

WRITING ABOUT "SUCCESSFUL WOMEN": A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POPULAR WOMEN'S MAGAZINES IN MALAYSIA

Mustafa K. Anuar and Shakila Manan

Introduction

As with most developing countries, the Malaysian state has been pushing for modernisation, socio-economic development and overall prosperity of the Malaysian people ever since it attained political independence from the colonizing British in 1957. This vigour was further spurred on by a Mahathir administration whose vision is to turn Malaysia into an industrialised country by the year 2020. In the process, Malaysians are always reminded in various ways such as through the mass media - of their duties and responsibilities in making significant contributions towards these cherished national goals.¹ Indeed, the contributions of the populace, particularly women, to the process of national development have over time been increasingly recognised by the government and Malaysians in general. Malaysian women, like other segments of the nation who are seen as lagging behind socio-economically, have been urged to propel themselves into prominence - and quite a number of them have succeeded - especially in the private sector where the dominant culture of enterprise and competition prevails.

These social changes have been recorded and discussed by various sources, such as the many popular magazines that proliferated since independence. Many mainstream women's magazines not only attempt to record the unfolding events in the Malaysian society, but also try to respond in various ways to the socio-economic, political and cultural changes that confront the female segment of the Malaysian population.

In addition, a number of these magazines see themselves - rightly or wrongly - as agents, if not catalysts, for social change. Thus, in the

pages of these magazines women are often portrayed as industrious, creative and willing to take on the challenges of a modern and progressive world. Certain women in the professions, for instance, have been highlighted by these magazines so as to serve as role models to other women to spur them into entering what was traditionally considered a man's domain. In short, these "successful women" are applauded, encouraged and placed on a pedestal for others to see and emulate. For the purpose of this paper, we would argue that a "successful woman" is one who either achieves a certain level of success in the profession, business, and/or in science and technology; or who religiously engages in social activities such as those in non-governmental organizations (human rights, consumer, etc.) or a trade union movement; or who strives to great heights in the arts; and/or who excels in politics (not necessarily in this order).

This analysis attempts to examine the ways in which these "successful women" are depicted, or "packaged", by such popular mainstream women's magazines as *Her World*, *Female*, *Woman At Work*, *Jelita and Wanita*,² and how, in the process, these magazines contribute to the marginalization of other categories of women. In this context, advertisements displayed in these publications are examined to determine how they constitute part of this packaging. In addition, this paper will also analyse how women are trivialized through language constructs.

Malaysian Magazines and National Development

The development of mass media in general and magazines in particular runs in tandem with the socio-economic progress of a country. The improved standards of living help create a lucrative market for magazines and, by extension, encourage advertisers to promote products and services. The implication of this is that, in a market economy almost all of these magazines are not only dependent on a substantial number of readers and advertisers, but are also profit-making in nature.³ This is why over the last few years when the economy has been performing well, many magazines, catering to various kinds of readership, have come into being. A few have

established themselves as major publishing outfits. There are magazines that cater to the interests and needs of various groups of women, the young and teenagers, technical people, economists, managers and business people, sports enthusiasts, religious people, educationists, social activists, etc.

And yet, while at a glance one might get the impression that the Malaysian publishing industry has a wide variety of magazines to offer in the market, the stark reality is that these magazines, particularly the mainstream ones, are published by only a few established publishing houses. This means that many of these magazines are produced by a few publishers whose political orientations or economic philosophies may not differ much among each other, or with those of the ruling elite.⁴

In other words, Malaysians have a large number of magazines to choose from, but they hardly have any variety with regard to publishers' ideological orientations, tone, values and topics in focus. For instance, a number of different magazines are being published by one particular giant publishing house whose own brand of political connections and orientation may have an influence over all of its publications. An equally constricting factor are the laws related to the media, such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Internal Security Act, and the Official Secrets Act. In short, economic and political expediency has in the main contributed to the current state and characteristics of the country's mass media.⁵

In addition, over the last few years the price of many of the magazines, in particular women's magazines, has escalated. One of the major reasons for this is increasing costs of production. Many of these publishers are not inclined to absorb substantially these rising costs for fear that this would eat into their profits even though the amount of advertisements - and, therefore, revenue - has increased substantially. This has at least one implication: not only are many readers of the low-income bracket priced out of this magazine market, but also the magazine publishers are compelled to "go upmarket", that is, to primarily seek the (financial) support and interest of high-income readers.

