

Obedient Wives Club: To Serve Husbands as a First Class Prostitute

Jin Kuan Kok and Mohammed Yusof Bin Dawood Gany

Abstract—Women seen as sex objects or sexual subjects are a topic that questions the meaning of the existence of women. This paper is a response to the recent debates in Malaysia about training wives as first class prostitutes in order to keep husbands from straying, as advocated by the spokes person from the Obedient Wives Club. A qualitative methodology is employed for data collection. 20 Malaysians, from different states of the country, were interviewed to find out their views on the role of wives in the family and in relationships. The findings have shown that most of the respondents in this study are aware of role of wives in the family, but they disagree about devaluing the role of women to the status of prostitute or sex-object. They raise the issue of “inter-subjectivity” and the mutuality or reciprocal communication in relationships.

Index Terms—component; Gender, sex object, sexual subjects the role of women in family, the role of women in relationships in Malaysia.

I. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of obedient wives club in Malaysian and its postulation of training wives to serve their husbands as first class prostitutes have provoked many insightful debates. It is suspicious of treating wives as sex objects that it denies the subjectivity of woman. This research aims at finding out the perspectives and views from Malaysian people on this matter. First we researched on the literature studies on the subjectivity of women from the western tradition and then we will present the unique local Malaysian views. The qualitative data collected from interviews and its analysis will be presented and discussed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Subject, Object or Intersubjectivity

The development of the notion of subject and of self has long been discussed in human history. The tradition from Aristotle to Kant is to describe a self-reflexive subjectivity which is based on rationality. The subject is the “priori, the pre-existent platform or basis from which thought, action and reaction emerge” [1]. Descartes’ description of a subjective self is more analytical: We are aware of our existence because we are able to think and analyze. This seemingly self sufficient and self-founding subjectivity was challenged by

the scholars from the camps of structuralism and post-structuralism [1]. They argued that the subject is formed by the culture rather than the subject producing the culture. The ways our thoughts function are inseparable from the culture we grown up with. Strozier [1] noticed that from Descartes on, self-reflection is seen as requiring a split of subjectivity. In Foucault’s [2] description, one subject possesses the gaze, or the position of knowledge, and the other is subjected to that gaze. Meaning, the one who does the gazing is the subject, whereas the other, being gazed at, is the object. Foucault understands Descartes’ self-inquiry as an epistemological approach, which is “capable of knowing self and capable of producing true knowledge” [1]. Therefore the contemporary arguments in feminist theory and cultural studies always put forward this point of view stress that the capacity for self-reflection is the criterion on which to establish the authentic being, and feminist theory [1], [3] stressed that this is applicable to both males and females.

Traditionally, the studies of self focused on the way human beings develop their human identity, which concerns who we are, this is a question of the being. We are the subject of our thoughts, feelings and actions. However, Foucault pointed out that [1] women are often excluded from cultural reproduction

Both Kant and Descartes have neglected the historical and contextual backgrounds. Irigaray [4] points out that women has been denied subjectivity from “representation, discourse, or desire”

Irigaray proposed [4] the notion of gendered inter-subjectivity which describes the relationship among gendered individuals. She obtains her inspiration from the work of Emmanuel Levinas [5] who strongly objects to reducing another person to the sameness of ourselves. “If the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other”. This is the ethical dimension that Levinas holds and it provides a transcendental ethical guideline that the difference between “self” and “other” can never be bridged or transgressed, meaning to possess another person is synonymous with power.

Rousseau’s discourses [6] emphasized a kind of social order in which women should be confined to domestic sphere to play their roles as nurturers and educators for their children. However, this view was criticized as serving a political agenda because women would then perpetually serve as supplements to support men’s political and public, sphere. The definition of women’s roles, as nurturing or the support of children and men has undergone a drastic change since women joined in civic participation, directly entering the public sphere. In her discussion of Rousseau’s Social Contact’ Nancy Armstrong describes how the “Nature” of

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women (referring to their nurturing and supporting role) role of women is translated into their cultural aspect [4]. Thus, Nancy Armstrong argues that the sexual differences are cultural products [7].

