct result of immigration during British colonialisation. This resulted in the determination of identity either through national, cultural or religious segments or through a transcultural lens. In general, Malaysian identity simply revolves around the idea that a Malaysian is a citizen of Malaysia regardless of race, religion and ethnicity, among other classifications. As such, one's identity can and would be contested and redefined. This is further complicated by the upward mobility of class and class experience as well. Abdullah (2010a, p.100) introduced the term 'postmodern situation' or '*situasi pancamoden*' to explain the context of art pieces since the 1990s. The term 'postmodern situation' that she espoused does not refer to a sudden disconnection from modern Western society but rather signifies the state of the (Malay) middle class society, who are pulled towards Islam as their religious identity, Malayness as their cultural identity and modern or capitalist culture as their modern identity as a result of upward class mobility. As a whole, she

argued, these situations have reflect the fragmented Malay(sian) identity.

An earlier observation made by Ahmad (1992) also reflects such changing conditions. Ahmad suggested that modernity has led to a crisis of identity among Malaysian men and women in terms of speech, attire and diet. Such forms have also taken place in the evolvement of local contemporary artwork by contemporary artists. Ahmad (1992, p. 426) stated that being a Malay is “no longer determined by the appearance but more importantly in what they belief in (notion/idea) collectively.” Subsequently, the author argued that the influence of postmodern culture has somehow outshone the richness of traditional symbols, metaphors and practices in traditional Malay art.

We would like to highlight here a view by Degele (1998, p. 1) on how postmodern identity basically revolves around the idea that individuals are starting to “go beyond straight rationalisation.” This means that people are starting to become unpredictable, pluralised and disembodied. Although there is a strong connection between art and identity, the ways in which humans comprehend themselves or perceive their identity are constantly changing. Again, Degele (1998, p. 1) explained that the concept of postmodern identity can also be derived in terms of how identity now very much involves a combination of rationalisation and pluralisation in everyday life. For instance, the individual self is no longer able to draw boundaries between professional and the private life. Another example would be how an individual is

given the freedom and choice to practise his or her expression of sexuality or gender in private and public life. Likewise, Degele (1998, p. 1) suggested that postmodern identity revolves around an individual’s self-perceiving ideas and practices of liberation.

Therefore, it can be concluded that postmodern identity is a new form of social identity that has evolved due to the changes undergone by social characters from time to time. Degele (1998, p. 1) further stated how the term ‘identity’ “captures the dilemma of self, for it describes and seems to explain the contradictions of living in a society that appears to be in constant change.” Thus, the term ‘identity’ is not just limited to how an individual is viewed in his or her society according to race as seems to be the case today, but to the limitless view of individual self-portrayal and perception. In addition, identity encompasses the individual’s change in value and practices due to changes in society. One’s stream-of-life experiences and encounters are, in fact, the ultimate source of art. With this, the artist’s true identity is reflected as the artist embarks on a personal, intimate inner journey.

This paper will examine Sophia Kamal’s work with regard to her postmodern identity that can be read through a multilayered reading of her work, which reflects either directly or indirectly her own personal, intimate inner journey. Sophia uses pictures of different women taken by professional photographers, and, mainly using pastel colours as her medium coupled with lighting effects, creates a feminine outlook and highlights the fluidity of the water element

present in various scenarios. Such an approach, this paper will argue, could be read as her concerns about being a Malay, a Muslim, a woman and an educated middle-class Malaysian. Her approach forms an ironic message that the creation of artwork is impossible without the use of a subject and that identity lies in the appearance of the subject and not in reality. Through a thorough observation of Sophia's work, this paper will present a postmodern meaning of the art pieces examined, inviting viewers and readers to offer their own interpretation of the subject.

THE MULTILAYERED IDENTITY OF SOPHIA KAMAL'S WORK

Sophia Kamal was born in 1991 in Selangor, Malaysia, and she completed her Diploma in Fine Arts in UiTM Lendu, Malacca, in 2012 before working in several art galleries in Kuala Lumpur. She spent the next three years living and studying in London, where she obtained a Bachelor in Fine Arts from the University of East London in 2015. She is known for her work in fine art portraiture, examining her subjects through the lens of identity, exploitation, religion and feminist beauty through sensually expressed portraits that does not literally reflect the material and physical aspects of the subject but rather, through the use of vibrant colours and artistic impressions, projects as sense of the subject's multiple identities. This paper will discuss Sophia's multilayered identity based on the following connotations: Malay Muslim, woman and middle-class

Malaysian. We also point out that this reading of a three-layered identity may not be as clear cut as we have hypothesised.

