

RESEARCH ARTICLE

VEILED EMPOWERMENT: THE BAJU KURUNG AS AN ISLAMIC SYMBOL OF MODESTY, FEMININITY, AND MALAY WOMEN'S AGENCY IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT – This study examines how Islamic values influence the design and symbolism of Baju Kurung, a Malay traditional dress, in negotiating modesty, femininity, and women's empowerment in Malaysia. Within Third World feminism and Islamic cultural identity, the research bridges the gap in academic literature that tends to marginalize non-Western expressions of agency through dress. Approaching it qualitatively, the study employs textual interpretation of literature from the past in the form of Ibu Zain's writing and cultural discourse analysis of elements of customary designs and their meaning. The findings prove that Baju Kurung is more than a piece of clothing; it is a socio-religious symbol reflecting decency values, spiritual devoutness, and national identity values. Islamic beauty with loose figures, non-revealing shapes, and symbolic cutting—are central to the means by which Malay women negotiate both femininity and religion. The study contributes to Islamic fashion studies and postcolonial feminist studies in offering Baju Kurung as veiled empowerment, countering Westernized presumptions on dress, freedom, and female agency in Muslim worlds.

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INTRODUCTION

The paper delves into the complex interplay of Islamic culture, third world feminism, and the representation of Muslim women, particularly focusing on the traditional Malay attire known as *baju kurung*. It explores the challenges faced by Muslim women in Western societies, addressing the intersection of Orientalism, Western feminism, and the misrepresentation of Muslim women. Additionally, it delves into the concept of Islamic fashion and the historical and cultural significance of Malay women, emphasizing the importance of upholding traditional values and cultural practices for the preservation of Malay cultural identity and the empowerment of Malay women in Malaysia. The research also discusses the societal and developmental challenges faced by Malaysia, particularly in the context of cultural lag, and the government's initiatives to build human capital and produce integrated individuals to compete in the globalized world. Furthermore, it highlights the significance of *Rukun Negara*, the national philosophy of Malaysia, with a specific focus on the principle of Decorum and Morality, aiming to foster racial unity and mutual respect among Malaysians. The exploration of these themes provides a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, societal, and religious factors influencing the representation of Muslim women, shedding light on the historical and cultural significance of Malay women in Malaysia.

The research discusses the intersection of third world feminism, Islamic culture, and the representation of Muslim women in Western societies, with a specific focus on the traditional Malay attire known as *Baju Kurung*. It emphasizes the detrimental impact of Western feminism's universalization of women's experiences, particularly Muslim women, and the need to challenge the assumption that all women's lives and histories are the same. It explores into the concept of Muslim feminism and its roots in Islam, highlighting the diverse interpretations of veiling customs and the resistance to Western stereotypes and oppression. Furthermore, it explores the historical and cultural significance of Malay women, particularly through the writings of Ibu Zain, emphasizing the importance of traditional values, cultural practices, and Islamic beliefs in shaping the personality, conduct, and attire of Malay women. It underscores the significance of upholding these values for the preservation of Malay cultural identity and the empowerment of Malay women in Malaysia. Additionally, it addresses the societal and developmental challenges faced by Malaysia, emphasizing the government's initiatives to build human capital and produce integrated individuals with a superior attitude to compete in the globalized world. It discusses the significance of *Rukun Negara*, the national philosophy of Malaysia, with a specific focus on the principle of Decorum and Morality, aiming to foster racial unity and mutual respect among Malaysians. The document also provides an in-depth exploration of *Baju Kurung* as a representation of Malay identity based on Islamic law, its cultural and historical significance, and its role in shaping the demeanour and mindset of Malay women.

The history of the Baju Kurung reflects the long evolution of Malay sartorial culture shaped by Islamic ethics, courtly aesthetics, and modern socio-political transformation. Scholars note that its earliest forms emerged within the Melaka Sultanate, influenced by Perso-Islamic and Indian Mughal dress traditions that encouraged modest, loose-fitting silhouettes suitable for Muslim women (Aris, 2014). By the 17th to 19th centuries, the Baju Kurung had stabilised as a courtly and everyday garment, with distinctive regional styles such as *Teluk Belanga* and *Cekak Musang* documented in

textual and visual archives (Ros Mahwati & Aszulhida, 2013). Its transformation accelerated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the introduction of new fabrics and sewing technologies during the colonial period, which broadened its aesthetic possibilities while maintaining its modest form (Hanisa Hassan, 2016). In post-independence Malaysia, the Baju Kurung became codified as a national dress symbolising Malay cultural identity, Islamic modesty, and female respectability in state institutions (Aman, et al., 2021). Contemporary studies further show how modern variations—such as the Kurung Moden, Kurung Pahang, and Kurung Riau—continue to evolve while retaining core elements that embody Malay aesthetic principles and communal values (Lyana, 2018; Junirah Djafar, 2022). Together, these studies affirm that the Baju Kurung is not merely clothing but a cultural, religious, and national symbol that negotiates tradition and modernity across historical periods.

This underscores the importance of preserving Eastern cultural values and traditions in the face of modernization and globalization, particularly focusing on the concept of decorum and politeness as essential components of maintaining harmony in a multi-racial society like Malaysia. It further discusses the cultural significance of *Baju Kurung*, its evolution, and its adherence to Islamic Sharia law, highlighting its role as a symbol of Malay identity and the importance of adhering to traditional dressing etiquette. The historical and sociological aspects of development, particularly in the context of cultural lag, are also addressed, with a focus on the challenges faced by Malaysian women in their struggle for emancipation while preserving their Eastern identity.

