

# Female Sexuality: Self Empowerment or Reason for Oppression?

**Cheryl Chelliah Thiruchelvam**

*Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, MALAYSIA*

E-mail: t.cheryl@gmail.com

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Review of three exhibitions: (1) *Love Me in My Batik* at Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2016); (2) *FACETS* at the White Box, Publika, Kuala Lumpur (2015); and (3) *My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* at The Star, Penang (2015).

"But we are not only oppressed as women, we are oppressed by having to be women, or men as the case may be". Rubin (1975)

The female body is a common and convenient site of sexual objectification. Constituting physiological attributes as well as psychological characteristics, the female body is used as a site or "body" to construct the gender representation of women in general. Since Neanderthal times, males have used the physiological attributes of females (as source of pleasure, ability to produce offspring, as well as to care and nurture) to define, control, oppress if not manipulate them; which inherently created the gender representation (VALUE) of women (Szymanski, Moffitt and Carr 2011). Women are still defined by socio-cultural norms (Baumeister and Twenge 2002) and even by religious-politico settings where women are commonly seen as sexual objects, or to play the role of a wife and/or mother, as the weaker sex compared to males and whereby women need to be controlled as well as protected by terms set by males in a society. In regards to the suppression of women and stifling of their sexuality, Baumeister and Twenge (2002) have highlighted that it was deemed as a necessary measure for the development of a civilised society. Females are commonly determined by cultural standards. In Asia, society restricts a woman's sexual expression (physical appearance

and choice of clothes) by constructing the gender representation of what a woman should be. For instance, the projection of an urban working Malay Muslim compared to a rural Malay Muslim housewife. The similar expectation or projection is also applicable to other races: a professional or English educated Chinese female compared to those who attend Chinese schools and live in the outskirts; or an Indian female from the middle income group compared to females who still live in plantation estates with little or no basic education. Now, although by providing such scenarios, I am stereotyping the image of women, hence inevitably creating a VALUE for them, nevertheless, each projection or expectation of the described females above are heavily based on societal norms—race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and cultural identity. It is for this reason specifically that I created the stereotypes hence exemplifying how VALUE is hinged upon the appearance of these females besides the way we experience or interact with them. This paper is a review based on three exhibitions that were held in Kuala Lumpur (*Love Me in My Batik* at Ilham Gallery [2016] and *FACETS* at the White Box, Publika [2015]) and Penang (*My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* at The Star [2015]). I intend to examine and discuss on the representation of female sexuality in these selected exhibitions within the Malaysian context.

Various representations of women in modern Malaysian art can be traced to its early days by both male and female artists such as by Sylvia Goh (*Red Bride*, 1996), Hoessein Enas (*Admonition*, 1962; and *Air Hostess and Pilot*, 1963) and Norma Abbas (*Two Women*, 1995) to name a few. Resulting from the rise of the feminist wave of the 1970s, feminist art and women's art have also made its presence in the local art landscape—group exhibitions anchored on women as their subject, as well as increased number of female artists addressing various issues pertaining to women in recent years. In the latest *Love Me in My Batik* exhibition that was held at Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur; I would like to emphasise on the works of two artists—Joseph Tan and Lee Kian Seng—who had used female(s) as their subject matter; however, these works were not perceived or contextualised as the representation of the female sexuality. Created more than four decades ago, Joseph Tan's *Love Me in My Batik* and Lee Kian Seng's *Ying Yang Series: Soul and Form*, represent the female sexuality boldly if not provocatively. In Joseph Tan's collage, a female leaning backward in an exposed *kebaya* (traditional Malay figure hugging outfit), where her unbuttoned blouse exposes her breasts and her undone *sarong* reveals her white panty with her legs spread out. Meanwhile, Lee Kian Seng's batik illustrations revolve around nude female figures with an