In the study, *The Second Sex* by Beauvoir (1972), the author pointed out that female art had been assumingly deconstructed in reference to the 'other', saying "Humanity is male and that man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man not be with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential—she is the Other" (p. 16). Beauvoir explained that in such a position, a woman should be given the freedom to explore and become who she wants to be. Therefore, the 'other' as presented in this paper is based on the study of the female gaze because a reading of the female gaze is highly subjective among women from different cultures, domestic positions, values and status.

Therefore, Sophia's soulful series in 2005, "WUDU", which was curated by Minut Init, can be posited as an example of the complexities of women's multiple identities in the midst of an incremental extremism and globalised economy. Her artwork pays close attention to how a Malay Muslim presumably adjusts and sublimes herself within the changing cultural landscape, especially in contemporary Malay society, both through the lens of Western perceptions, touches and views, as well as through the more intimate, passionate subject of personal and religious convictions. In her exhibition, the personas

in her portraits are seemingly painted close-up, showing only the face of the subject, while her hands are placed to show different directions. Her portraits show different women in different postures and angles, some of whom have their eyes tightly shut, while some stare intensely at the viewer. There is a form of fluidity present in Sophia's paintings that present the elements of water, fire and light.

The "WUDU" series confronts the modern reality of being a woman and a Malay in Malaysia through in sensual, vibrantly coloured portraiture. Each portrait contains a set of symbols associated with the representation of women: lips, eyes, hands, skin, exposed shoulders, water, the gaze and, in the case of a Malay Muslim, headscarf and hair. These symbols reflect not only the common depiction of women but also the intense struggle of the inner being of the woman. Sophia's artwork is defined by the use of colour and impression against a faint-coloured pastel background that appears full, but the image is not symmetrical. The fluidity that is present in her portraits implies a passionate, parapsychological interpretation of each subject's aura, each revealing and exposing the common struggle and modern dilemma faced by herself as a woman today.

Yuen (1992) posited the idea that women's art is related to the artist's consciousness of her world experiences, knowledge and struggles as a woman. She further stated that women's art provides "the knowledge of human experience" and has

become "an important issue in contemporary society." Women's consciousness, according to Yuen, (1992) refers to "the concern about her (the subject's) own life as woman." Yuen (1992) also suggested that such a context can be identified through artwork that produces the images, for instance, of "domestic women working, bright and evocative colours, self-portrait – introspective and biographical, mother and child-intimate relationship-compassion, surroundings with nature, greenery, and fauna and interest in fabric and decorative patterns."

In relation to this, Victoire (2007) explored the theme of the female gaze in various pieces of Western and Eastern artwork by men and women from different eras and producing different genre of artwork. Victoire (2007, p. 26) also examined the image of women in the eyes of a male, saying:

The roles of women were played out to prescriptive ideas of perfect mother, wife, sister and daughter who sacrifice themselves for the family, country or spouse. In any plot, where the female's aspirations were not sanctioned by society, heavy moralizing on the duties of the individual invariably followed, with the female encountering difficulties and ultimately, sorrow.

The portrayal of the female gaze, with reference to female identity in this paper, focusses on the tension faced by women in conceptualising their identity.

As seen in many of Sophia Kamal's paintings, artwork today emphasises on the woman as subject. Sophia's understanding of what it is to be a Malay Muslim woman is present in her artwork. Sophia, a modern woman who lives in two worlds, grapples to bring together traditional culture and modern culture. In trying to accommodate the pressures of a fast-paced, rapidly changing contemporary world, the postmodern Malaysian Muslim woman struggles as she finds herself bound and restricted by traditional beliefs, rituals, culture and practices. The conflict has led to confusion of identity, which now becomes the dilemma of the postmodern Malaysian Muslim woman. In focussing on the need for social mobility, Sophia, a woman herself, slowly and eventually loses her sense of self, which is an important aspect in human nature.

In one of Sophia Kamal's paintings, "But You Don't Know the Half of It", (2015) (Figure 1), she paints the subject wearing a black cloak with head gear that looks like a pair of bull's horn, while the index finger of one hand points to her mouth and the index finger of the other hand points to her temple. This painting does not seemingly represent more than just the image of a decent woman or *wanita solehah* – a socially accepted, respected and honoured representation of a pious Muslim woman. It can be suggested here that the painting communicates the subconscious reasoning the artist displays about her perception of what truly defines inner conscience and decency.