Women and Media: Some Theoretical Discussions

In a society that is progressing and one that promises ample opportunities for both men and women to tap their full potentials, deviation from the national objective of human development would certainly invite the interest and concern, if not the wrath, of many people, especially women who are now articulating their rights confidently. And as intimated earlier, the mass media is generally regarded as a social institution that has the capacity to monitor such social developments. The media, moreover, is often regarded as being in a position to help make some significant changes in society, such as working towards uplifting the status of women through their texts and programmes. This is why, for instance, some government leaders, social and women's rights activists and researchers are concerned with the way the media portray women in society.

Communication researchers like Gaye Tuchman (1981) concerns herself with what she terms "the symbolic annihilation" of women by the American mass media. What is meant here is that the media had either been under-representing women or promoting their stereotypes. According to the magazines she studied, "the ideal woman is passive and dependent. Her fate and her happiness rest with a man, not with participation in the labour force." (Tuchman, 1981: 176)

Another researcher, Janet Newman (1991: 241-259) studies women living in a Thatcherite Britain where success, particularly in business, is often depicted by the media as merely requiring individual effort and enthusiasm - without taking cognizance of the structural impediments and social factors that confront most women. Newman analyses a collection of books which in essence celebrated the creation of the "enterprising woman" in British society. Her study investigates the way in which ideas of enterprise are being "packaged" for women in texts inviting them to join the culture of success. She discovers that these enterprise promotions are "all addressed to white women, and ignore the way in which black women's labour is being exploited in particular ways in the new economic patterns of the enterprise culture." (Newman, 1991: 242)

Within the Malaysian context, Shakila Manan (1992) examines the ways and means in which the texts in *Her World* attempt to persuade the readers to adopt a certain constructed reading position. She concludes that in the final analysis, however, the dominant discourse prevailing in and outside the text would influence the reader into taking a particular "preferred reading" position. This implies that the writer of a text is faced with the task of constructing a text which will ably persuade the reader to comply with the demands imposed by the text, that is, by accepting the reading position created by the text and thereby to concur with the text and the dominant discourse. In order for this to happen, the text should seem "natural and plausible" and "obvious" to the reader (Kress, 1989: 40).

Advertisements in magazines, too, particularly those that use women and women models, become the subject of interest for researchers. Hamdan Adnan (1987), for instance, highlights the fact that women in magazine advertisements were employed more for their physical attributes than their intellectual ability, thereby reinforcing the stereotypical view of women as mere sex objects and homemakers. Hamdan was quoting a study, conducted by a group of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia students in 1983, that examined the advertisements found in *Jelita*, *Wanita*, *Her World* and *Female*.

We would argue that, arising from the points raised by Newman, Malaysian mass media, in particular women's magazines, has similarly taken steps to put the interests, concerns and economic and political leadership of women at centre-stage. And in a society that promotes and celebrates a culture of entrepreneurship and competition, business women are foregrounded in the pages of these magazines even while certain advertisements seem to have a different slant on women.

Moreover, in the very process of promoting and projecting images of "successful women", particularly those in the business and professional world, these magazines have marginalized other categories of women, people who are "voiceless" and desperately need the help of their successful sisters, if not their brothers. In other words, the implication is that these successful women, to borrow the

words of Stuart Hall, "always get represented" while "some others sometimes get represented - but always at the margin...." And there are still others, Hall adds, who are always represented "only by their eloquent absence, their silences...." (Hall, 1986: 9)

These successful women presented by the magazines invariably are "well packaged" in terms of their dressing, physical beauty and the language used in the text to describe them. The packaging of these women complies with the conventional notion of what a "successful woman" is: attractively attired, well made-up, exercising their options freely in their choice of clothes and all things fashionable. They exercise these options through advertisements which will invariably try to make a link between (women's) success and their need to consume merchandise for looking "good and feminine". Women readers through these messages are caught in the patriarchal and consumer - oriented definition of success. Advertisements of clothes, cosmetics, jewellery and other personal artifacts extensively adorn these mainstream women's magazines for women to be seduced by them, apart from the economic justification that is related to the profitability of the media.

Finally, the sexist course that is engaged by these magazines suggest subject positions for women. Kress (1989: 7) argues that this kind of discourse prescribes and defines the relationship and interaction between the sexes and by extension, how they ought to conduct themselves in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres of life. This discourse by and large dictates how men and women ought to perceive themselves in the language that they use when they talk about themselves or about others.