B. Malaysian Scenario

Malaysia is an Islamic country. All Malays are born Muslim. The religion influences all aspects of their lives including family life. Therefore how Muslims views their role in the family is inseparable from their religion. And since family starts with marriage, a closer look at how Islam perceives it is crucial. According to the Islamic teaching, marriage is a natural necessity for every human being. Through marriage, one's life is fulfilled by the presence of his or her loved one at home. The Holy Qur'an recognizes this natural human need in one of its passage,

"And among His signs is this, which He created for you mates from among yourselves that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts: verily in that are signs for those who reflect." (30:21)

Through marriage, the sexual relationship between a man and a woman is made legal. Islam has never regarded sex as filthy. Instead it regards sex as natural and good, but restricts it to the partners of marriage so as to ensure the responsibility for its consequences.

The general purpose of marriage is to provide both sexes company to each other, to love and cherish one another, to procreate children and to live in harmony according to the rules and regulations set by Allah. Marriage prepares couples a platform for a spiritual and legal foundation in the establishment of the family. The children born of the matrimonial (nikah) union become legitimate and mutual rights of inheritance are established. This in turn, requires both husband and wife equally to play their roles towards one another in maintaining the happiness of the household. The Holy Quran highlights the role equality of men and women in the following verse.

And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends of one another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish worship and they pay the poor-due, and they obey Allah and His messenger; as for those, Allah will have mercy on them; Lo! Allah is Mighty, Wise. Allah hath promised to believers – men and women – gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss; but the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of Allah: This is the supreme felicity. [Quran 9:71-72]

The above view is the Muslim's perspective on the role of men and women in marriage and family.

Recently, there was some fervent debate on The Obedient Wives Club in Malaysia. The club stated that wives are to serve their husbands as if first class prostitutes [Star June 7]. Surprisingly, this suggestion was supported by some leaders of the country such as Tan Sri Harussane Zakaria who claims that "calling for more such clubs to be set up throughout the country as a way to counter social ills" [Star June].

Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development argues that this suggestion from The Obedient Wives Club does not reflect

the position and needs of the majority of women in the country. And it is seen as "degrading men". [Star June 14].

Does offering "sex lessons" help women keep their husbands? Are women responsible for the break-up of marital relationship when husbands go out for prostitutes? Are women required, for the happiness of men, to serve as sex objects? Is the value of a woman being reduced to an object instead of a subject of her own being? How do Malaysian Muslim see the role of women and men in the family and in relationships?

III. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that employed interviews as a method for data collection. A semi-structured questionnaire was design to give guidelines for the interviews, while the in-depth qualitative interview was rather free flowing so as to give the respondents the opportunity to express their view and feelings freely. Each interview lasted for half an hour. A total of 20 respondents, all Malays, age ranged from 20 – 50, were involved in this study. All the respondents were informed of their rights and were assured of confidentiality. Interview sessions were recorded with the permission of the respondents and were analyzed using a constant comparison approach to group the common themes emerging from the interview data.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Wives Should Serve Their Husbands as a First Class Prostitutes

Most females do not agree as they think that the word "prostitute" has negative connotations, and the meaning of marriage is more than just sex. It is about sharing of feelings and building the family with good values.

The reasons given could be summarized as: (1) Women are not sex objects; (2) There is equal responsibility in the family and in the relationship. (3) Being obedient doesn't keep the marriage sound as both parties need to work cooperatively.

1) Women are not sex objects

"Wives are not sex slave; they should be protected by their husband. A first class prostitute is such a harsh and rude word (Female, 20 – 30, university student from Temerloh).