Overall, this provides a comprehensive exploration of the cultural, societal, and religious factors influencing the representation of Muslim women, shedding light on the historical and cultural significance of Malay women in Malaysia, and emphasizing the importance of upholding traditional values, preserving cultural identity, and fostering mutual respect and understanding in the face of societal and developmental challenges. It also highlights the nuanced intersection of third world feminism, Islamic culture, and the traditional Malay attire, *Baju Kurung*, as a manifestation of Malay identity and the significance of upholding Eastern cultural values and traditions in the contemporary world.

METHODOLOGY

The research method for this paper involves a qualitative approach by the researcher, focusing on the exploration of cultural, societal, and religious factors influencing the representation of Muslim women, particularly in the context of the traditional Malay attire known as Baju Kurung. The following steps outline the methodology, A comprehensive review of existing literature on third world feminism, such as Spivak and Jayawardena, and Islamic culture, and the representation of Muslim women in Western societies will be conducted. This includes analyzing scholarly articles, books, and historical texts that discuss the intersectionality of these themes. The writings of Ibu Zain and other relevant authors will be critically analyzed to understand the historical and cultural significance of Malay women and their attire. This analysis will focus on the themes of politeness, decorum, and the role of traditional values in shaping the identity of Malay women. A comparative analysis of literature will be performed between the representation of Muslim women in Western cultures and their portrayal within their own communities. This will help to identify discrepancies and commonalities in perceptions and experiences. This research method aims to provide a holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding the identity of Malay women and the cultural significance of Baju Kurung, while also addressing the broader implications of globalization and feminism.

RESULTS

Islam and Third World Feminism

Western feminism dealt critically and constructively with the legacy of androcentrism and misogyny that are ingrained in its culture. It does not, however, advocate for adopting another culture or for giving up the entirety of Western heritage. Instead, when it comes to the "innately" and "irreparably" misogynistic practices of Native they colonized, the mainstream in advocacy seems to be the wholesale adoption of Western culture and the giving up one's own culture. This rhetoric became more prevalent and pronounced with colonial dominance. The issues of nationality and culture were forged in the context of these two issues forever. Men are unable to speak while women remain in the shadows. Women are subjected to double subjugations, while men are portrayed only as needing to be saved from the monarchs. Women are represented as needing to be saved from the men (Abdullah, 2022).

In her book "Third World Women," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlights how eager Western feminists are to "speak for all women, regardless of cultural differences," which only serves to exacerbate the harm that Western feminism has caused by defining oppression in general terms and referring specifically to Muslim women. Furthermore, there is a "critical need to challenge the universal humanist assumption that all women's lives and histories are the same, which is prevalent in some western feminist thought. "One of the most important things in deconstructing the privileged ignorance of Western feminism and its impacts on Muslim women is the emphasis on breaking free from the notion that all women's lives and perspectives are the same. More oppression is inflicted upon Muslim women by this toxic, Occidental feminism than by the purported patriarchal tyranny they endure (Quinn, 2019).

Politically, this is where women's voice is methodically silenced and prevented from being heard. The patriarchy and colonial forms of oppression are not separate but rather joined legally, economically, and scholarly—so even writings on women become authoritarian to their cores. Colonial feminists, based on this atmosphere, manage to make a sweeping

statement that all the experiences of the colonised peoples are the same (Abdullah, 2022). The terms "feminist" and "feminism" have come to evoke strong feelings and negative reactions. The Eurocentric interpretation of the phrase is to create a new woman who disassociates herself from her culture, religion, and familial obligations, even if the original meaning of the words simply meant agitation on women's issues. In Asia, where all the countries were under colonial rule, feminist activism grew rapidly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as part of the campaign against colonial dominance (Jayawardena, 1986).

A growing anti-Muslim sentiment has been ingrained in Western culture through and due to Orientalism, along with Western feminism. The women wearing headscarves are herded together and made to feel pity by Western feminists who believe that their headscarves and covering the body are repressive and inappropriate, while people murmur about Muslim men as "terrorists." Western culture's saviour complex is a manifestation of its desire to drag Muslims out of the "bad," "barbaric," and into the more "civilised" world. This saviour complex and the pervasiveness of Orientalism are both sources of leverage for Western feminism. Additionally, the kind deed of these Muslim women's forced freedom exposes Western feminism as the real oppressor (Quinn, 2019).

As a protest against the "struggle for equality and integration," the first wave of feminism "Dominant values and sometimes inverted value-hierarchies to revalue qualities associated with the feminine" were criticised in the second wave of feminism, while "deconstructing the presumption of a gender binary or the conventional ways of doing politics" in the third wave of feminism crosses boundaries. Does Muslim feminism have a place in third wave feminism? In comparison to earlier feminisms, the pluralities embraced by third wave feminism undoubtedly offer a more inclusive space (Gillis, 2007). Muslim feminism is the name given to a feminist movement that has its roots in Islam, both as a religion and as a system of beliefs that has been historically and culturally maintained. That being said, not all women who base their activity on Islam ought to be categorised as Muslim feminists. Muslim feminism is also known as Islamic feminism; however, it should not be confused with Islamist feminism, which is reserved for women who are part of the structured orthodox Islamist movement. Nevertheless, Muslim feminism develops from the same points of confluence as Islamist feminism: Islam and women (Gilis, 2007).