**Photo 1** Joseph Tan, *Love Me in My Batik* (1968). Batik collage.  
Source: Photograph by author.

emphasis on the sensuality as well as sexuality. For instance, there is a pair of nude female twins cupping their breasts with their backs to each other on one piece, and the same female twins in an oppositional view to each other on a different piece. The highlight in this series is a piece that illustrates a nude female climbing a giant mushroom (it is hard to dismiss the representation of a penis) with an opened window at the bottom that reveals sensual Japanese

art of a romancing man and woman; and a crossed legged female seated at the pinnacle of the mushroom in an ecstasy/climax mood (with her hair depicted as being electrocuted and her eyes are symbolised with red eye shades). The rising waves at the background (that symbolise the female sexual drive) and the repetition of the mushroom (representation of penis complete with splashes of ink at the top) further illustrates how the female and male energy complement each other and can exist in harmony. Various symbols and subjects that are arranged in a particular manner in this artwork, subtly depicts a woman's sexual energy and sexuality as well. It is vital to take note here that the female sexuality is acknowledged and accepted, and is noted to co-exist along with the male sexuality in this particular piece.

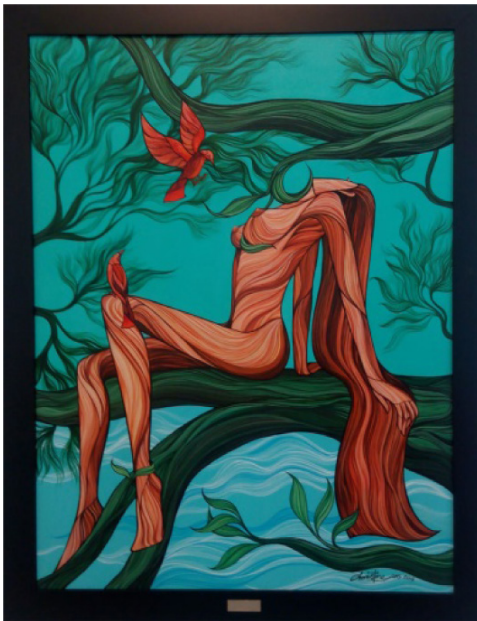
So, is the female sexuality something that needs to be feared of? Is the female sexuality so empowering that it needs to be defined, controlled and oppressed? Based on Lee Kian Seng's *Ying Yang Series*, the *Ying* and *Yang* are two oppositional elements that are meant to complement each other. The concept of *Ying* and *Yang* explains that everything that exist in this world come in pairs—such as good and bad, day and night, left and right, male and female, positive and negative, black and white, and so on. It is also important to note that the concept of *Ying* and *Yang* is also present in Christine Das' paintings where the female and the environment are shown in cool colours (*ying*) while the birds and the butterflies are painted



**Photo 2** Lee Kian Seng, *Ying Yang Series: Soul and Form* (1973). Batik.

Source: Photograph by author.

in warmer colours (*yang*). This will be discussed further in this paper. When two opposing elements meet, they are supposed to create perfect harmony and balance—this is transcended in Lee Kian Seng's batik pieces. The meeting of the male and female sexuality is believed to be in a balanced and harmonious state that it releases a huge amount of energy (orgasm/climax). As such, women should embrace their sexuality and use it as self-empowerment, as this female sexual energy should co-exist with the male sexual energy, in motion creating a balanced state that radiates energy.



**Photo 3** Christine Das, *Allure No. 3*.  
Acrylic on canvas.  
Source: Photograph by author.



**Photo 4** Christine Das, *Allure No. 6*.  
Acrylic on canvas.  
Source: Photograph by author.

I would like to highlight three separate exhibitions anchored on feminist art that were held respectively in Kuala Lumpur and Penang last August (2015) that contextualised different aspects about gender and sex(ual) issues faced by women. *FACETS*—a group exhibition that was a collective effort by Cerebral V—showcased the artworks of five female artists—Christine Das, Jasmine Kok, Lisa Foo, Poojitha Menon, and Yante Ismail—at the White Box in Publika, Kuala Lumpur. It was liberating to see female sexuality being portrayed in interesting and provocative ways. Although expressing or discussing the female sexuality is against the cultural norms and expectations within the Malaysian society, the artists were being bold and intimidating to the viewers. Albeit Christine Das' canvases mainly portrayed nude female figures enclosed in a natural background with the presence of birds or butterflies, there were some elements of mystery and secret gestures—by the female's position, her long wavy hair, the pose of the female not looking at the viewer (except for one canvas where the female gazes directly), and the details (contour lines) that forms her body. This is such, a woman who expressed her sexuality (in the way she dresses, or speaks, or accentuate her physical attributes or even her sex life), which further forms her identity, is objectified and evaluated (usually misjudged and often degraded) by the society around her.

