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The Concept of National identity in the Artwork of Female Artists in Malaysia

Salehuddin Zakaria¹, Rafeah Legino^{2*}, Mohammad Kamal Abdul Aziz³

¹ College of Creative Art, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 32610 Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

² Formgiving Research Group, College of Creative Art, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

³ College of Creative Art, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

msalehuddin@uitm.edu.my, rafeahl@uitm.edu.my, mkamal054@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +6017 577 2620

Abstract

This study examines the national identity elements of the Fatimah Chik and Khatijah Sanusi artworks, which begins with the examination of relevant material, including examples of national identity-related works and visual data on the results of Malaysian female artists obtained through digital photographs and records. Identifying and recognising national identity in Malaysian female artists' works is categorised by the artwork's profile. The artwork's focus and criteria will be mapped with the inquiry of the National Cultural Congress's study (NCC). Women's attitudes in art production reflect national identity in female artists' artworks that emphasise culture, family, and accuracy.

Keywords: Artworks, Female artist, National identity, Malaysia

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1.0 Introduction

The concept of national identity is an important element that a certain artist is concerned with and embeds in their artwork making. This avenue is how the artist contributes to shaping the culture of a plural society through artworks. At the same time, through the artwork, the indication of the national symbol, from the selected objects shows unity and shares the cultural values over the content and context of artworks. These ongoing projects, where this study focuses on selected female artists' artworks, and the artwork belonging to Fatimah Chik and Khatijah Sanusi were chosen for further consideration of analysis and discussion. Therefore, the objective of this inquiry is to the analysis of how the use of a certain object formed a unique idea and represents the national identity of this country through artwork. The appropriate methods begin with a review of related literature and also mapping with the selected artwork, in order to analysis the artwork accordingly.

2.0 Literature Review

Recent and previous of relevant studies determine and support the direction of this study. Mahamood (2001) stated on the results of the identity conflict and uncertainty among Malay artists from the 1930s to the late 1960s, began searching for an identity in the 1970s. In this effort, the establishment of the National Cultural Congress in 1971 was conducted by the Sports Division and the Ministry of Youth at the University of Malaya. Indirectly, the group is pushing artists to try to include Malay elements in their work. Meanwhile, the goal of this congress is to come up with a new formula and focus on developing a multi-ethnic nation's culture. In this regard, he claims that it has succeeded in achieving three key principles in the development of Malaysian cultural citizens. At first, Malaysia's national culture must be

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rooted in the country. Secondly, another appropriate cultural element can be incorporated into the national culture. And finally, Islam is the key element of the country's culture. Indeed, Malay artists are beginning to explore Malay artworks and cultural history, which has indirectly contributed to the country's new generation of artists. As a result, a few years later, most of the great local artists influenced by the West have temporarily forgotten their local identity due to the existence of artwork (Mohammad Noh et al., n.d.).

The local artists started and allocated their idea formulation towards how to protect their sense of self-identity and cultural legacy in visual art. Even without the 'A Malayan School of Painting,' the concentration of the Malays artist had they been experienced artistic changes between 1958 and 1964 (Md. Zain, 2006). This bold endeavour is also spotted internationally in the World of Contemporary Art for its visual art contributions. In 1979, the seminar of the *Akar-Akar Peribumi* (the native roots) was held at the Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM), now also known as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). These platforms directed the changes and development in visual art. In fact, today, the sustainability of the visual art movement still shows how the emergence of cultural identity art from Malay revivalist artists who recognized the need for Malay identity in the visual arts in the production of local artwork (Piyadasa, 2000). Most Malay revivalist artists who received education at the ITM have sparked a new visual art production that is more geared to Malay art, such as the motifs 'songket' and 'batik,' tales and legends, and Malay social issues (Mahamood, 2001). They have created their artistic ideology in the context of Islamic aesthetics. As a result, Islamic morals have been inadvertently incorporated into their identity, allowing them to express their souls as muslim artists (Hassan, 2010).

When the country entered the twenty-first century, the advent of the Malay female artists with other local male artists is continue their focus. Where, among the artists who have been established in this country's visual arts, such as Fatimah Chik, Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Khatijah Sanusi, and Mastura Abdul Rahman are female artists who contribute to the efforts to portray the national cultural identity. Most of their artwork shared Malay art as their idea. to achieve national art did not appear during moments of 'dried brains' but more of the intellectuality and elegance of Malay female artists (Musa, 2010; Noh et al., 2018). There are various qualities embedded in their spirits and hearts that enable them to successfully express an aesthetic perspective on nature, society, and religion. Traditional visuals such as wood carving motifs, traditional textiles such as batik, and traditional weaving are all referenced in Malay artists' work. It shows the softness of touch of the Malay female artists who emphasize fragility, the method pertained, and the meaning conveyed. It can be said that Malay women of that age are women of progress, awareness, and change, while women are encouraged to be more daring to make progress in the interest of the nation but must adhere to the foundation of religion (Noh, 2013). Since Malaysia's history under British rule before independence, national identity has been enforced through government programs that encourage unity and tolerance among people of varied ethnic and racial backgrounds. In this regard, researchers have further explained that the National Cultural Policy (NCP), inspired by the National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971, has started to find national identity through artwork in Malaysia produced by artists that use local cultural elements as the basis of exploration for their art. Thus, in the artworks of Malaysian artists, the impact of the interaction between social and cultural creation on identity construction or the question-and-answer process in art practice can be seen (Abdullah & Elham, 2019; Zailuddin et al., 2018).