Muslim feminists highlight the various interpretations of veiling customs that vary based on regional customs and the individual circumstances of Muslim women worldwide. She replaces oppression and control with modesty, religiosity, and resistance to colonialism and materialistic society. According to research, women may feel safer in these settings than in the US if there is extensive censorship that bans pornography, respect for women's roles, gender segregation, and supervision of young women. "One may start to wonder about the price we pay for freedom in the United States," that one in three women will experience rape in their lifetime (Zimmerman, 2014). The stigmatisation of the headscarf and body covering due to secularisation has made it possible for it to be used as a symbol of identity rebuilding. They distinguish between two ways in which the stigmatisation of the hijab supports identity reconstruction: first, as a means of bolstering individual identity, in which the headscarf is internalised as a symbol apart from parental influence; and second, as a means of reproducing collective identity, with the impression of symbolising Islam. Young Muslim women strive to challenge stereotypes and make their own ideals known in regard to relationships in general and with males in particular, while also conforming to the stereotypes of Islam and the expectations of non-Muslims. Muslim women in France are able to confirm their identities in relation to French society, the Muslim community, and themselves by wearing the veil in an intellectually feminist manner (Zimmerman, 2014).

Islam and its Relationship with Decorum

Hijab and covering one's body a symbol of Islam and Islamic decorum, serves as a symbol of a Muslim woman's devotion and sincerity to her religion. It is considered the only way for women to keep themselves away from the fitnah and endure respect for her in the Dunya and Akhirah. In modern society, women wear attractive clothing and accessories alongside their hijab to make themselves look attractive. Islam does not prohibit women from wearing good scarves or veils, but they must be worn within the limits prescribed in the Quran and Sunnah. Muslim fashion is not just about clothing but also includes jewellery, perfumes, footwear, and hijab. With the influence of Western fashion magazines, Muslim women are looking for new ways to stay up to date with modern fashion while covering their bodies. This dilemma can be solved by combining hijab with modern fashion trends, allowing women to maintain modesty while covering their heads (Jan, 2015).

One of the forerunners of Malayan Feminism movement during the pre-independence era was Ibu Zain. Ibu Zain's writings on Malays women, under the theme *Konsep Keperibadian dan Kesantunan Wanita Malayu*, are among her most notable contributions. From her point of view, the essence of being a Malay woman is based on the aspects of personality of decency and decorum. This is based on the way Malays behave and speak, which is described as full of tenderness and gracefulness. Their decency is also refined through the way they dress and style themselves, such as through the traditional *baju kurung*, which is said to have its own value of uniqueness and beauty. The traditions of Malays continue to be preserved and passed down for the benefit and direction of future Malaysians (Abdullah, 2022).

Ibu Zain provides historical and cultural context, drawing attention to the valuable role of Malay women in society and their contributions to the nation's progress. It highlights the importance of maintaining traditional values and cultural practices, particularly in the context of women's conduct and attire, to ensure the preservation of the Malay cultural identity. The study underscores the significance of women's behaviour, attire, and adherence to Islamic beliefs as essential

components in upholding the dignity and honour of Malay culture and society (Yassin, 2019). Ibu Zain emphasizes the importance of maintaining cultural traditions and Islamic beliefs in shaping the personality of Malay women through her writings and teachings. She highlights the significance of women adhering to Islamic beliefs and values, as well as their conduct and attire, to uphold the honour and dignity of the Malay culture. Ibu Zain stresses the duty of women to strengthen their Islamic faith and the importance of preserving Eastern cultures, behaviours, and attires. She advises women to acquire religious knowledge and understand their true obligations as Muslim women (Yassin, 2019). Additionally, she encourages women to uphold traditional values and cultural practices, particularly in their behaviour and attire, to ensure the preservation of the Malay cultural identity. Ibu Zain's teachings emphasize the ontological essence of Malay women, emphasizing their roles in shaping the progress of their nation and the importance of maintaining their cultural heritage and tradition. The concept of personality and politeness of Malay women, as articulated by Ibu Zain, holds significant implications for the development and empowerment of Malay women in Malaysia. The study emphasizes the ontological existence of Malay women, highlighting the importance of their personality and politeness as symbolic gestures of their cultural identity. The findings suggest that the Malay woman symbolizes the strength of the nation with her polite behaviour, high morale, and sincere struggle in developing the nation's race, while also freeing themselves from the injustices of colonization and men of cowardice (Yassin, 2019).

The implications of this concept are fundamental for the holistic development and empowerment of Malay women in Malaysia. Ibu Zain's ideas are deemed significant for the present and future, as they inspire the continued defence of the identity of dignified Malay women. The concept emphasizes the duty of women to strengthen their Islamic faith and the importance of preserving Eastern cultures, behaviours, and attires, which are deeply ingrained in their cultural heritage. This serves to instil a sense of pride and identity among Malay women, contributing to their empowerment and self-esteem (Yassin, 2019). Furthermore, the concept of personality and politeness underscores the significance of upholding traditional values and cultural practices, particularly in the context of women's conduct and attire, to ensure the preservation of the Malay cultural identity. By adhering to these values, Malay women can assert their place in society and contribute to the progress and preservation of their cultural heritage. Overall, the concept of personality and politeness of Malay women plays a crucial role in shaping the development and empowerment of Malay women in Malaysia, providing them with a strong cultural foundation and a sense of identity and dignity (Yassin, 2019).