"Wives responsible to take care their husband not, and should not only in sexual parts" (Female, Age 20 – 30 from Ipoh, Perak)

"Prostitute is a term very cruel for the wives. Wife is a person who has halal relationship with their husband after they married but prostitute is a man can have her and leave her immediately." (Female, Age 20 – 30, student from Pahang)

"A man can leave a prostitute anytime, but a husband has engaged with commitment and responsibility toward his wife. (Female, student from Pahang)

Some of the participants thought that the "definition" of "first class prostitute" was very subjective and the wording was problematic as it was very difficult to evaluate the standard of "first class".

"No, absolute no. Not first class prostitute, but first class

wife” (Male, 35, Assist lecturer, from Bota)

2) Equal responsibility in family and relationship

Most people talked about the responsibility: Both serve each other, not just wives serving the husbands, the husband are also serving their wives. One male participant in his 40s mentioned that various conditions need to be taken into consideration due to social change especially as both husbands and wives are working nowadays.

“It is not fair. Can we say the husband should treat their wives like the first class gigolo? Why should it be prostitute? It is a total degradation of the status of women. Women are noble creation of God. Furthermore, men’s faithfulness or fidelity towards a wife doesn’t subject to how obedient the wives are. Some married men, despite of their wives’ faithfulness, still find it hard to restrain themselves from entering into social vices.” (Male, age 45, Lecturer, from Kuala Lumpur)

“It is not only the duty of a wife to please her husband, but it is also the obligation of a husband to provide to the wife” (Female, 36 year old, teacher, from Selangor)

3) Being obedient doesn’t secure the marriage.

“Both parties have to cooperate to make marriage work. If either party wants to cheat, there must be reason behind it. And being an obedient wife or not only part of the reason or excuse for the husband to go for social vices.” (Male, aged 40, Lecturer, from Ipoh, Perak).

However, some of the females agreed to the statement that they should serve their husbands as first class prostitute, and they cited (1) the religion reason; and (2) their responsibility to support their view:

“In Islam, serving their husband is a good wife”

“Wife is under husband responsibility, wives should respect their husband”

“For sure, syurga isteri di bawah tpek Kaki suami”(A wife’s paradise lies beneath the feet of the husband). (Female, 20 – 30, student from KL).

Most of the participants said wives should serve their husbands according to the syariah laws, according to the teaching of the Islamic religion.

Three females agreed to the statement, and they used the words “responsibility” and “to keep a happy marriage” in explaining their reasons:

“In order to make them happy and more loving towards each other” (Female, aged 23 year old, student from Pahang).

“It is her responsibility towards her husband” (Female, aged 22, student from Kuantan).

“Her responsibility to treat their husband nicely” (Female, 23, student from KL).

Two males responded “Yes” (both aged 20 - 30, Males, students from Pahang).

They mentioned after getting married, they are “halal” for each other as long as the husbands do not harm the wives and treat the wives appropriately. One university student agreed that wives should be obedient so that husbands would not try to seek a new relationship outside marriage.

B. The Role of Husbands and Wives in Their Family:

For husbands: Most cited Islam as the religious background in which being a husband means to be a leader, the head of the family, responsible for teaching their children

by good example.

“Husband should teach and treat his wife and children well according to the rules in Islam’s family, therefore I don’t agree wife being a role of first class prostitute” (Female, Age 20-30 year old, student from Kuala Lumpur).

“Husbands need to provide sustenance to the family, educate the family, be a leader of the family, be a decision maker and always protect the family”. (Male, aged 47, Lecturer, from Kuala Lumpur).

“Husbands need to be a good to their wives and children

Husband need to guide the wife and children and also to take care of the family in terms of food, clothes and other”. (Female, aged 24, student from Pahang).

For wives: Most of the participants agreed that the role of a wife is to be an assistant, a helper, a good follower for the husband.

“A wife helps to manage family issues and other family members, Wife need to teach the children, prepare all the needs of the family such as food.” (Female, 24, University student, from Kampar, Perak)

“A wife should guard the things owned by the family in the absence of the husband. Take good care of the name/reputation of the family” (Male, 45, University Lecturer, from Ipoh, Perak)

Others acknowledged the affective nature of women.