A Textual Analysis of Five Women's Magazines: Looking at "Successful Women"

In this preliminary study, five mainstream women's magazines: *Her World*, *Female*, *Woman At Work*, *Wanita* and *Jelita*, were selected and qualitatively analysed for a period of three months, that is from February to April, 1994. The study is concerned with the ways,

means and strategies employed by these magazines to portray "successful women" and, subsequently, to map meanings made available to the reader.

For analytical convenience, the following general categories were employed (not necessarily in this order): (a) Profile of business people and other personalities (men and women alike); (b) Image-making/dressing/fashion; (c) Advertisements; (d) Career guide and advancement; (e) Shopping, and the Latest in the Market; (f) Cover story; (g) Body and facial care; (h) Social events; and (i) Editorials. Given the space constraint, we highlight only a sampling of the analysed categories that indicate, or represent, the overall characteristics of the magazines in so far as women's portrayal and the coverage of their social interaction are concerned.

What is a "successful woman"? The notion embraced by these magazines generally coincides with the one promulgated by the dominant sectors of society: a "successful woman" is usually one who has made it in the business world or private sector. She is the successful entrepreneur, manager and businesswoman; the dynamic woman professional; the woman who is on her way to becoming a millionaire; and the woman who is equally adept at mixing with the "right crowd". In addition, these magazines also envisage such a woman as one who has the inclination to wear expensive and exquisite dresses and jewellery, live a lavish lifestyle, and simply "look good". Thus, when it comes to the profiling of individuals, these magazines tend to feature them as involved in one form of business or other. But at the same time, there are also instances where such women are depicted as people who consider their businesses as peripheral to their personal and family lives, and therefore these businesses are not taken too seriously. Nevertheless, these women are still considered "successful" given that they are wealthy.

The April 1994 issue of the *Wanita* magazine, for instance, profiles five individuals. For the purpose of this paper, three individuals are selected for analysis. These three women, all married, are considered by the magazine as having achieved some measure of success in their professional lives. On pages 64-65 of the magazine, readers are

introduced to an article entitled, "Che Puan Temenggung Noor Aini bahagia hidup sekarang" (Che Puan Temenggung Noor Aini now lives happily). If the primary aim of this article is to give prominence to Noor Aini's ability as a writer of books and her insatiable thirst for knowledge (which is only mentioned about half way through the article), then it certainly has failed to do so. For what is foregrounded is the fact that she lives in comfort, with her royal husband and a daughter, in a palatial mansion with all its trimmings - her professed humility notwithstanding. Her wealth and material comfort are noted prominently in the article, an indication that the writer is simply full of admiration for this personality. This is how she is introduced in the article:

Rumah besar di atas bukit tersergam indah. Pintu pagar automatik menyukarkan sesiapa yang ingin masuk tanpa membuat temujanji. Gaya hidup orang kaya, kalau hendak datang ke rumah mestilah menelefon dahulu dan membuat temujanji. Jika tuan rumah setuju barulah boleh datang.

Mahligai Che Puan Temenggung Noor Aini sunyi sepi. Sementara menunggu Noor Aini turun, mata sempat memerhati keindahan ruang tamu. Beberapa set kerusi terdapat di ruang tersebut. Lukisan-lukisan potret dan abstrak menghiasai dinding kemas lagi menawan.

Teguran Noor Aini sambil tersenyum manis mengejutkan saya daripada lamunan. Berkurung batik merah beliau nampak begitu sederhana. Seperti yang diberitahu awal melalui telefon, beliau enggan membincangkan soal kekayaan. (p. 64)⁶

Not only has this introduction stressed Noor Aini's lavish lifestyle, it has also engaged in a sexist discourse; a woman like her, the article implies, is necessarily located in a home and assumes "womanly responsibilities". Although somewhere in the article it is stated that she wants to strike it out on her own, without having to rely on her husband's success and popularity, this fizzles out by the article's

emphasis on her dressing and obsession with designer items and overseas vacations.