Malaysia, which aims to become a spiritually and physically evolved nation by 2020, is currently dealing with several intricate issues. These challenges come in all shapes, sizes, and manifestations; these include, but are not limited to, moral dilemmas, criminal activity, interethnic relations, domestic concerns, the consequences of globalisation, and other unfavourable signs. Building human capital is one of the government's major priority items and is full of spiritual values among its many other initiatives. The goal is to produce integrated, high-calibre individuals with a superior attitude, so they can compete in the globalised world. In this instance the *baju kurung* and the principle of *Rukunegara* especially Decorum and decency plays an extended role (Gill, 2008).

Decorum, National Cultural acceptance and The *Rukunegara*

Rukun Negara was declared on 31 August 1970 by the fourth Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Almarhum Tuanku Ismail Nasiruddin Shah Ibni Almarhum Sultan Zainal Abidin in conjunction with the 13th anniversary of Malaysia's independence. Outlining five principles which are Trust in God; Loyalty to King and country; Supremacy of the Constitution; Rule of Law; as well as Decorum and Morality, *Rukun Negara* was introduced as the foundation of racial unity which was seen as fragile and shaky when the events of May 13, 1969 occurred. Among the causes leading to the event as recorded in history include verbal warfare, racial and religious sentiments that cause tension (Adnan Mac 2023). Therefore, the fifth pillar of *Rukun Negara* clearly emphasizes human values with the hope that every Malaysian will respect each other and accept each other's differences (Adnan, Mac 2023). Decorum revolves around good behaviour, while decency is related to morals. Both refer to the nature of mutual respect to form harmony in the multi-racial society in this country. In recognising decorum and morality, the fifth *Rukun Negara* principle? In a nation where race, nationality, and religion are intertwined, like Malaysia, politeness is essential to maintaining harmony. It is necessary to comprehend this idea of politeness from all angles, not just via behavioural practice but also through thought patterns and styles, in order to preserve the eastern philosophy that has been upheld for so long and prevent our superficial living from scuffing it. Humility and discipline are the key elements that span the politeness principle. If Malaysians are successful in ingraining this noble concept, it will be demonstrated in their conduct when they speak, drive, or what they wear to cover their body (Suliman, September 17, 2022).

Malaysia has embarked into a new phase of growth in the twenty-first century, with the goal of becoming a developed nation by the year 2020. From a historical standpoint, the concept of development, which originated in Europe, has effectively captivated the attention of humanity, particularly that of those living in developing nations, ever since the Second World War. Although they did not immediately benefit from the outcomes, the majority of the former British colonies, including Malaysia, contributed to the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, which was led by the West. But thanks to the revolution's historic upheaval, many nations have joined the modern period. Following their independence, many nations have prioritised development in order to forge ahead on their own paths of advancement. (Gill, 2008). The issue of cultural lag is the most obvious feature of Malaysian society. The sociological term "cultural lag" often refers to a scenario in which the development of material culture lags behind the development of non-material culture in terms of change or advancement. This mainly impacts Malaysian women especially when their commitment of

women emancipation is often measured by how much they are willing to discard the eastern identity and total acceptance of western culture (Gill, 2008).

There are many different racial groups, faiths, cultures, and customs among Malaysians. An integrated and common pattern of human conduct, encompassing speech, action, thought, and objects, is referred to as "culture." A nation's culture defines its identity and sets it apart from other nations. Since culture represents the nation's racial and ethnic composition, it is crucial for nations to preserve their cultural heritage. To maintain culture, a great deal of research has been done. A culture's ability to endure rests on its members' ability to acquire new information and pass it along to future generations so they will know how to act (Mubin, 2018). As for the term "value," it is described as the fundamental component of a culture that acts as a code of conduct for appropriate daily activity. Culture is made up of an infinite number of components and is described as the collective mental programming that sets one group or category of people apart from another. They said that values are what make culture who we are. However, the values also serve as a means of interpreting and raising these values' consciousness through social behaviour. Culture is made up of an infinite number of components and is described as the collective mental programming that sets one group or category of people apart from another (Mubin, 2018). They said that values are what make culture who we are. However, the values also serve as a means of interpreting and raising these values' consciousness through social behaviour. The idea of value is defined as a notion that influences people or social institutions like families and schools, serving as the fundamental principles that society accepts (Mubin, 2018).

Material culture and nonmaterial culture are the two distinct categories into separated culture. Material culture is tangible because it is visible and tactile. On the other hand, nonmaterial culture describes works of art and Culture is made up of an infinite number of components and is described as the collective mental programming that sets one group or category of people apart from another. They said that values are what make culture who we are. However, the values also serve as a means of interpreting and raising these values' consciousness through social behaviour (Mubin, 2018). Generally speaking, the idea of value is defined as the conviction that influences people or social institutions. On the other hand, nonmaterial culture describes elaborated works that represent conscious components, such as symbols, rituals, and heroic elements; these include recognisable and observable items and artefacts like buildings, logos, language and vocabulary, ways of addressing one another, and beliefs about the allocation and use of power (Mubin, 2018).

