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Self-Expression, Symbols, and Meaning in the Context of Personal Experience through the Contemporary Paintings of Fadilah Karim

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Abstract

This study explores the ways Malaysian contemporary artist Fadilah Karim expresses her emotions, beliefs, and personal experiences through symbolic imagery in her artwork. As one of Malaysia's prominent contemporary women artists, Fadilah Karim often relies on visual symbolism to communicate her identity and the emotional landscape of her daily life. Much of her work revolves around her experiences as a mother, wife, and artist, reflecting themes of womanhood, intimacy, and the deep bond between parent and child. The research looks at how she uses facial expressions, gestures, and body language as symbolic tools to convey meaning. Through qualitative methods including observation, interviews, and documentation this study examines the role of self-expression, symbolism, and emotion in shaping her artistic practice. Ultimately, it shows how visual art becomes a powerful space for reflecting identity and expressing values like love, sacrifice, and humanity through representations rooted in real lived experience.

Keywords: Self-Expression, Symbols, Meaning, Personal Experience Context

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1.0 Introduction

Self-expression reflects both personal thoughts and interactions with society (Renasti & Asriwandari, 2023). It serves as a language to communicate emotions, ideas, and lived experiences. This study focuses on how Fadilah Karim expresses herself through visual symbols and meanings, particularly using the figures of mother and child. Her artworks tell personal and environmental stories influenced by events and life experiences (Stallabrass, 2020). Fadilah Karim is a Malaysian contemporary artist recognised for her emotionally charged figurative works, which are grounded in her personal experiences of womanhood, motherhood, and everyday life. Through intimate visual narratives, her artworks articulate self-expression and convey deeply felt lived emotions (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020). Contemporary art often responds to individual and societal realities (Ismail & Jusilin, 2020), making Fadilah Karim's work a relevant subject of study. As a prominent Malaysian contemporary artist, she consistently uses symbolic visuals to express personal experiences (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020). The contributions of female artists like her deserve more attention, as they play an active role in

shaping contemporary art through both local and international exhibitions (Abu Bakar, 2023). Fadilah Karim's symbolic approach offers new perspectives on how meaning can be conveyed through visual art.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Contemporary Art

The creation of contemporary art incorporates context and concept (Barret, 2017) as a narrative understanding to interpret diverse meanings (Esanu, 2012) involving chronological changes in current events (Omar & Sedon, 2019). Ideological thoughts in contemporary art are more open and intellectual (Stallabrass, 2020). Thus, it is so very clear that every contemporary artwork is an intellectual response (W. Mohd Apandi, Merman, Syed Abu Bakar & Razali, 2023; Abdullah, 2023), involving emotions as self-expression through thoughts, environment, experiences, events, and artistic context bringing its own meaning (Ismail & Jusilin, 2020).

2.2 Context of Personal Life Experience

Most artists produce works through personal experiences, creating identity by expressing soul and values to form self-identity (Ahmad & Husain, 2016). The term identity is practiced in the context of life events as history depicted to cultural groups (Ahmad & Husain, 2016). Cultural identity value systems are determined by five major themes influencing human life (Partiwi, 2017; Koentjaraningrat, 2014). These themes are: (1) human relationships with themselves, (2) human relationships with others involving social aspects, (3) human relationships with the environment, (4) human relationships with divinity, and (5) human relationships with culture. Fadilah Karim falls under the theme of human relationships with themselves, as her works are reflections of personal life experiences (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020; Partiwi, 2017).

2.3 Aspects of Self-Expression in Art

Self-expression in art includes the communication of emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and life experiences through visual forms (Abdullah, 2023). This form of expression often arises from different life stages such as joy, fatigue, sorrow, confusion and serves as a response to personal and social experiences (Renasti & Asriwandari, 2023). Through this process, visual symbols become tools for conveying meaning. Philosophically, Collingwood describes art as emerging from internal intuition that develops within the artist (Braembussche, 2009; Kraut, 2005). Fry views art as a medium for suggesting emotional responses (Carroll, 1999). Langer further expands on this by highlighting elements such as symbolic representation, abstraction, emotional expression, and imagined imagery as key components of artistic self-expression (Abdul Hamid, 1995). In particular, abstraction allows for deeper reflection on beliefs, hopes, and personal meaning (Dilliston, 2002). Fadilah Karim's work exemplifies this, inserting personal life experiences into her visual expressions (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020).