“Wives need to be a loving wife and mum for their children”. (Female, 37, Manager, Tapah, Perak)

“Wives need to nurture the kids/children”. (Female, aged 29, lecturer, from Kuching, Sarawak).

Besides mentioning the separate roles of husbands and wives, most of the participants also mentioned the “togetherness” in marriage:

“Both take care of the family together, to cooperate to build a happy family and to have good manners to each other, menjaga keluarga daripada gejala, social. (Take care of family from social illness)

Both play their roles to keep their marriage in harmony and set good example for their children and lead their family to the best way.” (Male, 38, Engineer, from Kuala Lumpur)

“To complete each other to get Al-Sakinah (Tranquility).

Husband and wives should complete each other, they both need each other to take the responsibility given to them.

They are related to love and respect each other and make a happy family, so they commit to each other; they need to spend time with each other, to treat each other with care, honesty and respect. (Male, aged 48, College Lecturer, from Kuala Lumpur”.

“A husband and a wife made up the house/shelter for their own life and for their children future (a full course voyage of life). To make the family in harmony with Islam, both need to treat each other nicely” (Female, age 29, Lecturer, from Kampar, Perak).

It is important for both to know their responsibility, as cited by one of the participants “Both of the husband and wife need to fulfill the innate nature of human being as creation who is able to love and wanted to be loved, so that they are able to commit to each other based on the physical and spiritual unity. (Male, aged 45 year old, Lecturer, from Kuala Lumpur)

From the above verbatim responses, it appears that a

reciprocal and communicative relationship is preferred by the participants.

C. The role of Husbands and Wives in Their Relationship

Most of the participants mentioned mutual responsibility in the relationship so that both the husbands and wives are to understand, and to love each other, to complete their responsibility, to complete each other, to respect each other, love and caring for each other, taking good care of each other.

Following are the verbatim from the participants.

“Both husband and wives play their roles with full responsibility, to increase quality of their lives in all thing“(Female, aged 24, university student from Rawang, Kuala Lumpur).

“For a sacred purpose, to create a happy family, respect each other”(Male, age 37, manager, from Kedah).

“To be in a happy relationship therefore should have positive relationship”(Female, 22, student from Selangor).

“Both men and women share equal role in maintaining the stability of relationship in marriage. I think men have forgotten that they are also imperfect to expect perfection from women”(Male, aged 47, Lecturer, from Kuala Lumpur”).

“To have good relationship with one another is the most important thing”(Female, clerk, from Kuala Lumpur).

“Loving, trust, respect each other, should love and loyal to each other, looking for prostitute is not loyal”. (Female, 34, full-time house wife, from Ipoh).

“More tolerance in relationship to solve the problem.

Each should fulfilling the needs for each other, such as love, care, attention etc., treat your spouse like how you want the spouse to treat you. If you want your spouse to be loyal to you, you should do the same”(Female, 24, university student from Jengka, Pahang).

V. DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that most of the participants, both male and female do not agree that women should serve husbands as first class prostitutes because they are not sex objects. They acknowledged the equal responsibility for both the family and the relationship. The mutuality words from their verbatim were paramount, such as “Both need to...”; “Both are responsible...” for the stability and happiness of relationship. However, the hierarchy of the relationship is obvious, as the man is the head, the leader, the decision maker.... And the wife is the follower, supporter. The distinct separated roles were highlighted: husbands are for leading and providing, and wives are for nurturing and supporting. Those descriptions seem to fit into the traditional patriarchal values. Perhaps the advocates of the Obedient Wives Club reflect the beliefs of traditional, pre-Muslim, tribal society?