The way of life in Malaysian society is made up of attitudes, morality, taboos, religion, customs, laws, ideas, and mythology derived from the habits and cultures of many races. There's more to Malaysian culture than just variety. In order to prevent confusion when explaining Malaysian culture, it is better to discuss the broad aspects of the culture rather than just focusing on its distinct elements. The idea of multiracialism is reflected in apparel with characters dressed in various ways that take into account Malaysian culture (Muhamad, 2023). First, the traditional attire for women, which includes *batik fabric*, *baju kurung*, and accessories like a Chinese umbrella and a veil. Secondly, the wearing of short-sleeved shirts is pictured, paired with headwear like *Songkok*. In addition to traditional attire like "*Baju Melayu*," "*Samfoo*," or "*Dhoti*" fabric, short- or long-sleeved shirts were among the frequently traditional worn clothing styles in Malaysia. The identification of Malaysian cultural elements is important because it expanded on the analysis of culture, which claimed that there are two main types of culture in Malaysian society: non-material culture, which is composed of laws, traditions, and beliefs, and material culture, which is the culture of things like houses, boats, and weapons. Additionally, a study of culture revealed that the four main components of cultural aspects are institutions, values, norms, and artefacts. In terms of political, economic, religious, social, and educational activities, the diversity of Malaysian race (Muhamad, 2023).

Socially, the acceptance of cultural features by people or groups from a different culture is known as acculturation. When a group of people from one culture are exposed to aspects of another, the foreign characteristics must eventually be assimilated and processed into the group's own culture. The non-Malay minority community in Malaysia experiences this in their daily lives. The protracted acculturation process is evidence that the non-Malay and Malay groups have maintained their bond. The non-Malays community is exposed to Malay community standards through the acculturation process, which include Islamic religious components like donning the *baju kurung*. Thus, making this dress accepted as a national women identity (Awang, 2016). To put it briefly, non-Malays can effortlessly adjust to the local community by incorporating aspects of Malay culture. Nonetheless, non-Malays residing in Malaysia can witness the growing influence of Malay culture. Acculturation can be divided into two categories: extreme acculturation penetration violent and peaceful acculturation penetration *pasifique*. When aspects of alien culture are assimilated peacefully—that is, without force or conflict—this happens. Extreme acculturation, on the other hand, refers to the process of forcing aspects of the victorious side's foreign culture to be accepted within the defeated community, which ultimately leads to social imbalance (Awang, 2016). Thus, embracing the *baju kurung* as a non Malay and non- Muslim is considered acculturation part of the national identity as promoted by the *Rukunegara*.

DISCUSSION

Islamic Philosophy Embedded In Baju Kurung Design

As this paper discusses several interconnected themes, focusing on the representation and perception of Muslim women in Western cultures, particularly concerning the wearing of headscarves and modest attire. It highlights the intersection of Orientalism, Western feminism, and the perceived saviour complex of Western culture, which collectively

contribute to the stigmatization and misrepresentation of Muslim women. Additionally, it delves into the concept of Islamic fashion, emphasizing the compatibility of modern fashion trends with the principles of hijab and modesty, providing Muslim women with the means to express themselves while adhering to their religious beliefs. Furthermore, the document delves into the historical and cultural context of Malay women, particularly through the writings of Ibu Zain, emphasizing the importance of traditional values, cultural practices, and Islamic beliefs in shaping the personality, conduct, and attire of Malay women. It underscores the significance of upholding these values for the preservation of Malay cultural identity and the empowerment of Malay women in Malaysia. Additionally, as intersectionality theory do it addresses the societal and developmental challenges faced by Malaysia, emphasizing the government's initiatives to build human capital and produce integrated individuals with a superior attitude to compete in the globalized world. It discusses the significance of Rukun Negara, the national philosophy of Malaysia, with a specific focus on the principle of Decorum and Morality, aiming to foster racial unity and mutual respect among Malaysians. It highlights the importance of decorum and decency in maintaining harmony within a multi-racial society, emphasizing the need to preserve Eastern philosophy and cultural values in the face of modernization and globalization. Moreover, it touches upon the historical and sociological aspects of development, particularly in the context of cultural lag, where the material culture lags behind the non-material culture, impacting Malaysian women and their struggle for emancipation while preserving their Eastern identity. In essence, it provides a comprehensive exploration of the cultural, societal, and religious factors influencing the representation of Muslim women, particularly in Western societies, while also shedding light on the historical and cultural significance of Malay women in Malaysia. It underscores the importance of upholding traditional values, preserving cultural identity, and fostering mutual respect and understanding in the face of societal and developmental challenges.