2.4 Symbols: Visuals as Symbolic Representations in Art

Artists determine visuals as symbols addressing issues expressed according to the message intended (Ismail, Merman, Razak & Zakaria, 2022). Symbols are replacements representing self-expression of the artist, embodying thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences (Ismail & Jusilin, 2019; Canggara, 2007; Dilliston, 2002). Visual symbols in art act as intermediate language and expressions connecting to society (Canggara, 2007). The creation of visuals involves various image elements as subjects (Abdullah, 2015).

2.5 Meaning in Art Involving Visuals and Self-Expression

The presence of meaning in art involves understanding relationships between several main factors (Abdullah, 2023). Visuals as symbols of individual self-expression in the physical creation of artworks, the context of creation as background through experiences or events, and meaning (Rohidi & Husain, 2021). Ideological thoughts explain emotional aspects of self-expression in the artist's process, using visuals as symbols to explain the creative work's meaning (W. Mohd Apandi, Merman, Syed Abu Bakar & Razali, 2023; Rohidi & Husain, 2021).

3.0 Methodology

Figure 1 illustrated the conceptual framework for this qualitative visual study, centering on self-expression, the human soul, symbolism, and meaning in art (Ismail et al., 2023; Yudiani, 2013; Dilliston, 2002). At its center is (1) the visual artwork of Fadilah Karim. Surrounding this are four main components: (2) the analysis of visual signs and symbols, (3) the exploration of self-expression that includes emotion, inner life, and personal desire, (4) the interpretation of meaning shaped by Fadilah Karim's life experiences, and (5) the role of visual art in communicating meaning. This framework serves as a guide for analyzing her artworks by linking visual symbols, emotional expression, and personal context (Ismail et al., 2023; Yudiani, 2013; Canggara, 2007; Dilliston, 2002). This study acknowledges the limitation of concentrating on a single artist and four artworks, which naturally narrows the depth and breadth of analysis and restricts the extent to which the conclusions can be applied to wider artistic contexts.

Figure 2 presents the structured qualitative research process used to analyze Fadilah Karim's contemporary paintings, progressing systematically from data collection to the interpretation of meaning. The process begins with observation, interviews, and documentation, which offer firsthand insights into the artist's personal experiences, emotional intentions, and creative motivations, an essential foundation for studies on self-expression in art (Leave, 2015). The second stage involves a literature review that positions the study

within existing discourse on figurative painting, symbolism, autobiographical art, and Malaysian contemporary art. This theoretical grounding provides the conceptual lenses for examining themes of identity, emotion, and lived experience (Barrett, 2020). The research then advances into the descriptive phase, where visual details such as color, composition, gesture, and symbolic elements are systematically documented. This leads to the stage of findings and visual analysis, where the artworks are examined using visual research approaches to identify recurring motifs, emotional cues, symbolic forms, and narrative structures (Rose, 2016). In the subsequent stage, the concepts of art expression (self-expression) and symbolism are applied to explain how Fadilah's personal memories, psychological states, and lived experiences inform her visual language. Symbolic interpretation becomes central here, linking visual elements with deeper autobiographical meanings (Shapiro, 1994). The process continues with the interpretation of meaning, where the researcher synthesizes visual evidence, artist statements, and contextual information to uncover how Fadilah constructs meaning through her intimate portrayals of womanhood, emotion, and daily life. This stage aligns with qualitative hermeneutic traditions in art research, which emphasize subjective meaning-making (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Finally, the study concludes with the discussion and implications, connecting the findings with broader theoretical perspectives and issues in contemporary Malaysian art. This stage articulates how Fadilah's artworks contribute to understanding self-expression, symbolism, and emotional narrative in contemporary painting. The process ends with the conclusion, summarizing key insights, acknowledging limitations, and identifying directions for future research.



Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of the Research Method for Visual Self-Expression and Human Soul, Symbol, and Meaning in Art (Context of Visual Art).

Source: Adaptation Visual Research from (Ismail, et al., 2023; Yudiani, 2013; Canggara, 2007; Dilliston, 2002)