In the same issue, *Wanita* (April 1994) also profiles former 1976 Miss Malaysia/Miss Universe, Datin Fauziah Harun. The reader is told, initially, that she runs a shop called "Saddlers", selling horse riding equipment and golfing gear. What follows after the brief introduction to what promises to be an example of individual enterprise is a long story about a Fauziah Harun who has a yen for travel, with husband and children, to western destinations such as Australia, the United States and England - in search of her "suitable dresses". She's quite fastidious about her dressing, the writer insists, and she also goes for brand-names or designer items. The article gives the impression that running a shop is less central to the personality's life than buying expensive dresses. While the reader may read this as the writer's subtle criticism of Fauziah, the overall write-up however suggests that she is profiled primarily due to the fact that she is rich and famous (she is both a former Miss Malaysia/Universe and wife of a successful businessman).

A woman can thus gain media spotlight by the mere fact that she, invariably beautiful, is married to a successful businessman. This is the primary reason why the same *Wanita* issue profiles former Indonesian actress Enny Beatrice, otherwise known as Datin Anggraini. In this article, she is first introduced as the wife of the Chairperson of *Berjaya Air*, Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor. Her involvement in running an Indonesian restaurant in Kuala Lumpur, however, is somehow obscured by accounts of her luxurious lifestyle, liking for expensive cosmetics, and unfailing attention and care towards the loving husband and son.

All of the three profile articles are accompanied by photographs of the women concerned, in what can be regarded as sexy poses and standing in front of their respective expensive cars and huge houses. Such a photographic depiction, coupled with sexist discourse, suggests that these women are helplessly reduced to being ladies of leisure, and therefore not really serious about their businesses or other social commitments. In fact, both photographs and texts reinforce each other

in generally conveying a negative image of these women. Such a portrayal makes these women seem like total appendages of successful men. While the intention of the discourse is to glorify entrepreneurship in women, the write-ups inevitably get back to square one - the idea that women's success cannot do without male patronage.

Profile columns also exist in the *Jelita* magazine. In its April issue, the magazine highlights, at varying lengths, five women. Four of them are analysed here: Hairani Saban Hardjoe, the first Malay lawyer in Singapore; Siti Saleha Talib, the woman scientist who's involved in tissue culture at the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute; Zakiah Seman, the gutsy lady who aspires to be the owner of a rubber wood processing factory; and Juliet McCully, the entrepreneur who owns and runs a highly successful speech therapy outfit in Kuala Lumpur. The first three women are depicted by the magazine as those who, firstly, manage to climb up the social ladder without having to lean, if at all, on their spouses. Secondly, they generally come from simple socio-economic backgrounds. McCully, however, attains her professional and commercial success jointly with her husband.

Put next to the other three profiles, particularly the one on McCully, the obscure, one-page profile on Zakiah Seman under the simple rubric "Bertemu bual" [Conversation] sits rather uncomfortably. This article which is buried in the back pages of the magazine (on page 200) smacks of levity on the part of the magazine editorial personnel. The "poor packaging" (i.e. lack of make-up and "power dressing") on Zakiah's part may have contributed to this editorial discrimination. In contrast, the profile of Juliet McCully is even highlighted on the contents page.

In the March issue of *Female*, four individuals are profiled, of whom two are analysed here. In this issue, the magazine brings into the spotlight architect Ruby Ahmad, under the headline "Gleaming Gem". We are told that she not only part-owns and runs an architectural and construction-related company, but that she also dabbles in beauty care via a hair salon. The article goes to some length in detailing her family

background and tertiary education, and yet opens with a flippant introduction:

Impeccably coiffured and groomed, she looks more like the perfect companion for high tea rather than an architect or hard-nosed businesswoman. She confesses to a weakness for high fashion. She's into Karl Lagerfeld at the moment and has developed a craving for Chanel. And she is hopelessly in love with outfits by Issey Miyake, who specialises in difficult fabrics from paper to plastic. "Miyake loves unpredictable twists in his creation," she explains. "He makes me feel very liberated. He is inspiration to the phrase: nothing is impossible." (*Female*, March 1994: 90).

The lexical choice made to emphasise Ruby's physical appearance is "irrelevant, and hence offensive," and "it perpetuates a stereotyped view of women...." Poynton (1989: 58). Besides, the writer seems to suggest that Ruby, because of her so-called physical impeccability, is in fact more effective in a secondary role, i.e. as "a perfect companion". There is a combination of possible explanations to this: firstly, Ruby is enthralled, as she patently confesses, by all things "fashionable". Secondly, the writer herself seems to have a penchant for promoting this frivolous side of Ruby. All this has the cumulative effect of reminding us that the consumerist lifestyle of many successful women, and men, in a capitalist society is very much in dominance. No where else is this dominance more felt in this article than when Ruby ironically celebrates her personal "liberation" via her pre-occupation with Miyake's fabric design, a liberation within the confines of consumer culture.