Clothing has played a significant role in the history of human life, Malay women's traditional *baju kurung* remains an integral component of their daily lives. As a cover and shield of the body from numerous survey aspects, it even evolved into a basic necessity. As human civilization progresses, clothing serves not just as a necessity for survival but also as a social construct that signifies the wearer's identity. Clothing expresses a person's individuality and serves as a social and cultural emblem. An important factor in defining a woman's self-image is her wardrobe. Unknowingly, a perception of what individuals, small groups, and huge organisations would wear as a show of clothing worn by individuals, small groups, and large groups as a sign of the wearer's culture (Roza, 2023). The significance of clothing is very vast in Malay culture. Not only does clothing refer to textiles or garments, but it also refers to any personal gear that community members use and handle according to traditions. Implicitly, clothing refers to more than just what is worn on the body; it also refers to a variety of items that demonstrate how a group behaves in terms of attitude and regard for maintaining conventions. Thus, it may be concluded that Malay apparel has no purpose if it does not capture the essence of the Malay people. In addition to serving as a decorative item, clothing also embodies actions with aesthetic and symbolic significance (Roza, 2023).

Culturally every human being needs clothing. It is also seen as one of the essential components of material culture that humans require. There are traditional clothes associated with every culture and civilization in the world. One of the traditional costumes of the Malay people is the *baju kurung*. The Malay proverb "*Tahu memakai baju kurung, tanda adat dijunjung*". Initially, *syarak kurung*, secondly *dikongkong oleh adat*. The Malays of the Malay Peninsula are Muslims, and as such, they should dress for daily wear in accordance with the Islamic decree found in the Al-Quran. The Malay phrase "*dikurung oleh syarak*" means "Malay clothing," which refers to loose, rather than tight, body-hugging apparel for ladies. That exist within the Malay Traditional culture, the Malay way of life (Roslen, 2023). Malay women's identity is shown through *baju kurung*, which is based on Islamic Sharia and covers the entire body while yet being elegant and comfortable. Malay traditional attire includes multiple styles and purposes, including everyday wear and official traditional attire, which is typically worn at formal or important occasions. When it comes to their everyday *baju kurung*, Malay women typically opt for modest, unassuming outfits, as opposed to the velvet and gold-embroidered styles worn for formal occasions (Nurdin, Oktober 2020).

Islamic philosophy, rooted in the principles of tawhīd (the oneness of God), ethical conduct (*adab*), and rational reflection, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human behavior, including personal appearance and dress, as integral to spiritual and social ethics (Nasr, 2006; Rahman, 1995). Within this philosophical framework, clothing is not merely a cultural or aesthetic choice but a reflection of moral responsibility and spiritual mindfulness, as the Qur'an instructs both men and women to dress modestly, lower their gaze, and maintain dignity in their interactions (Qur'an 24:30–31). For women, attire like the Baju Kurung embodies these ethical and spiritual ideals: its loose-fitting tunic and long skirt preserve modesty, align with Islamic injunctions, and protect personal dignity while allowing for cultural expression (Rogayah, 2013). Beyond the ethical dimension, Islamic philosophy also emphasizes the interplay between aesthetics and morality, asserting that clothing can simultaneously be elegant and virtuous, enabling women to navigate social, cultural, and spiritual spheres without compromising ethical principles (Al-Ghazali, 1997). The Baju Kurung, in particular, illustrates how Islamic thought negotiates tradition, identity, and modernity, serving as both a symbol of Malay-Muslim identity and an enactment of philosophical ethics (Rogayah, 2013). Scholars have argued that wearing modest attire constitutes a form of agency, wherein women actively embody spiritual values in their daily lives while maintaining social respectability and cultural rootedness (Rahman, 1995; Rogayah, 2013). Thus, Islamic philosophy positions garments like the Baju Kurung as more than clothing; they are ethical practices and expressions of spiritual discipline, balancing modesty, cultural identity, and personal empowerment (Nasr, 2006). Through this lens, the Baju Kurung is not simply a traditional costume or a fashion statement but a manifestation of philosophically grounded values, demonstrating

how Islamic ethics inform the material, aesthetic, and social dimensions of women's attire in the Malay-Muslim context (Al-Ghazali, 1997; Rogayah, 2013).

Baju Kurung is one of the traditional handicrafts of the Malay people, particularly in the southern regions of Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Singapore. *Baju kurung* is frequently compared to a woman's body. According to legend, asserts that the Malay population, including both men and women, only discussed the lower half of the body throughout the 13th century. In the process, Malay women make sarong using the "*berkemban*" paradigm, which involves making sarong in the outermost layer of the clothes. The Malays upon became followers of Islam, which had an impact on their attire since the new faith required both men and women to cover their private areas. (Nuridin, Oktober 2020) It peaked in the 1400s when literary works of *Sejarah Melayu* prominently featured Malay attire. Here is where *baju kurung* first appeared, where it is now typical for Malay people to cover their bodies with a type of tunic. The shirt collar that Arabs wear is an example of how the tunic was influenced by the Middle East. Muslim and western Indian traders brought *baju kurung*. This is apparent from the neck's tunic-like form. In the early days of Malacca, *baju kurung* was cut short and tight. According to legend, Tun Hassan was the one who altered the *baju kurung's* cut to make it longer and looser (Nuridin, 2020).

The book "*Pakaian Patut Melayu*" by Dato' Haji Muhammad Said Haji Sulaiman claims that *baju kurung* as we know it now dates back to 1800, during Sultan Abu Bakar's reign in Teluk Belanga, While, Mattiebelle Gettinger clarified that *baju kurung* originated in Sumatra and was popularised in the 20th century, having been worn by palace dancers in Palembang. "The history of the birth of the Malay kurung shirt cannot be separated from the influence of the entry of Islam in the Malay state during the time of the Malay kingdom. The introduction of Islamic teachings brought by traders from the Middle East to some extent influenced the way the Malay community dresses, which conforms to the Islamic *Shari'a*, which is covering the *awrat* (Nuridin, 2020).