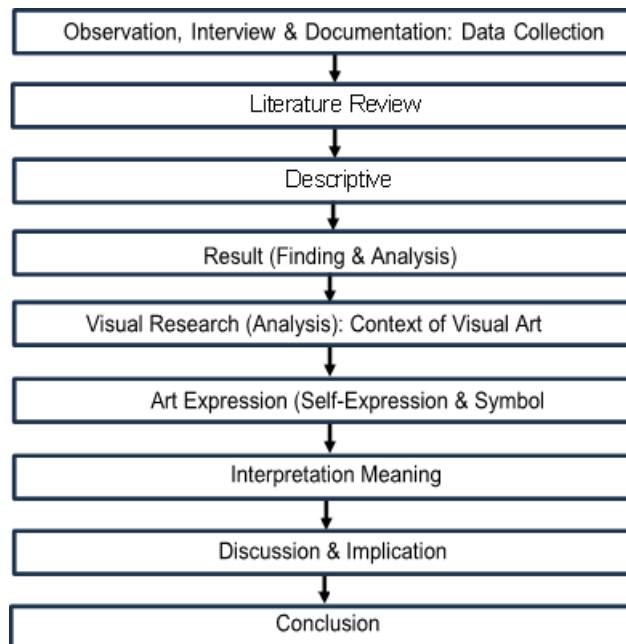


Fig. 2. Process of Qualitative Research

4.0 Result and Finding

4.1 Self-Expression, Symbols, and Meaning in the Context of Personal Life Experience Through Fadilah Karim's Works

Understanding visual elements as symbols helps clarify meaning when they function to express, portray, imagine, explain, or represent a narrative (Saidi, 2008; Rohidi, 2000). Symbols serve as a form of visual language that conveys meaning rooted in self-expression and personal experience (Rohidi & Husain, 2021).



Fig.3. Fadilah Karim, Hush, Oil Paint on Linen, 183 cm x 152 cm, 2019
Source: A Decade Fadilah Karim 2010-2020 (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020)

Figure 3 is a painting by Fadilah Karim titled *Hush*, measuring 183 cm x 152 cm, created with oil on linen in 2020. The work portrays a woman embracing a baby, an intimate scene drawn from the artist's personal life. Fadilah's work extends beyond simple visual representation, as it conveys layers of self-expression and emotional meaning. The tenderness between mother and child expresses the feminine experience of early motherhood, particularly the emotional labor involved in nurturing. The visual composition reflects the calm and reassurance offered during moments of fear, sadness, or anxiety in a home setting. This piece belongs to the early stages of her journey as a mother, following the birth of her first child and the sudden transformation in her daily life with new responsibilities.

The facial expressions and physical embrace reflect a bond of affection and the effort to comfort a distressed child. Through this depiction, Fadilah Karim channels her emotions into visual form, using symbolic elements to communicate deeper meaning (Shia, 2004). Her aim is to emphasize the emotional closeness between mother and child, and how this relationship fosters a quiet, internal connection focused on care and security. This personal experience shapes the visual language she employs. Works like this show how female artists use personal, lived experiences to express the emotional dimensions of womanhood and their interaction with the world around them. The use of figurative imagery functions as a symbolic communication tool (Jahn, 1975), offering a window into their emotional realities (Yuen, 2007).



Fig. 4. Fadilah Karim, Terrible Two, Oil Paint on Linen, 183 cm x 152 cm, 2020
Source: A Decade Fadilah Karim 2010-2020 (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020)

In *Terrible Two* (2020), Fadilah Karim represents herself (Figure 4) in a moment of visible fatigue, seated as her child plays with tissue. The contrast between maternal fatigue and the child's carefree play captures the emotional complexity of parenting. In this scene, the

tissue symbolizes the child's freedom and innate curiosity, while the mother's posture reflects the physical and emotional demands of daily care. The child wrapping her mother in tissue adds a layer of gentle humor, yet gently shows the struggle of care, sacrifice, and the sense of losing personal freedom that many mothers go through. As Risdiantoro (2015) notes, self-expression in art often emerges from emotional responsiveness to lived experience. This piece serves as a visual diary, reflecting the tension and rawness of modern motherhood.



Fig 5. Fadilah Karim, Routine #2, Oil Paint on Linen, 152 cm x 122cm, 2020.
Source: A Decade Fadilah Karim 2010-2020 (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020)

Figure 5 is a work by Fadilah Karim titled "Routine #2," created in 2020 using oil paint on linen. The visual presentation in this piece features a mother engaged in artistic activities, while her daughter sits beside her holding a paintbrush. This symbolizes Fadilah Karim's self-expression through her daily activities in the studio. The visual symbols used convey that this artwork represents the daily life challenges Fadilah Karim faces as a wife, mother, and artist (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020). Fadilah Karim manages her responsibilities as both a wife and mother while also considering her career as artist. Consequently, she strives to balance her daily routine to fulfill all her responsibilities meticulously.

The straight lines on the yellow canvas panel symbolize the clear need to balance the time spent on her career and her family responsibilities. This visual symbol underscores the timeless role of women in balancing family care with their professional aspirations as artists. The complexity of womanhood she faces is a significant challenge, involving various difficulties in managing these responsibilities effectively. The formation of conceptual elements of self-expression and emotion as symbolic meanings is undeniable in the process of understanding contemporary art (Ismail, et al., 2023).