Ruby's profile contrasts starkly with the one (also written by the same female writer) on pianist Dennis Lee in the same issue of *Female*. Headlined "Hitting The Right Keys", this profile informs the reader about the Malaysian-born pianist who had won world-wide acclaim for composing beautiful music. The article in essence narrates Lee's professional training and experiences. It is revealing that the

introduction to this profile of a successful man is sober and the language used apt:

London's *Daily Telegraph* praised his fine musicianship. Vienna's *Kurier* applauded his powers of expression while Australia's *Sydney Morning Herald* described him as a pianist of immense polish.

Such are the accolades bestowed on Malaysia's very own music maestro, Dennis Lee. And, indeed, the concert pianist of prestigious international standing has raised thunderous applause with every fall of the curtain, all over the world. (*Female*, March 1994: 86)

Lee's achievement in the world of music is emphasised in the introduction. This professional, via the language employed, is seen as a person that must be taken seriously. This kind of sexist discourse which has one kind of language for profiling women and another for men, in the long run only reinforces the "traditional stations" in life of men and women.

Woman At Work (WAW), is a magazine which, going by its name, should be dedicated to the welfare of professional women and the advancement of their careers and social status. In its April issue, WAW carries a profile of accountant-turned-lingerie shop-owner, Liza Noordin. This article (pp. 64-67) briefly describes the beginnings of Liza's business venture, but the bulk of the article, however, revolves around her insistence that lingerie has its prominent role in a working woman's life. In an advertisement-like exhortation, she argues that every woman should have at least one item of beautiful lingerie. She further emphasizes, "The new woman of the 90s likes to feel feminine and sexy without compromising on her professionalism. This is "obvious just by studying the fashion trends in the market where business suits are getting more feminine and softer looking." (WAW, April 1994: 66; emphases added) A person's sense of insecurity is being exploited here for what is implied is that, it will be difficult to be "the new woman of the 90" unless one is willing enough to slip into sexy lingerie. In other words, it should be obvious to anyone, women

in particular, that looking sexy and feminine are crucial to women professionals who take on the challenges of the 1990s. This approach to physical appearance is supposed to be taken as "natural". A magazine that is supposed to promote the interests of professional women in particular and women in general could and should have chosen to do away with this article.

A final point that needs to be made about the profiling of women in these magazines is that, one gets the impression that most of these women succeed in their careers purely out of their own individual efforts and determination. There is little, if any, indication of the structural and institutional factors that can hinder the socio-economic development of women in general.

In all of the magazines examined, the subject of image-making, dressing and fashion abounds. Whether in the form of texts or photographs, this subject takes centre-stage. In the case of the April issue of *Her World*, for instance, the heading of a series article, written by an "image consultant", encapsulates the dominant interest and concern of all these magazines: "Packaging Is Everything". Such articles stress the importance of clothes, personal style, self-image and body language in the ultimate objective of achieving "success". In a column like this, a woman, working or otherwise, is persuaded to dress and look beautiful. And as if to drive this message home more effectively, such an article is often sandwiched between advertisements of exquisite beauty items and designer outfits. In *Wanita* (April 1994), for example, about 35 pages of texts and photographs are dedicated to fashion.

In terms of advertisements, these magazines provide a lot of space to advertisers.⁷ And the fact that they basically cater to female readers helps advertisers to focus on all things and services that relate to women. In the February issue of *Her World*, for instance, there are approximately 75 advertisements, a majority of which occupy one page each while others take up two pages each.

In many ways, the advertisers are able to dictate the kinds of article to be published. The close relationship between advertisements and text

at times becomes apparent when the text on one page directly relates to the goods advertised on the opposite page. This phenomenon is known in the media circle as "advertorial", a combination of advertisement and editorial (i.e. text). For instance, Ruby Ahmad's prestigious French hair salon is advertised next to her profile (*Female*, March 1994). Sometimes this blurring of the once sacred line between text and advertisement can be very crass and blatant. In a blurb about its front cover personality, *Woman At Work* (February 1994) declares, "senior human resource analyst Masitah Babjan looks authoritative, yet totally feminine, in a soft pink pantsuit and white bodysuit by Tangiers. Earing and brooch by Soleil. Makeup by Susi A of La Prairie...." This woman professional is thus branded by name brands to the detriment of her achievements.