Women's traditional dress, known as *baju kurung*, is a representation of Malay identity based on Islamic law. Islam's rapid growth, which began with the urban and commercial elite, had a significant impact on significant cultural shifts in the area. Historically, the Malay cultural dynamics have been centred around Islam. The community's assertion that "Customs is linked to Islamic religiosity" reflects this. As a result, the traditional Malay *baju kurung*, which was loosely designed by the ancient civilization, does not emerge from the religious corridor where it does not reveal the wearer's body curves (Roza, 2023). The traditional Malay *baju kurung* has rules' *Kurung Budaya* in its manufacture and contains a philosophical meaning for its existence. For example, the '*pesak*' that is on the left and right side of the shirt is an additional fabric so that it does not cling to the body. This means that the shirt becomes loose so that it does not shape the wearer's body. Then the '*kekek*' in the armhole makes the arm loose and does not shape the body, which will invite the eyes of others to the wearer (Roza, 2023).

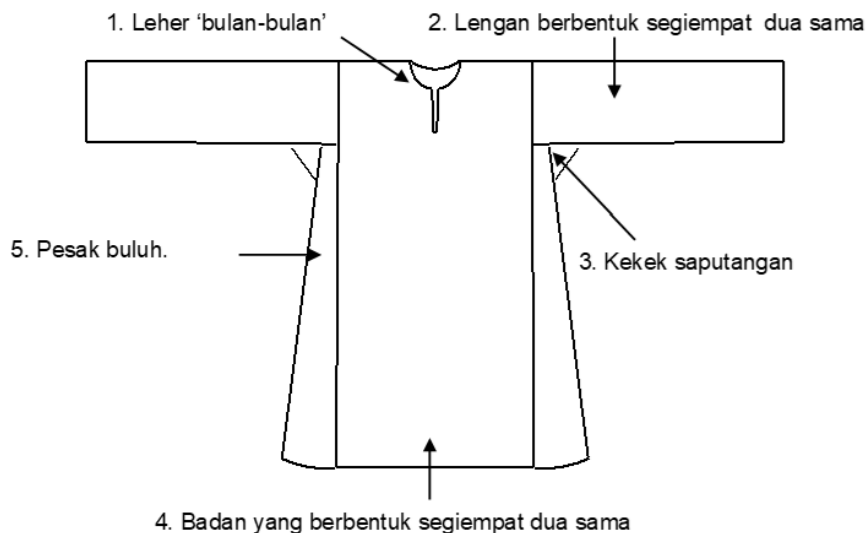


Figure1. *Baju Kurung Pesak Buloh* design. Adapted from *Refleksi Islam dalam pakaian tradisional Melayu: Baju Kurung* by A. Aris, 2015, Paper presented at ICOMHAC 2015, Universiti Teknologi MARA. Copyright 2015 by Universiti Teknologi MARA

Islamic Sharia law serves as a standard or guide for all aspects of Malays culture, including clothing choices and lifestyle choices. One example of this is the traditional *baju kurung*, which is typically worn by Malays during special occasions. The majority of the people of Malays believe that the traditional *baju kurung* should cover the entire body in accordance with Islamic law. Malay ladies find it lovely and comfortable to wear even though it covers the entire body. Malay ladies wear *baju kurung* most of the time throughout the archipelago. Due to the fact that the *Baju Kurung* is worn over the head, it has a long, loose shape and is classified as a type of tunic attire. Originally, women wore *Baju Kurung* with a sarong made of fabric twisted into waves. *Baju Kurung Pesak Buluh*, *Baju Kurung Potong Riau*, and *Baju Kurung Cekak Musang* are the three varieties available for ladies. Ladies accessorise this blouse with a sarong draped in

undulating waves (Aris, 2015). The torso and arms of the *Baju Kurung* are made up of equal squares, the *pesak* is made up of unequal squares, the *Kekeks* are made up of squares that are folded diagonally at the corners to form equilateral triangles, and the neck holes are punched out of circles. On the other hand, after connecting both ends, the sarong cloth is shaped like an equal square that is roughly 1.15 metres long and 0.85 metres broad. A tiny pocket was inserted to the left side of the body, between the waist and the height of the chest, during Sultan Ibrahim's (1886–1919) reign. To make it seem nice, this pocket was designed to be tucked in between the *pesak* in the middle of the 1950s (Aris, 2015).