Furthermore, because of the national symbol's distinctive feature of unification to preserve cultural values and identity, national identification plays a significant role in defining the culture of a plural society (How et al., 2015). National identity is a complicated problem that has a long-term impact on Malaysia's national identity construction. By showing artworks of national identity and the application of the Malay concept to visual art, female artists visibly advocate for creative philosophy. Other women's media is framed using a combination of words, photos, metaphors, descriptions, and visuals. This is despite the changes in the role in their society in the modern era (Fong & Nyathi, 2019). A study on female artists in Malaysia is to investigate female artists to define visual artwork and develop it and have the concept of national identity contribute to the visual arts movement of the country. Female artists have distinct and creative personalities when it comes to creating art that may be noticed and appreciated (Mokhtar et al., 2016). For local artists, creating artworks based on traditional art has become a pilgrimage back to their national identity. Traditional art techniques include songket, batik, wood carving, storytelling, legends, literature, and architecture. Through the National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971 and also 'The Seminar on the Roots of Indigenous art' held at the Faculty of Art and Design of the Mara Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM), Shah Alam, which took place in 1979, it made a handful of artists to become self-aware and change the attitude of the artists on the importance of Traditional Art. As a result, artists such as Fatimah Chik and Ruzaika Basaree have begun to create more artworks that are both traditional and Islamic. Nonetheless, despite the 1980s' intense interest in the aesthetic worth of Islamic and traditional art, local artists' connections to Western art, particularly expressionism and subsequently abstract expressionism, remained unaffected (Kamal & Aziz, 2016; Shaharuddin et al., 2017). The pluralist era began in the 1990s, and it is divided into three broad categories. The first are artists who continue to use traditional art as a subject in their artwork. Artists who relate to the aesthetic worth of art in Islam are the second type, while artists who embrace the Western approach to concept style are the third. Sculptural and printing components are also prominent throughout this period. Several artists, such as Fatimah Chik, Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Khatijah Sanusi, Zaliha Shaari, and Hashim Hassan, continue to work traditionally. There are also young artists such as Mastura Abdul Rahman and Romli Mahmud who follow closely in producing works with traditional elements.

3.0 Methodology

This study focuses on the approach of gathering and analyzing literary texts from art-related materials that are sources of information or historical and current documents. In addition, to obtain further material, numerous references are made from visiting the gallery that owns the artworks of women's artists. This approach entails conducting fieldwork to learn more about female artists, which gathered pictures or notes, recordings and transcripts of the interviews, descriptions, personal documents, and others was included in the data compilation. In this case, all the data and new information found for this study relied upon on-site visits. It involves reconstructing historical facts where

there are still flaws, ambiguities, or possibilities that are unclear to present knowledge. Through the artworks of female artists that recognise, and use the concept of national identity, this methodical approach is possible to elaborate on the essence. The application of this method also allows us to find more accurate information in a matter done in a more structured and systematic method. The artworks of female artists Fatimah Chik (*Gunungan*, 1987) and Khatijah Sanusi (September Series II, 1992) were chosen based on how the national identity idea and context, which were analysed based on selected works; the focus and criteria of the artwork will be mapped with relevant information consolidated in the phenomenon of national identity and referencing the National Cultural Congress in 1971.

4.0 Findings

Based on this study, selected works are chosen through the concept of national identity, which was referred to by the National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971. Fatimah Chik is a well-known Malaysian artist who studied textile art at ITM. She began working in a batik factory after graduating. Her appreciation and affection for traditional textile art have impacted the creation of her textile-based works. She incorporates these elements into the majority of her artwork (Noh et al., n.d.). Based on the artwork of the "*Gunungan*", exhibited landscape images were produced using batik and acrylic materials. The idea of batik, which had been studied as previously the traditional batik, represents a continuation of tradition. It is typically worn by Malay women and covers the body from the waist to the ankles (Legino, 2012). The processing of landscape shapes is highly complicated because the techniques and ideas used to create them evolve with time. In fact, the outcome is based on the landscape of *larat* (the motif is inspired or like a cloud motif) and a right triangular mountain motif inspired by a legendary Malay tale. The *larat* motif refers to a life that has no end, which is a manifestation of eternal and eternal life in the hereafter (Ahmad, 2014). Floral themes organized horizontally using a repeated arrangement structure are also used in this piece. In addition, the motif implies that the relationship between cultural identity, national identity, and government policy should be investigated (Bahauddin, 2002). Floral motifs such as hibiscus, *cempaka* flowers, cloves, star anise, *tanjung* flowers, yam leaves, bamboo shoots, and mangosteen flowers (Haron et al., 2014). The artwork shows decorative styling features based on aesthetic values as well as traditional art. The structure of the whole formulation of this work showed implicit structure, form, art, symbolism, and meaning, clearly showing the highest achievements of the aesthetic Malay values.