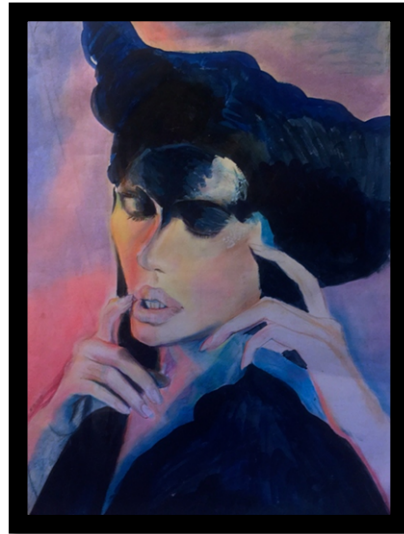


Figure 1. Sophia Kamal, "But You Don't Know the Half of It" (2015), mixed media on paper, 59 x 84 cm (Image Source: www.sophiakamal.com)

In Malaysia, once a Muslim woman is seen wearing a headscarf or a *tudung*, she is believed to be moving into the role of being a religious and pious woman. Growing up with this concept in mind, many Malaysian Muslim women who have been exposed to Western culture grapple with this expectation. The *tudung* is apparently intended to conceal and protect the woman's hair, neck and chest from becoming sexualised by the male gaze. In the context of the Qur'an, the "gaze" subsequently becomes a representation and indication of sin, lust, power, sexuality and shame, which is why, in the excerpt from the Qur'an below, it is seen that Islam implements strict rules on men and women

not only to protect Muslim women but also to help the people achieve purity:

Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. (Qur'an 24:30)

And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women . . . and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! so that you may be successful. (Qur'an 24:31)

O Prophet! say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments; this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (Qur'an 33:59)

Nevertheless, a question arises in this context: Does this apply to Sophia's quest, and the quest of other Muslim women like her, to strike an inner balance between purity and the modern way of life? In Sophia's "But You Don't Know the Half of It," one may infer that the artist is aware of the significance of the *hijab* or *tudung*; however, she seeks to express her own understanding of personal freedom and choice when it comes to dress codes without having to violate her inner purity and devotion to Islam. The black mark on the subject's forehead, which cuts through the centre of the face, may imply a psychic fragmentation. As the painting depicts a single subject, it may suggest that the artist grapples with internal contradictions that circle around the notion of tradition versus modernity, value versus culture, East versus West and beauty versus culture. Shirin (2015), a contemporary photographer who completed a series of black-and-white photographs entitled "Women of Allah," expresses that "every image, every woman's submissive gaze, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical reality behind the surface." Considering the title of the painting "But You Don't Know the Half of It," this painting certainly suggests that the artist is aware of her struggle and is not afraid to point to it. What then is the other "half"? Sophia grew up as a Muslim but lived as a postmodern Malaysian woman at the same time in a Western country for several years, where she was undoubtedly introduced to current trends and new

depictions of what beauty should be. Therefore, like her subject, she struggles to find a balance between both. Thus, she questions and speaks through her art that as much as she is a Muslim, there is the "other half" of her, the half that is trying to identify and search for who she really is. In Sophia Kamal's personal blog, "Behance" (2014), she clearly suggests that her artwork centres on the modern Malay dilemma, writing, "The beauty of women through features that are not sexual but still attractive and elegant without exploiting their rights. While at the same time include the dilemmas of religion in the modern era. How to survive religion in modern context."

In the same light, Sophia's "Lesson in Layers" (2015) (Figure 2) also implies a similar theme of her quest to discover her identity and reasoning behind Malay identity. The representation of the title is significant in decoding what is in the artist's mind. The noun "layers" indirectly implies a covering, a piece of material that covers, the *tudung*. What then does the title directly represent? Here, we suggest that it represents the lessons that the artist has to learn or is in the process of learning while discovering a full picture of who she really is in being Malay. As discussed above, the *tudung* is in fact an object used to protect, cover, conceal and directly project an image of purity among Muslim women. The artist is not trying to imply that she is against covering or "layering" herself; otherwise, she would not consider it a "lesson". She is exploring this major image of her religion with honesty and in a positive light, trying

to learn to adapt to the values of being a Muslim, but she is doing so as a thinking individual who seeks to enter into her religion with a sense of personal integrity and self-controlled individuality. Note how the face of the subject (Figure 2) is covered in different, dark-hued colours and only her passionate eyes are exposed.