Figure 2. *Baju Kurung Cekak Musang Pesak Gantung* design. Adapted from *Refleksi Islam dalam pakaian tradisional Melayu: Baju Kurung* by A. Aris, 2015, Paper presented at ICOMHAC 2015, Universiti Teknologi MARA. Copyright 2015 by Universiti Teknologi MARA

Legally, The Five traditional Malay dressing etiquette are to be followed: don't show off your *awrat*¹, don't be overly skinny or tight, don't fabulate, and don't be flippant. The perfection of Malay garment designs, particularly those found in the *Baju Kurung*, is reflected in these five ethics. Similarly, it is thought that the button that seals the shirt's neck opening symbolises God's unity. On the other hand, the crisp and precise eel bone stitching that encircle the neck hole symbolise the strength of brotherhood (Aris, 2015)². Malay culture is governed by Islamic Sharia law, which sets standards for everything from attire to way of life. The traditional *baju kurung*, which is usually worn by Malays on special occasions, is one illustration of this. The majority of Malay women think that, in compliance with Islamic law, the traditional *baju kurung* should cover the complete body. Despite covering the entire body, it is elegant and comfortable for Malay ladies to wear. as demonstrated by the fact that the armholes, chest, and stomach of a traditional *baju kurung* have a loose pattern (Roza, 2023). The *baju kurung* has lace at each end and is not collared or buttoned. To make a sarong, *baju kurung* is worn with *songket* fabric. Since the majority of the Malay community practices Islam, *baju kurung* wearers never wear them without a veil or hijab. believe the traditional *baju kurung* is highly appropriate for the period they are in since, when worn with a veil, it gives ladies a more modern appearance than a traditional one. Despite the baggy shirt, the ensemble doesn't seem dated because this adjusted to the *Baju Kurung* (Roza, 2023).

When a woman dons a traditional *baju kurung*, she is automatically subject to a number of regulations that must be observed because the garment denotes that the wearer is "confined" by Islamic law (*syarak*) and custom. Therefore, ladies who dress in traditional *baju kurung* ought to be mindful of their demeanour and mindset (Roza, 2023). Personal condition: If you wear traditional *baju kurung* with non-traditional clothing, your attitude and behaviour will naturally adjust to the clothing, requiring us to be mindful of our language, demeanour, and actions. In accordance with Islamic law, the traditional Malay *baju kurung* serves not only as clothes but also as a covering for the *awrat*, and it has the power to alter the moral hierarchy of the women who wear it. Naturally, this fits in extremely well with traditional Malay thought. This indicates that Malays who adhere to *adat*, which is founded on Islamic religious leaders and Shariah law, have a respectable position in Malay society (Roza, 2023).

Reiterating from the first point third world feminism, Ibu Zain's adamantly urged women not to emulate the way of life of women in the West, particularly when pursuing their own goals of achievement and advancement. Conversely, he urged Malay women to learn about and gain a deeper understanding of Eastern culture. This is due to the fact that any aspect of Western culture that is in opposition to Eastern culture, such as the unrestricted association of men and women, may be suppressed and fought within the Malay community while also upholding the identity of Malay women, which is shame (Yassin, 2019). Then, he claimed that the greater personality of Malay women comes from their unique culture,

¹ In Arabic, the term '*awrah* or '*awrat* (عورة), with the root 'a-w-r, means "defectiveness", "imperfection", "blemish" or "weakness". The most common English translation of *awrah* is "nakedness".

² As written in Malay proverb "...kibar-berkibar ditiup angin, tidak sempit menyampul nangka ... aib tertutup malu tersimpan, sesuai adat dengan syarak,"

which they adopted without copying any other country or person. His demand was noted on page 62 of *Bulan Melayu* Ogos 1930.

“We Malay women do not want to compete with anyone. We don't want to compete with the West and we don't want to imitate the Turks, Egyptians and so on. But actually we just want to fulfil or complete our obligations.”

With regards to third world feminism, construction of "Third World" women by feminists in privileged positions of global knowledge production in Western universities. These feminists tended to idealise the freedoms enjoyed by Western women in comparison to those of non-Western women, universalize the experience of women, and essentialize women of colour as helpless victims, effectively silencing feminist struggles in the Global South both historically and currently. This construct was deconstructed by the value of Malay women which is politeness and decorum. It is a symbol of their existence that Ibu. Zain emphasized in her work. This idea of Ibu Zain embroiders a message about the importance of women to be graceful and behave well. she insisted that "having a good attitude should not be considered weak". Being kind is a value of "decency, politeness, elegance, a woman's ability to make everyone feel comfortable (Yassin, 2019).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion this article provides a comprehensive exploration of the cultural, societal, and religious factors influencing the representation of Muslim women, particularly in Western societies, while also shedding light on the historical and cultural significance of Malay women in Malaysia. It underscores the importance of upholding traditional values, preserving cultural identity, and fostering mutual respect and understanding in the face of societal and developmental challenges. The intersection of third world feminism, Islamic culture, and the traditional Malay attire, *Baju Kurung*, is highlighted as a manifestation of Malay identity and the significance of upholding Eastern cultural values and traditions in the contemporary world. The concept of personality and politeness of Malay women plays a crucial role in shaping the development and empowerment of Malay women in Malaysia, providing them with a strong cultural foundation and a sense of identity and dignity. Additionally, the document emphasizes the importance of Islamic Sharia law in shaping Malay culture and traditions, particularly in the context of clothing choices and lifestyle, and the significance of *Rukun Negara* in fostering racial unity and mutual respect among Malaysians. Overall, the research underscores the importance of preserving Eastern cultural values and traditions in the face of modernization and globalization, particularly focusing on the concept of decorum and politeness as essential components of maintaining harmony in a multi-racial society like Malaysia.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no personal interest or bias toward any party directly or indirectly involved in this study

AUTHOR DECLARATION

This article was written solely by the author. The author confirms that the work is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not under consideration by any other journal. The author declares no personal interest or bias toward any party directly or indirectly involved in this study. All sources and references used in this work have been properly acknowledged.

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