Fig. 6. Fadilah Karim, A Day at Studio, Oil Paint On Linen, 183 cm x 152 cm, 2020. Source: A Decade Fadilah Karim 2010-2020 (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020)

A Day at Studio (2020), also measuring 183 cm x 152 cm, continues Fadilah Karim's exploration of motherhood (Figure 6), this time within the setting of her creative practice. The painting shows the artist in her studio with her daughter, symbolizing the ongoing effort to balance professional aspirations with maternal responsibilities. The mother's posture focused yet burdened, reflects the emotional weight of juggling both roles. Her daughter, shown holding a telescope, becomes a meaningful symbol of observation and learning, suggesting

the mother's awareness that her actions directly shapes her child's emotional, mental, and spiritual growth. The work emphasizes that motherhood is not separate from identity but is instead laced into everyday routines and self-expression (Pollanen, 2011; Mat, 2017).

Taken together, these three artworks reveal how Fadilah Karim uses figurative visuals such as postures, facial expressions, and symbolic objects to explore themes of womanhood, identity, and emotional labor. Her daughter is not merely a subject but also a recurring symbol of transformation, continuousness, and emotional connection. As noted by Jahn (1975) and Yuen (2007), figurative representation often serves as symbolic communication, offering insight into lived experience. Fadilah Karim's work aligns with this idea by translating private, personal moments into visual narratives that speak to broader emotional and societal realities.

Through symbolic imagery, Fadilah Karim shows how motherhood, self-expression, and personal growth are deeply intertwined. Her paintings offer a window into how modern women navigate the complexities of family life while holding on to their individual identity. As Ab. Hamid (2011), Braembussche (2009), Kraut (2005), and Carroll (1999) argue, visual art can be a vital space for exploring identity and expressing emotion.

Despite the challenges portrayed, a sense of quiet strength runs through her work. Fadilah Karim's continued dedication to painting amid daily responsibilities reflects resilience and commitment. Her practice illustrates how personal experience fuels artistic expression, reinforcing the idea that art is not separate from life but closely tied to it (Ahmad & Husain, 2016).

Ultimately, Fadilah Karim's paintings reflect the emotional landscape of modern womanhood—intimate, symbolic, and universally resonant.

4.2 Result Analysis Artwork: Visual Self-Expression and Human Soul, Symbol, and Meaning in Art

Table 1. Result Analysis Artworks Context of Visual Art: Refer to Conceptual Framework of the Research Method for Visual Self-Expression and Human Soul, Symbol, and Meaning in Art.

Source: Adaptation from (Ismail, et al., 2023; Yudiani, 2013; Canggara, 2007; Dilliston, 2002)

No.	Artwork Title	Symbol (Visual)	Self - Expression	Meaning (Context of Visual Art)	Function of Meaning Visual Art
1.	Hush	The artist's figure as a mother embracing her child	• Affection • Calming the child	• Relationship • Affection • Sensitivity to the Environment • Communication	• Personal experience • Interaction through body language • Femininity
	Hush	The figure of a child	• Anxiety • Fear • Sadness	• Relationship • Comfortable with the maternal relationship	• Interaction
2.	Terrible Two	The artist's figure as a mother is seated on a chair wrapped in tissue paper inside the house.	• Fatigue • Stress	• The reality of a mother's life is not always beautiful • Sacrifices • Routine of daily life • Responsibility • Life's Challenges in Confronting Pressures	• Personal experience • Expressing the soul as an interaction • Women's issues • life challenges in bearing responsibilities of a mother and a wife
	Terrible Two	The figure of a child playing with tissue	• Happiness • Freedom • Exploration	• Exploration • Freedom • Needs and wants • Internalizing • Watching • Influence • The mother does not hinder the growth and development of her child. • Supporting all activities and desires of the child	• Having the freedom to explore various things • Communication