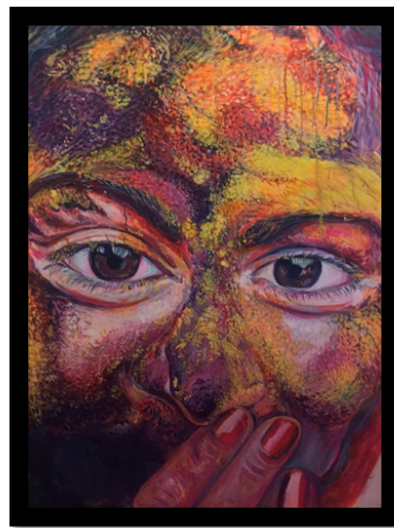


Figure 2. Sophia Kamal, "Lesson in Layers" (2015), acrylic on canvas, 77 x 102 cm (Image source: www.sophiakamal.com)

This gives the viewer a metaphorical depiction of how Muslim women in the Middle East dress: the headscarf covers the woman's entire head and forehead all the way down to her waist and a black veil or the *niqab* conceals her nose and mouth. Only her eyes are exposed. Apart from this, the subject in the painting has her fingers over her mouth, covering it. This directly represents a 'force' placed upon her so that she is unable to speak in her own voice,

suggesting that her freedom of speech has been violated due to controlling forces, or that she herself chooses not to speak.

Perhaps this implies that the artist knows that in spite of her many questions, she will never arrive at a good answer because at the end of the day, she cannot have her own voice. It is important to also notice the water dripping down the subject's forehead, presumed to be sweat that might indirectly represent struggle. Here, it is suggested that the subject struggles and is frustrated at her inability to find direct answers to her questions and reasons for her imperfections. The sweat on her forehead may also represent a sense of hopelessness as the subject first has to grapple with a 'force', then finds that she is unable to express her true inner self. She thinks that she is trapped and will never be free. She becomes tired of striving and falls into a sense of hopelessness. What are the factors that are controlling her? The artist wants to speak but cannot because she is held back by a greater force. The artist is aware of the significance of maintaining her inner purity, yet she struggles to voice out her deep-seated questions regarding factors that she does not understand. Is she merely respecting and practising her religion out of religiosity, or is she doing it because it is her choice to practice it?

Shirin (2015), the photographer referred to earlier in this paper, stated that "every image, every woman's submissive gaze, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical

reality behind the surface." This means that underneath every woman's physical appearance, no matter how perfect she tries to look on the outside, lie deep imperfections, buried deep within, propelling her forward on a quest for 'true beauty'. It would be relevant here to first explore the concept of 'beauty' according to Islam. In the Qur'an, Muslims are reminded of Judgement Day, when one's deeds and acts of service will determine one's physical appearance: "On the day when (some) faces shall turn white and (some) faces shall turn black; then as to those whose faces turn black: Did you disbelieve after your believing? Taste therefore the chastisement because you disbelieved." (Qur'an 3:106)

Sophia Kamal's exhibition of her art pieces was entitled, "WUDU" (ablution), which is an Islamic purification ritual performed before formal prayers (*solat*) by Muslims to cleanse and wash their hands, mouth, nostrils, arms, head and feet using water. It is a required act of purification is deemed a holy practice. Indeed, the artist cleverly draws attention to this Islamic ritual through the use of water in her paintings that were exhibited in "WUDU". In "I Am a Dream Still Dreaming" (2015) (Figure 3) and "Milk and Honey" (2015) (Figure 4), for instance, this can be clearly seen. The presence of water in these portraits represents of the act of cleaning, cleansing and purification in the Islamic context as well as the artist's quest for true beauty. The paintings lead to the question: What

sort of beauty defines womanhood? The answer may be found in one of Sophia's blog entries:

These references (subjects) are people living in urban cities but despite that, their perception of beauty in women is changing. The female body, a perfect example of alluring beauty but does it always has to be exposed or can it be rendered from a different point? I try to answer this question by painting my subjects in a modest rendering of feminine beauty.