Many of the goods, in particular beauty care products such as Estee Lauder, Shiseido and Christian Dior, are found to be advertised in these magazines almost all the time. Such a practice only maintains and reinforces the dominant and traditional image of women (i.e. good looking, "feminine", subservient and yet "sexy"); this is totally in line with the advertisers' promotions which thrive on such stereotypes of women. For example, "Sabrina Fair Lingerie. For the sensual woman in you." (WAW, April 1994 : 71)

The use of the pronoun "you" in advertisement invites reader participation. It singles out an individual consumer as if she is important, and it implies "a relationship of solidarity" (Fairclough, 1989: 128). For example, an advertisement in *Female* (February 1994) carries these words for a weight-watching outfit, *Marie France Bodyline*: "Showing off comes naturally when you look this good! When you're overweight, there's a tendency to hide in the background. But after FMS (Fat Mobilization System) at Marie France, you can't resist being in full view. Some might call it showing off, but it's only natural when you look this good. (*Female*, February 1994 : 103)" Another instance from the same magazine: "Basic Instinct. Basic Beauty. Enough to drive any man wild. RVB provides the latest technologies in body beauty cosmetics to keep you looking and feeling healthier (*Female*, March 1994 : 125)". This is

also an example of how an advertisement tries to exploit and manipulate a person's self-concept and self-authentication.

When it comes to career guidance and advancement, these women's magazines focus on the subjects of corporate management, image consultancy, empowerment workshops, the professions which are still perceived as male bastions, trades that are traditionally associated with women (like home decor, fashion designer) and the owning and running of businesses. In *Her World* (April 1994), for instance, the reader is provided with a variety of features entitled, "Becoming a Million-dollar Woman", and "Total Image", career news concerning "Direct-selling Champions" and "Telephone Etiquette" an article on "Lifestyle/Time Management Seminar"; and a number of articles under the rubric "The Successful Secretary".

Given the dominant and mainstream notion of a "successful person" it is almost inevitable that stories or profiles of women social activists, trade unionists, social workers, and the ordinary woman in the street are neglected and pushed out of the media gaze. These are individuals who, despite their substantial contributions to the process of national development, do not matter much to many of the magazines as well as the advertisers simply because they are not easily lured by the advertised goods and services. A large number of them do not have strong purchasing power.

The subject, "Shopping and the Latest in the Market" is very much emphasized in all of the women's magazines studied. The readers are indirectly coaxed into buying when certain (new) items are introduced in the magazines. They are featured under various editorial departments, such as, "Headlights", "Beauty World", "Short Cuts", "The Wide Dress", "The New Jackets", and "Steeped in Tradition". (*Female*, March 1994) In these columns, which often take up a lot of space, certain items like clothes will be introduced briefly only to be followed by the all important message, where to buy the item concerned. This is not even a veiled attempt at hiding the commercial messages of the texts concerned. In fact, glancing through the pages of these magazines is like to pouring over a goods catalogue. Readers are consciously and constantly exhorted to consume and to feel good about

the spread of goods available, ready for them to exercise their options. As Fairclough asserts, "Advertising, for instance, firmly embeds the mass of the population within the capitalist commodity system by assigning them the legitimate and even desirable role of 'consumers' " (1989: 36).

Cover stories normally involve an expose of the "model girl" (or actress or housewife) who graces the cover of the magazine concerned. With the exception of WAW, the other magazines almost always have female models to "decorate" their covers. If this editorial policy is sexist, the brief interviews conducted on these models, as in the case of *Her World*, are frivolous. The following standard line of questioning is indicative of the magazine's expectation of the model's intellect: (a) What are the beauty products you use?; (b) What is your most indispensable beauty item?; (c) What is your best asset, physical or otherwise?; (d) If you could change one part of your body, which would it be?; (e) What is the most indispensable item in your wardrobe?; (f) What is your favourite smell?; (g) What is your favourite place?; (h) What is the best present you've ever received?; (i) Which book can you read over and over again?; (j) What do you do to beat the blues?; (k) If you were stuck on an island, what are the things/people you would like to have with you?; (l) If there is one thing in the world you can change, what would it be?; and (m) How do you see yourself 10 years from now? Of these questions, only (i), (l) and (m) are worthy of response.