The "*Gunungan*" is where artwork of Fatimah Chik that is also classified as an abstract ornamental artwork with its symbolic value. This is due to the usage of tiers of triangular organic forms, which are represented by mountain motifs. The subject of the mountains conveys the center of spiritual and mystical forces found in *wayang kulit* (Malay puppet), and other artistic elements like the motif of *songket*, which has an inferred significance. The other unique feature is how the shape of the prominent triangle, which was influenced by Egyptian pyramid formations and the Ziggurat, conveys a sense of accomplishment and promise (Mohammad Noh et al., n.d.). Ultimately, this artwork, is an example of how the artist uses and shows the element of national identity; the artist has been showing an art style that defined the art of Malay culture and is considered a cultural style, based on the use of cultural heritage images that connects the community and the artist closely. Besides, the main theme of the artwork, indeed, is the quality of the batik process, and artwork and the most dominant in her artwork is the effect of texture and surface character that is the result of the batik itself. Fatimah Chik's artwork is engthened the visual effects, structured compositions, and harmonious colour combinations. All of these factors are a reversal of the beauty that translates into all of her artworks. The balance in terms of the combination of her block technique and collage technique brings about a change in 'batik painting', which is usually found in the form of scenes and depictions of daily life. Fatimah Chik's artworks are unique and different from previous batik artists such as Chuah Thean Teng, Khalil Ibrahim, and Tay Mo Leong. Arney (1987) notified that the 1980s motifs of batik show a lot of changes, where the motif shows how, where the figures are gradually not reappeared, and the effort of changes also influenced the Malaysian painters. The Islamic art concept, at the same time, which is the axis in Malay society, has encouraged artists like Fatimah Chik to elevate the batik technique into artwork and established it to a higher level. The idea shared the blended traditional batik elements with Islamic patterns and succeeded in spawning a new art form, modern in nature and Malaysian in appearance.

The other female artist, which received her education abroad, and lead to Malay Islamic Art's inspiration, which clearly shared in the artwork of "September Series II," with specific issues. The use of floral designs is inspired by Malay and Islamic mathematical concepts. As reflected in Hanash (2017) study, where the Islamic interpretations of art were recognizing through visual signs, the use of cultural symbols, and shared the high epistemological discourse. The character is sometimes expressed in the form of a figurative character, so audiences respond more deeply based on the Islamic interpretations that transcend mere artistic form. The artwork shows deeper connotations, meanings, and values in the "September Series II". This artwork has shared the soul and identity of Malay Muslims and demonstrated the reaction of the national cultural congress concept that stimulus Khadijah Sansui's artwork. Expressively, the artwork highlights the issue of national identity and creates conflict in the soul and thinking in between the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, through Khatijah's creative inspiration in the process of traditional art media and techniques, Malay batik, which is well-known in this work, has demonstrated cultural symbolism in the country. Also, she used her artwork as a means to raise awareness of her battle to develop a national identity through her art. Her attempt to recollect her memory in September using a Malay and Islamic artistic approach was, nevertheless, successful and harmonious. Therefore, Khatijah Sanusi's artwork entitled "September Series II" has been categorized as an abstract artwork that is expressed in the form of decoration and symbolism that has meaningful value. Based on this artwork, Malay artists started doing research and analysis on Malay art and cultural heritage in greater depth. It has indirectly opened up a new wave of art today (Ismail, 2012). Her artwork focuses on the batik process and its effect on texture and surface character. Khatijah Sanusi's art features visual effects, structured compositions, and harmonious colour choices. These characteristics reverse the beauty of her artworks. The balance between her block and collage techniques changes "batik painting," which normally depicts scenes from daily life.

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of national identity is clearly defined as an important element that artists are concerned with and incorporate into their work, which contributes to shaping the culture of a plural society in this country. The appropriate methods that begin with a review of related literature are linked with the chosen artwork and analysis the artwork appropriately. Selected female artists' artworks, by Fatimah Chik and Khatijah Sanusi, were chosen and discussed. The indication of the national symbol where artists selected the objects, developed, and invented the idea shows the features of unity and shares cultural values over the content and context of artworks. The analysis shows the artwork was formed from specific objects, shared a unique idea, and represents the national identity through the chosen medium and technique that represent it. A visual art movement for Malaysia could be made and expanded by continuing and thinking about a similar approach that focuses on other kinds of artwork.

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