Both subjects of both paintings have dreamy eyes that stare back at the viewer, and both have water flowing down their faces. The light and the neon colours projected from the subjects' face downwards from their forehead reveal the imperfections of their skin. As Low (2015) suggested, Sophia's artwork is portrayed in a way where bright lights are used as an element to "represent water—shines on a woman's face, revealing her imperfections." Having revealed these imperfections, the artist then tries to find healing for her inner soul through the practice of *wudu*, which acts as an agent to purify, cleanse and set her apart from all her imperfect views of beauty.

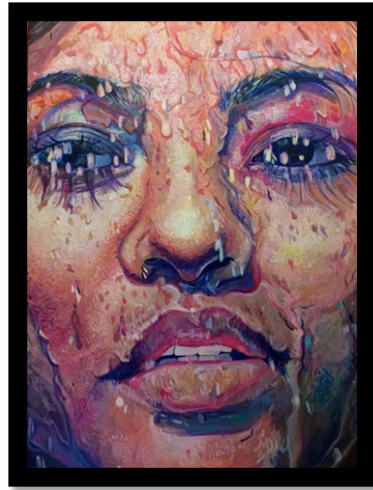


Figure 3. Sophia Kamal "I Am a Dream Still Dreaming" (2015) Acrylic on Canvas, 77 x 102 cm (Image Source: www.sophiakamal.com)

In performing *wudu*, it is essential that water must touch the entire surface of the skin, so any form of makeup will tarnish the act. In Sophia's paintings, it is obvious that the subjects have traces of makeup on. Makeup acts as a concealer that hides one's imperfections. Could this be the artist's struggle in finding a key balance between religion and the modern statement of beauty? She seeks to enhance her beauty as a woman, yet she has to remove all her concealing agents, revealing all her imperfections and flaws in order to achieve a state of spiritual, innate peace. The dominant

features of the hands, the head and water in both paintings evidently suggest that the artist is trying to find an answer and also a solution to what beauty is in spite of Western influence, as she herself has been exposed to that has affected the values and cultural practices of the Malay Muslim woman. While she struggles to define what beauty is, she falls back on her religion, which, through the practice of wudu, for instance, gives her peace and healing.

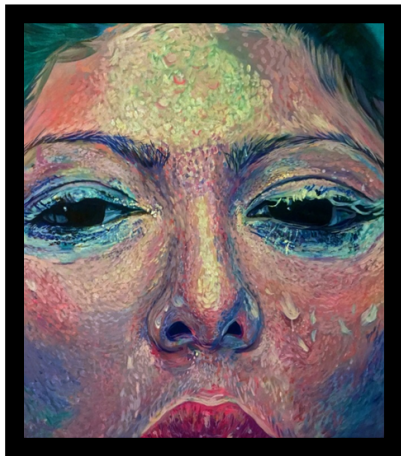


Figure 4. Sophia Kamal "Milk and Honey" (2015) Acrylic on Canvas, 61 x 77 cm (Image Source: www.sophiakamal.com)

CONCLUSION

While there are still many questions and thoughts left unanswered about the role of women in this 21st century, one young Malay woman artist, Sophia Kamal, has been exploring the multiple roles and the multi-layered identity of the modern Malay Malaysian woman, and in doing so, is contributing towards shaping the identity of

Muslim women in modern Malaysia. Most of Sophia Kamal's subjects in her series of paintings featured in her solo exhibition, "WUDU", are painted with references to water and the female gaze and a strong focus on the face, head and hands, all of which are features that commonly define a woman. Despite the pursuit of beauty among 21st-century Malaysian women, character flaws cannot be hidden, and the woman would need to fall back on inner awareness, understanding and acceptance of who she is in order to achieve inner healing and to find that space within that is rooted in inner peace. Sophia's paintings, "But You Don't Know the Half of It", "Lessons in Layers", "I Am a Dream Still Dreaming" and "Milk and Honey" not only simply show a physical form of beauty; they also expose the heart and quest of a woman in search of her identity.

The roles and identity of women has been an ongoing discussion and are featured in Sophia Kamal's artwork. The implication that the artist has not found a new identity yet is in the fact that the representations in her paintings suggest that she falls back on who she has always been, a Malay, Muslim and Malaysian artist. The artist knows very well that she cannot change it and this becomes a possibility in representing women in the 21st century. A woman's body is usually paraded as an object of male desire and lust in films and advertisements; nevertheless, Sophia has successfully used the subjects in her paintings to "gaze back" as a means of setting the female body free of this misconception. Her paintings suggest

that a woman is truly beautiful when she possesses inner peace that is achieved through understanding her body and her spirituality.

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