Does the traditional Muslim religion place woman lower than men? To cite one example from this study, an academic staff member at a college in Perak state of Malaysia said:

“Due to the lack of exposure to the actual teachings of Islam, some may come to believe that it is true that wives should be like a prostitute to their husband. These people

succumb to the notion of patriarchal principles blindly without further checking the scriptures or consulting the authoritative sources of the religion itself. It should come as no surprise that most Malay men have been believing that women should be behaving in this and that and whatsoever way at the ignorance of their own role as a man and a husband”(Male, 45, Lecturer, from Perak).

He stated that “there should be no such tradition in which women are viewed to be ideally perfect for their husband if only they present themselves like a prostitute”.

He further added “The traditional values should be altered to suit the religious demand especially in a Malay community where religion (Islam) is viewed as a higher source of authority as compared to customs or thousand years of tradition”.

“To degrade female is not the traditional values of Muslim culture, perhaps it is for particular type of Muslim, which is more Chauvinistic male dominant kind of Muslim”(Male, 45, Lecturer, from Perak).

Should the Obedient Wives Club open as many branches as possible so that more members could be recruited, and more husbands are served by their wives as if they were first class prostitutes. This daring suggestion provoked many opposing voices from many people, scholars and lay alike, soon after it appeared in the newspapers.

Most of the participants in this study disagreed.

Both male and female participants hold high values for women in the family and the married relationship.

Perhaps those men who think wives should be pleasing husbands in the manner of first-class prostitutes view their wives as lower status objects, so as to justify their demand for submission. And by using religion as authority women will be forever shaped by this culture and unable to have other perspectives because women do view themselves through the looking glass of their culture. This will then perpetual the male dominant hegemony, embedded into the male chauvinistic agenda. Women will be forever been seen as objects of male desire and wifely submission will be glorified. To degrade wives to “first class prostitutes” seems to resemble pre-Muslim tribal culture which is pretty much uncivilized. Foucault would criticize the “docile bodies and obedient souls” [2] produced by degrading human beings to objects. Seeking pleasure from prostitutes is somehow virulent towards the females, as “female will never be able to feel liberated from this concepts of BODY” [4]. It is not surprising that this view was objected to. However, there were some participants, male as well as female who agreed with the Obedient Wives Club proposal to serve husbands as if “first class prostitutes”. Irigaray [4] was right in this sense as women do see themselves through the image of women created by the society in which they live. Therefore being aware of the culture in which people operate, in which religion is one of the most important aspect, is of paramount importance.

The way the participants articulated their views is very much what might be expected from most people in the modern world. However, it is worth noting that although both the male and female participants used “mutuality words” to describe how husbands and wives should treat each other with love and care, which seems to fit Luce’s

proposal of “inter-subjectivity” [1] the meaning of “mutuality” may not be the same as in western society, in the tradition of Descartes’, instead, it fits more into the social norms [8]. The development of the identity of women is found to be constructed by the Muslim culture as most of them used religion to support their view. The different role assigned to women has its foundation in their religion. Though the roles between male and female are different, it doesn’t seem to put females in a disadvantaged position as the participants submit themselves to the religious authority.

Therefore, the women are not being understood as collateral beings as their role and responsibilities are different from that of men. Each of them has a fixed role. The role description follows a role bound regime. It is unsure that “the collateral for irreducible constitution of object” in Luce Irigaray’s term [4], can be applied in the Malaysian Malay context. Will women then be denied representation, discourse or desire? As the world is fast changing, the Muslim in Malaysia is increasing being exposed to the effects of globalization. Will this fixed role description between men and women be challenged when faced with an increasingly globalized environment? Does the “non-collateral” role description allow of any subjugation to women’s status? Those are questions worth investigation in the future research.

VI. CONCLUSION

Perhaps an attempt to demean women by making headlines in the newspapers does not reflect most of the Malaysian Malays’ view. This research reveals that females are seen to have a fixed role in the family, however, most participants used mutuality language to describe their role in the married relationship, and a reciprocal communication relationship is preferred by the participants.

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