In *Allure No. 3*, the nude female figure is seated on a tree branch with her head tilted to the back and her long hair flowing down onto the branch. A leaf from the twig gently cups under her breast as she somewhat surrenders herself to nature. Similarly, a leaf twirls at one of her ankles, and there is a river flowing behind her in the illustration. The presence of two birds—one seated on her left knee and one flying towards her—can be read as the presence of the male. Tranquillity, peace and sense of freedom that are present in Christine's canvases suggest the liberation and security of the female in her environment to be just as she is or wants to be. In *Allure No. 6*, the female is threading through the shallow water of a river, demurely walking towards the viewer as her long wavy hair is gently blown by the wind, as she tilts her head sideways to gaze at the butterfly that rests on her fingers. Another butterfly is near her ear (similar to a flower placed behind the ear) and the other butterfly in a flapping motion is at her breast. The birds and butterflies in each of the canvases that are in warmer colours (orange red and purple red), and in contrast to the cool and soothing blue and green background, act as decorative items that complement the female subject while enhancing and emphasising on her beauty, sensuality and sexuality as a whole. Is this not the desire of most women to be appreciated, liberated, respected and empowered by the presence of others in a given environment be it social or cultural or even political?



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**Photo 5** Yante Ismail, *The Surfaces of My Existence* (2015). Mixed media on canvas.  
Source: Photograph by author.



**Photo 6** Jasmine Kok, *Blue Armour* (2010). Copper wire, fishing lines, coloured thread and crochet.  
Source: Photograph by author.

I must admit Jasmine Kok's *Sensuality Dress Ceramic Series* was the centrepiece of the exhibition as it somewhat contextualised the entire exhibition. Small ceramic figurines that resembled the female hourglass shape were arranged to portray the shape of the letter "V" with another two pieces of ceramics (depicting ovaries) placed at the centre of it. "V" which loudly symbolises vagina, is part of the female sex organ; and the entire composition of the figures (each one in different colours, details and shapes), depict the female reproductive organ. Firstly, there are no two identical figurines that make up the "V" shape on the wall. Each figurine is detailed and customised differently. Secondly, the symbolism of the female

reproductive organ and the alphabet "V"—where V here can be read as Roman number to represent the five female artists, V for Vagina, and even to symbolise the shape of the reproductive organ in the female body—creates the paradox on gender representation of women. Each and every female is different, despite being objectified generally as a woman based on her physical appearance. Moreover, the female reproductive organ, which contributes both to the physical and psychological being of woman, must not be viewed, understood or analysed separately. This is further portrayed by her *Sensuality Dress Series* where the female genitalia are used in repetition in different sizes, shapes and colours to form the female body. To analyse further, the repetition of female genitalia that is used to create the female body, symbolises the complexity of female as a sexual being. In contrast to common belief that a woman's sexuality and sensuality is often related to vagina and breasts, it is the sensual feeling of her entire body (from her hair, face, skin, limbs, emotions) that paramounts to the feeling of sexiness, hence her sexuality in general.