Given the conventional notion of women subscribed to by these women's magazines, it is no wonder that the editorial department of body and facial care is given most attention. This may take the form of regular features such as "Body Talk" (*Her World*); "Beauty World" (*Female*); "Beauty" (WAW); "Dari Hujung Rambut Ke Kaki" (*Wanita*); and "Di Sebalik Warna" and "Ke Arah Kejelitaan" (*Jelita*). In all of these columns, various beauty care advertisements creep in either as straight advertisements or advertorials. It is in columns such as these that one gets a sense of rapport between the magazine publishers and the advertisers. And once again, both, in varying degrees, thrive on female stereotypes. This inclination (to exploit particularly sexual

stereotypes) is in part attributed to the fact that these magazines are also attracting the attention of their male readers.⁸

The category "Social Events" generally refers to social gatherings that are held in major cities such as Kuala Lumpur and attended by important personalities such as politicians, chief executive officers, actors and actresses, singers, economists, business people, wives of important people, and other socialites. These events are duly recorded and publicised by the magazines concerned under their respective editorial departments: "Eye Spy" (*Her World*); "Candid Parties" (*Female*); "Happenings" and "People" (*WAW*); "Sekitar" (*Wanita*); and "Di Sana Sini" (*Jelita*). In this way, the magazines themselves try to attract readers from this set of people as well as signalling to the advertisers the magazines' association with these people. It is very seldom that one gets to know what the other segments of society (women in particular), do and how they socialise during their free time. The emphasis on the VIPs, in other words, has marginalised to a large degree women and men who come from other classes of society, for example, the working class.

Editorials usually constitute convenient vehicles for a publication to comment on issues or matters that it deems socially important and urgent, and subsequently suggests, if need be, specific remedies. An editorial in many ways helps to forge an individual identity for the publication concerned. All the five women's magazines have their own editorials which are given their respective names. However, the seriousness of matters discussed in the editorials varies from one magazine to another.

In its March 1994 editorial under the departmental name "Editor's Say", for instance, *WAW* essentially responds to a reader's comment on the problems faced by an experienced worker who doesn't have paper qualifications. As a solution, the editorial suggests that networking with people in the profession can be of great assistance in one's search for a job. In the second part of the editorial, the editor announces the coming of the management guru, Philip Kotler, who will contribute articles to the magazine regarding management strategies as well as about good dining manners. In the main, the

above editorial put heavy emphasis on issues relating to the industries and management. In short, matters concerning people from outside this realm are not likely to receive attention from the magazine.

In the "Reflections" editorial of *Her World* (February 1994), the editor attempts to turn clairvoyant by her desire to take a glimpse into the future, in particular regarding man-woman relationships. This seems to be a personal voyage and yet she does not hesitate to generalize. By concentrating on matters of the heart, the editorial has to some degree strengthened the popular notion that women in general put issues of love and relationships above other equally important issues in life.

The serious issue of competition in the world of business and at the workplace is discussed by the *Female's* "Editor's Note" (April 1994). The conclusion is a simple cautionary note to the reader to be aware of the dangers arising from being competitive. While this editorial has addressed itself to an important issue that affect professionals as well as business people, it nonetheless fails to question the underlying causes of competitiveness, especially the kind of competition that invariably exploits women.

Exploitations of women by men and husbands takes the centre-stage in the "Cetusan Rasa" of *Wanita* (April 1994). The editor discusses the plight of married women as well as the problems faced by single parents and divorcees who have to confront ex-husbands who refuse to provide them with financial support. However in conclusion, the editor is resigned to "the fact that women are usually the losers".

In the "Coretan Pengarang" editorial of *Jelita* (April 1994), the editor discusses the issue of single parents needing legal and other forms of protection. She also informs the reader of the setting up of a body that aims to protect and promote the interests of women divorcees and single parents in a society where prejudices against them still prevail. Unlike the previous piece, this editorial is positive in its approach to this social problem for it is willing to take the initiative to champion certain causes of women.

While there are some editorials in the magazines which are serious and even at times cutting in their remarks, these tend to get easily blunted by the same magazines' heavy emphasis on and exploitation of the physical beauty of women in their texts and advertisements. Stereotypes of women therefore continue to be unquestioningly reinforced.