3.	Routine #2	The figure of a mother engaging in painting activities in the studio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Inner strength • Determination to continue daily tasks as an artist, mother and wife • Challenges • Complexities of life • Stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mother who must balance her time within daily routines • Sacrifice • Life routine • The complex role of modern women, balancing career considerations and taking care of the family • Domestic Responsibilities in the household and as a mother • Life challenges • Life trials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal experience • Life history • Expressing the soul through interaction • Women's issues in balancing career aspirations with the responsibilities of motherhood • Life's challenges in carrying the responsibilities of a mother
	Routine #2	The figure of a child sitting and holding a brush	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom • Influenced by Mother's work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire • To see • Influence • The mother does not hinder the growth and development of her child • The responsibility of the mother to take care of her child in the studio while continuing her work • activities as a painting artist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having the freedom to explore various things • Communication
4.	A Day at Studio	The figure of a mother engaging in painting activities in the studio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Inner strength • Determination to continue daily tasks as an artist, mother and wife • Challenges • Complexities of life • Stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mother who must balance her time within daily routines. • Sacrifice • Life routine • The complex role of modern women, balancing career considerations and taking care of the family • Domestic responsibilities in the household and as a mother. • Life challenges and trials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal experience • Life history • Expressing one's soul as a form of interaction • Women's issues of balancing career aspirations with the responsibilities of motherhood • Complex life issues and challenges in bearing the responsibilities of motherhood
	A Day at Studio	The figure of a child standing and holding a telescope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom • Exploration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning something through observation, approach, and the influence of the mother. The child is a responsibility that the mother needs to consider in her daily life. • The child has the freedom to explore various things to enhance their growth and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having the freedom to explore various things • Communication

5.0 Discussion and Implication

Fadilah Karim's self-expression offers a creative path for artists to explore women's issues through personal experience, using visual elements as symbolic tools. These symbols such as shapes, images, colors, or words are served to convey specific meanings in art (Ismail & Jusilin, 2020). Visual imagery becomes a reflection of internal thoughts and ideas expressed through the act of creation. Her work can be seen as a guide for shaping identity and style in today's visual art. Deeply rooted in her own life, Fadilah Karim's art functions as a visual diary that consistently mirrors her inner world (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020).

Figure 7 illustrates this self-expression process, integrating symbol, image, context, and meaning to communicate deeper messages and support artistic diversity. This study offers important implications for understanding how women artists draw on personal experience as a foundational source for visual storytelling. It demonstrates that self-expression and symbolic imagery can reveal deeper emotional,

social, and cultural narratives within contemporary Malaysian art (Abdullah, 2023; Pollanen, 2011). The findings also indicate that acknowledging these symbolic expressions can enrich curatorial, educational, and analytical approaches by recognizing the emotional labour, identity formation, and lived realities embedded in women's artistic practices (Abu Bakar & Jamaluddin, 2020; Braembussche, 2009). Furthermore, this research highlights the significance of incorporating gender-sensitive and experience-based perspectives in future interpretations of contemporary art, allowing for more inclusive and contextually grounded understandings of artistic meaning (Ismail & Juslin, 2020; Yuen, 2007). The study also acknowledges several limitations, particularly its focus on a single artist and a limited selection of artworks, which restricts the breadth and generalizability of the findings.

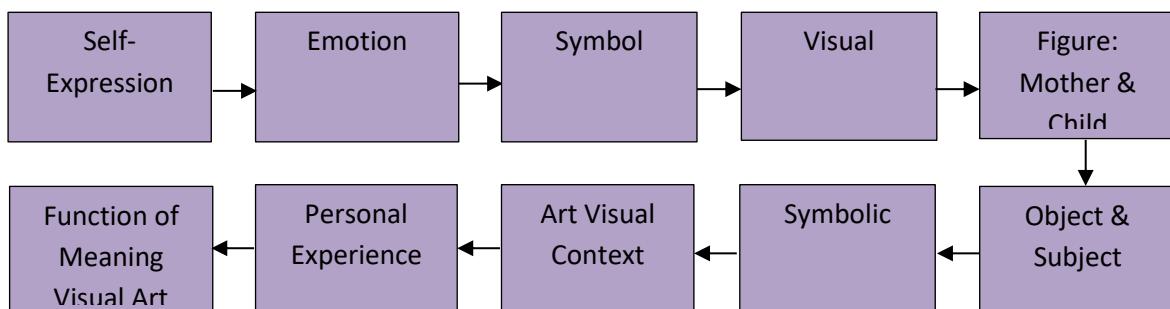


Fig.7. Process of Fadilah Karim's Artwork Framework: Self-Expression, Symbol and Meaning

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study shows that the family environment plays an important role in shaping self-expression in the creation of visual works in contemporary art, aiding in a deeper understanding of meaning. The findings indicate that the artist's environmental experiences have a substantial impact on conveying self-expression, symbolism, and meaning in their work. The researcher recommends that future studies broaden their scope to include a wider range of contemporary women artists, both Malaysian and international, to deepen the understanding of how self-expression is shaped by emotional experience, symbolic strategies, and lived realities. Comparative investigations across different cultural contexts would further enrich insights into women's artistic narratives and strengthen cross-cultural interpretations of contemporary female art.

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