**Photo 7** Jasmine Kok, *Sensuality Dress Ceramic Series*. Ceramic figurine on wall.  
Source: Photograph by author.

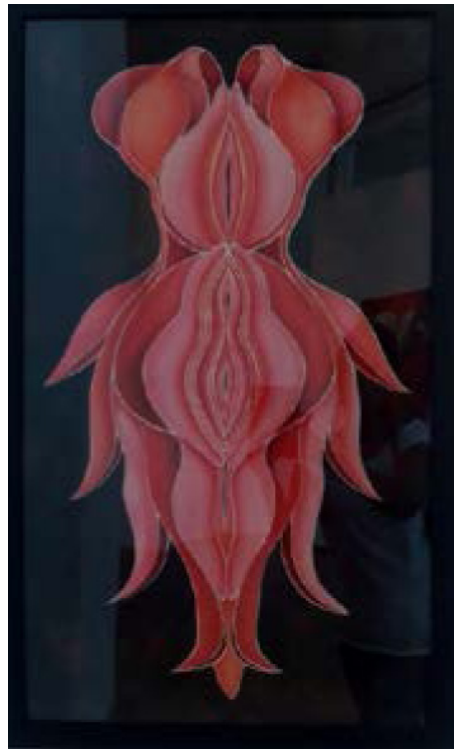


In general, all women are perceived to behave in an expected manner fixed by social norms; whereby the desire or likings of women are often ignored and oppressed. Basic human rights and freedom of expression (whether it is sexual preferences or sexual identity) are taken away from women. Moreover, society in general rarely tries to comprehend women. Often and typically stereotyped, females are seen in a single lens and expected to behave in a similar manner, whereby the individuality and subjectivity of females are totally disregarded and silenced. The common misconception that women are merely sexual objects for men as noted by Bartky (quoted in Szymanski et al., 2011), to be pursued and manipulated for their self-interest becomes problematic, even radical, and too liberal if it is the female who plays the dominant role of finding and experiencing sexual encounters. When there are women with such sexual empowerment, society (both men and women) sees it as a threat and goes to the extent of verbal, physical, or even emotional abuse.

If Christine Das speaks about the sensuality and liberty of women, and while Jasmine Kok emphasises on the female reproductive organ and subjectivity of female sexuality; on the contrary, Yante Ismail's bold and provocative canvases liberates and lifts the subject of female sexuality into a new perspective. Her realistic looking nude female subject(s) in a pale brown skin tone with an exaggerated hair (colourful strips that flow endlessly through the canvas) intimidates the viewer with a strong gaze. Yante goes against the norm of gender representation of women (especially in regards to Malay females) where her illustrations break, destroy, and liberate the very expectation of men about "normal" women. Her canvases speak in volume about the freedom of expressing and owning one's sexuality—her voluptuous figures with accentuated curves and flesh, glorious hair, inhibited eyes, and posture. The exaggeration on the big and colourful hair is vital to take note of as for women; hair plays a vital role in expressing or displaying their sexuality, and identity as a whole. Long, wavy and voluminous hair symbolises sexiness, and for the Muslim female in particular, one is supposed to cover their hair as it is only to be admired by their husbands. Identified as the *aurat*—Malay Muslim women are "strongly" urged to cover their hair (*aurat*) with headscarf or *hijab* as part of the religion's requirement and in the larger picture, not to portray their sexuality. In Yante's canvases, the prominence of the long, colourful and intertwined hair is difficult to be missed, although in another canvas, Yante portrays a bald female. The oppositional portrayal of a female with and without hair creates some sort of engagement with the viewer as they would need to contemplate, identify, and judge on the portrayal of what is "normal", "expected" and "accepted" female figure.

Titled *Desire*, this canvas rather bravely and boldly brings forth the subject of female sexual pleasure and desire as an individual. It challenges and destroys the very expectation of how a woman should behave or what a woman should be. As a nude female lies on her stomach with her full rounded buttocks protruding the viewer, one leg stretching out of the canvas and one leg folded up. A strong gaze from her eye captures and intimidates the viewer as she reaches to please herself, as her big wavy and colourful hair connects from her head to the bottom left of the canvas which somewhat creates a flow/direction for the viewers. Being comfortable with one physical's body, to express one's sexuality, and to be confident about your sexual identity are shown in Yante's paintings; instead of letting others to control and dictate of one's physical body and sexuality. Especially in a conservative Asian society, a female's physical body is ruled and governed by men in order not to provoke, or arouse, or tease them in any way. Women are blamed and further discriminated if men misbehaved, or harassed, or assaulted, or passed abusive/derogatory remarks, or even rape; where women are said to have provoked and "invited" these wrongdoings unto themselves. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, as cited in Szymanski et al. 2011: 8) further summated, "... women to varying degrees internalize this outsider view and begin to self-objectify by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance".