Conclusion

Women's magazines can, and should, play an important part in promoting the interests of women as well as assisting them in uplifting their social status. However, the analysis above indicates that unless substantial and effective steps are taken, many of these women's magazines can unconsciously or otherwise be transformed into convenient conduits of time-worn stereotypes of women that eventually harm the women themselves. The majority of these magazines portray and project, "successful women" as necessarily wealthy, glamorous and powerful proponents of consumer culture.

Although there are a few articles that deal with the other categories of successful women, these are not adequately highlighted or foregrounded. These women are marginalised because firstly, they are generally not "compatible" with the image of the affluent and good-loving consumers that are advertised in the magazines. In other words, they do not live up to the stereotype image of success that conform to the expectations of a consumer culture and a patriarchal society. Secondly, the depiction of marginalised women in these magazines may be seen as subversive, for it basically questions the status quo and disrupts the "taken-for-granted" good-living aspirations of mass consumers. Even if these articles do appear in these magazines this does not necessarily mean that alternative approaches to women's issues and problems and socio-economic development are encouraged and heralded. These few articles are in many ways appropriated by the publishing concerns to lend legitimacy to their existence. They can claim to be covering as many stories of human interests as possible. Hegemony, to be sure, has to be fought and won over larger territories.

Given the prevailing characteristics of most popular women's magazines in Malaysia, the task of tearing down women's stereotypes can be monumental. This is made more difficult by the profit-maximization philosophy that informs many publishing concerns in the country. While Malaysian feminists have made some degree of progress in certain areas such as fair treatment in the professions and equal access to education and training, they still have a long way to go in terms of demolishing unfair portrayals of women in the media. Finally, unless and until feminist consciousness is widely achieved, women that fall out of the "successful women" stereotype conjured by popular magazines will only be mere onlookers, unheard of and eclipsed by the glamour-hype image of the dream woman.⁹

Notes

- ¹ Such exhortations are prominent in almost all of the Malaysian government's socio-economic planning documents like *The Second Outline Perspective Plan 1991-2000*.
- ² Both *Her World* and *Jelita* are published by Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd., a subsidiary of the giant publishing company, The New Straits Times Group. *Female* is published by the established MPH Magazines Sdn. Bhd. while *Wanita* is published by another giant publishing company, Utusan Melayu (M)Group. Quest Publishing Sdn. Bhd. publishes *Woman at Work*.
- ³ For a discussion of the 'profit inclination' of the local print media, see Francis Loh and Mustafa (1992).
- ⁴ The close relationship between the media and the ruling party, which can be a problem in itself, can be traced to the media ownership pattern in the country. For an excellent account of this media ownership pattern, see Gomez (1990).

- ⁵ The variety of reading materials in the Malaysian market is constrained by factors legal and economic. For a discussion of this see for instance Mustafa (1994).
- ⁶ English translation of the last paragraph relevant to our argument: "The palatial mansion is perched on the top of a hill. The automatic gate makes it difficult for anyone to enter without making prior appointment. It's the lifestyle of the rich, one has to phone and make an appointment before making a visit. One can only visit if the host agrees".
- ⁷ Some of the major advertisers who mostly sell exquisite or expensive items or services in these women's magazines are: Raymond Weil, Ariston, Estee Lauder, Pierre Cardin, Shiseido, Seiko, Calvin Klein, Ginvera, Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, Guess, Triumph, Loewe, Gucci, Michel Herbelin, Napier, Elancyl, Bianca, Giamax, Etienne Aigner, Hana, Kose, Clairol, Aquatone, Shape-up, Enercal, Louis Vuitton, Clinique, Wacoal, Christian Dior, Elizabeth Arden, Storch, Clarins, Emporio Armani, Bella, Imedeen, Toscano, Woolite, Swatch, Charles Garnier, Ozly, Levi's, Juvena, Phillip Wain, Biore, Pierre Balmain, Bruno Magli, Stayfree, Laurier, Cartier Santos, Aji-Shio, Pepper and Kimball.
- ⁸ The latest Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies or 4A's Mass Media Survey that was conducted - between February and December 1993 - by research firm, Frank Small & Associates, revealed that 30 per cent of Women magazines' readers in Peninsular Malaysia are men (*New Straits Times*, 26/5/94, p. 17).
- ⁹ Minority groups are also marginalised, or de-centred, by the mainstream newspapers and magazines in Malaysia because of such factors as journalistic procedure, structural constraints, and economic emphasis.

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New Straits Times newspaper.