If *FACETS* exhibition acknowledged female sexuality with a positive undertone, *My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* exhibition which was held in Penang brought to witness how female sexuality was used as a



**Photo 8** Jasmine Kok, *Sensuality Dress Series (Red)*. Batik painting.

Source: Photograph by author.

tool to oppress, manipulate, control and silence women. Women's Centre for Change, Penang initiated a project to raise awareness how some women have survived abuse and violence by getting artists as a mediator to transform the stories and experience from these survivors into visual artworks. Stories of women being abused sexually, mentally and physically are still common in the current times. The continuous struggle for gender equality or change towards empowering women seems to take two steps back with every step forward. Laws and policies (such as approving child marriage at the age of 16) or even to the rights to collect one's marriage certificate without the presence of the husband only proves how females are marginalised, degraded, and politicised.

In *My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* exhibition, most of the women (majority who are/were married) became the victims to various forms of sexual aggression, physical abuse, and mental torture of their husbands or mothers-in-law in one such case. Commonly, married women are often thought to be objects that have become possessions of their husbands and/or their families; they can be manipulated and used to suit the likings, convenience or even as platforms to take out their anger or frustrations. As wives, these women are expected to obey, fulfil, and even support their husbands. In a marriage where the wife is supposed to play an equal role (by taking the responsibilities of a husband), women are often neglected, abused, and swindled out of their mental and physical health by their husbands. The photomontage by Tetriana titled *Big Mother* portrays the constant surveillance from the mother-in-law of the survivor who watched her constantly in her daily household chores. As a daughter-in-law or an outsider in the family, she became the maid (*My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* Exhibition Catalogue 2015). It is important to note that within some families, the female figure loses her own individuality and liberty to nurture and pursue her ambitions, once married. From speaking her mind, to the clothes she wears, or even her food preferences, she may become under the scrutiny and preference of her husband. The female here—as a wife—loses her own voice and freedom to live a fulfilling and happy life. In the given normal circumstances, most women dream of having happy married lives, and I doubt highly if there is any woman who gets married with the intention of being a slave.

Although there are circumstances where marriage is arranged to lessen the financial burden, or even to form new family ties, or to adhere to societal norms where at coming to a certain age—one is expected to be married and experience the next stage of life. In the following example, one of the survivors married an *Imam* (religious figure) to prevent him from raping her sisters and her best friend (*My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change*



**Photo 9** Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi, *Big Mother* (2015). Print on photo paper, 500 × 400, 440 × 560, 500 × 400 mm.

Source: Photograph by author.

Exhibition Catalogue 2015). In Engku Iman's work entitled *Yang Melindungi* (The One that Protects), a white *telekung* (a long headscarf that a Muslim female wears to perform her prayers) with black line illustrations clearly shows the decadence and violation on an object that is to be kept clean and considered sacred. Here, the *telekung* is used to contextualise the male religious figure who is supposed to be the protector of the religion and a respected figure within the community. However, in this particular case, the male figure is the aggressor as he abuses his masculine capabilities to violate females (the act of raping) and further caused the survivor to marry him and adhere to his sexual needs—regardless of how she felt emotionally towards him (a form of oppression). To be trapped in an intimidating and abusive marriage violates the basic fundamental human rights of any individual, as one would expect to be treated equally and respectfully. The need and pressure to stay in a marriage can vary from

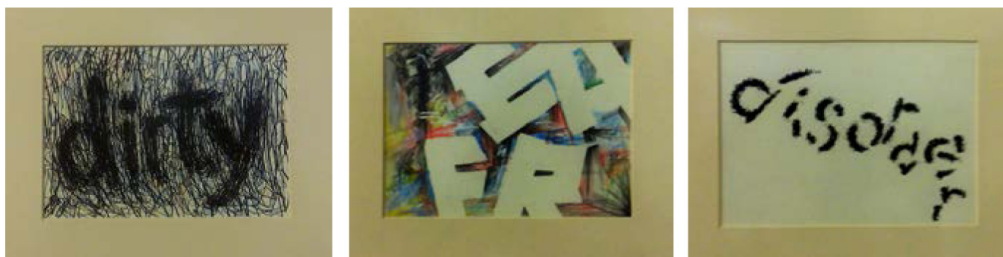
financial dependence on the other spouse, to the notion of raising the (child)ren, or even to retain a certain perceived social status that is deemed to be more "successful" compared to those who are unmarried. On a much more serious note, the portrayal of a "good wife" becomes a VALUE that is used to classify and benchmark wives in general, hence, neglecting the individualistic perspective on a female (who she is or what she wants to be), and instead emphasises and prioritises the role as a wife and a mother.

These typographic expressions by Typokaki comes as a result of shared experience of another survivor who was sexually harassed, molested, and raped by a priest (*My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* Exhibition Catalogue 2015). The perpetrator had promised to fund her education abroad and provide her with financial support if only she would have sex with him. Despite the survivor confiding in her mother, the priest was neither confronted nor the truth revealed as she feared she would be blamed for the incident. Experiencing a mental trauma from this experience with the priest, the victim was reluctant to further engage in a romantic relationship with her own boyfriend. This had further spurred her attempts to commit suicide (another tragedy). Words such as "dirty", "fear", "disorder" and few other words are expressed using typographic elements by Typokaki in order to convey the physical trauma as well as the emotional and mental stress that the survivor had endured. Similar to the case of survivor with the *Imam*, this is not the only case involving religious or even respected figures in society. More disturbing, if not crucial, is how these incidents are often ignored, silenced and forced to be forgotten in order not to be viewed both sceptically and negatively by society. Concurrently, this is also further reflected in a different experience by another survivor—Laila, not her real name—who was raped by her stepfather since the age of 11, and for the following 14 years (*My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* Exhibition Catalogue 2015). He had sexually violated her, physically abused her, mentally tortured and haunted her throughout her secondary and university days. She endured these 14 traumatic years in silence in her childhood; her teenage years and youth were stolen and replaced with agony, pain and fear. The stories highlighted by the survivors in *My Story My Strength: Doodle for Change* exhibition indeed beg a few considerations. What gives the right to these men to treat a lady or even a child in such unspeakable and cruel manner? More than that, why have not these women or children sought help, or lodged a report, or even stepped up to protect their body and mind from these evil perpetrators? What had held them back from speaking up? Why had they taken years to finally speak the truth or even to react to these terrible wrong doings?



**Photo 10** Engku Iman, *Yang Melindungi* (2015). Ink and acrylic on fabric (*telekung*), dimension variable.

Source: Photograph by author.



**Photo 11** Typokaki, *The 7 Words* (3 examples shown above) (2015).

Source: Photograph by author.



Stereotyping leads to objectification and oppression as the female gender representation (WOMEN) was construed by men in the very beginning. Socially, women are objectified to be wives and mothers—to produce offspring and care takers; culturally, women are subjugated by men as they are often seen to be incapable of taking care of themselves, and that they need constant surveillance and control by their fathers, brothers or husbands. In the political realm, women are commonly marginalised as the weaker sex as women are supposedly emotional and irrational beings that are incapable to make clear, concise and wise decisions. Lastly, religious teachings are often twisted and skewed (by men) that as a wife, one needs to adhere to all the husband's need and wants (desire, emotional and physical) and the cliché of being the dutiful and perfect housewife comes into play. It is the net result of these objectifications and oppressions that these survivors (both women and children) feel and think that they owe their sexuality rights to these men.

The empowerment of female sexuality opposed to sexual objection can be a tricky issue, and it is even harder in a religiously concerned society (anchored on Islamic values and teachings) like in Malaysia. Even if women are not in total control of their sexual identities, society and its surroundings forces should help women to protect themselves from both verbal and physical abuse. I am beginning to ponder whether there is a need to teach and discuss with other women about owning their sexuality, or a need to educate the men on acknowledging and respecting females for their own sexuality—that females has the liberty to act upon it without having men to impinge, define, control or oppress it.

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