LITERATURE AND GENDER EQUALITY AS NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE GOALS

Hanita Hanim Ismail

Centre of English Studies, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Kampus Gong Badak, Terengganu Malaysia.

Email: hanitaismail@unisza.edu.my

Received: 20 August 2019, Accepted: 20 November 2019

ABSTRACT

Very often, public expresses dissatisfaction over the lack of respect for women. Yet, this poses an important question—what has been done at improving the local situation where women are cheated, their rights are questioned and left behind? Malaysia at present, is ranked six out of ten based on Social Sustainability Index (SSI) 2016, surpassing an alert level. While the government remains consistent in its effort to distribute gender equality, the promotion of social sustainability issues, particularly in the areas of gender equality, can further be improved upon. This study, as such, aims to rationalise the Ministry of Education’s recent effort of bringing back literary appreciation into schools in general in its hopes to achieve a sustainable living space and developing the nation’s civilizational growth. Besides that, the study also associates a correlation between literature-inclusion in classrooms and encouraging the vocalisation of opportunities and dreams, where the lack of literary appreciation in the recent past shows vulnerability and lack of respect for both genders. Later, it provides a discussion over the roles of literature as an agent of creating awareness for gender equality in classrooms. Without using any particular research design, this study provides a discussion of initiatives at providing the basis of including literature as part of the national language policy and planning. This study on its inclusion in classrooms reiterates past research on encouraging results and high morale among the school teachers and the public as due to its use in classrooms.

Keywords: Literature in classrooms; sustainable development goals; good values; Literature; Malaysia.


1.0 INTRODUCTION

The advent of IR4.0 in the present world is causing a lapse in the human sciences where philosophy and literature suffer the most. In spite of the many benefits that these two branches of knowledge offer to society as a whole, literature in particular is seen as a problematic and difficult subject, especially to the Malaysian school students. As a mechanism that enables
social changes and absorption of values, the subject offers a range of features but the scope of this paper is limited to those taught in schools and tertiary level. This paper focuses primarily on the contribution of literature in education towards creating opportunities between the gender in Malaysia.

Since this paper mainly highlights on ‘literature’ and ‘gender’, there is a need to define these two concepts as to benefit the readers, besides other related aspects like Malaysian National Educational Policy and syllabus. In general, literature is “a sort of disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions” (Murdoch, 1978) that requires a “special language” (Selden, 1989), which only explains the fading away of interest among school students, be it at primary, secondary or tertiary level. The word ‘gender’ on the other hand, looks into assigned roles on men and women as according to socio-economic aspects which might differ from one culture to another.

2.0 Current Global Concerns and GGGI

The blurry vision of an uncertain future draws in many concerns, be it on the climatory studies (i.e. Kumar et al, 2006; Nogues-Bravo, Araujo, Errea & Martine-Riza, 2007) or general issues regarding employment (i.e. Ployhart, 2006; O’Neil, Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008) and food distribution (i.e. Serageldin, 1999) which all direct to the handling of global sustainability. Sustaining Mother Earth also includes considering global gender gap, where talent management would also have to consider distributing opportunity for both genders (World Economic Forum, 2017). On average, the awareness of creating equilibrium between the gender has increased in most countries where Central Asia is reported to have achieved 29% increment, which is based on the Global Gender Gap Index.

The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) 2017 mainly focuses on four sub-indexes: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. Under the index of Economic Participation and Opportunity, men/women are assessed in terms of their contribution in the economic sector, specifying on their role at generating income as well as observing their career movement. This includes those in the professional as well as the technical line. The sub-index on Educational Attainment, looks at gaps between men and women attained in relevance to educational access, be it at primary, secondary and tertiary level. While the sub-index on Health and Survival looks at available health provision to both gender as well as health longevity, the final index on Political Empowerment assesses available opportunity offered to the both, men and women when it comes to making policies, including having voices in parliamentary as well as ministerial positions. A current report on Malaysia state of gender gap reveals that the country has only achieved 0.6-0.67 (Social Sustainability Index, 2016; Global Gender Gap Index 2017), situating behind Philippines (see Figure 1, below).
In a laymen’s perception, Philippines might be a mediocre Asian country but an extended learning reveals the nation’s strive to provide equality between the two genders. Pinoy parents are reported to invest more in their daughters’ schooling, enabling better educated adult daughters (Yamauchi & Tiongco, 2013) and this explains for the many labour migrations of nannies and maids abroad (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2005).

3.0 Literature, Malaysian NEP and teaching of Literature in English language learning (ELL) classrooms

The use of literature in ELL classrooms receives a range of perceptions. While there are sceptics (i.e. Ferradas, 2009), there are also apologists who champion for its use in classrooms. Within the latter camp of thought, literature is viewed as playing the role as a “powerful change agent” that are diverse in its features, i.e. creating intercultural awareness, nurturing soft skills (like empathy, tolerance over diversity and emotional intelligence) (Ghosn (2002), enabling students to be involved in “authentic communicative events” (Obaidullah, 2016). Su (2010) observed a boost of motivation as due to the use of literature. In general, literature is often perceived suitable for the upper range of language users which would explain why it is a difficulty to the lower language learners.

While some associate Malaysia with post-colonialism (e.g. Koh 2017), there are other identifications that can be associated with the country which appeals to the global audience. The richness of its historical and socioeconomic background distinguishes Malaysia from other countries where it exceeds its popular reputation as a multiracial country with diverse cultures that respect one another for the last 50 years of independence. It is a legacy; a pool of many faces, beliefs and backgrounds that strive hard for survival but also rally for the country’s political change. It was reported that Malaysians elsewhere flew back in the desperation of regaining political justice where the long-standing political party was toppled in the 2018 national election for its failure to sustain public trust and perform transparent good governance. This is among the many examples of Malaysia championing for its talents and hard work. While
these national sentiments are passed on by the senior generations, there is a need to continuously remind the younger generations of the need to continue the same national spirit and inculcate good values. At the level of policy-makers, the Malaysian Educational Blueprint (2015-2025) aspires students from the local higher learning institutions to be strong and capable individuals that strike a balance between ethics and knowledge (be it in the sense of leadership, sense of national identity, language flair, and thinking skills). These are aspirations that shape the future generation, who will govern the state’s economy, welfare and security, as well manage their homes and family.

While the current national education system emphasizes on strengthening knowledge among school students, issues concerning the teaching of English in schools remain prevalent. Research papers often feature present concerns over quality teaching (e.g. Ting 2007) to use of high-technology in local setting (e.g. Saadat, Hussin 2013; Nawi, Nadzri, Rom, 2013; Puteh, Shukor, 2010), including students’ learning motivation (e.g.), the inclusion of emotional intelligence (e.g. Aziz, 2016) and language proficiency (e.g. Majid, 2014), making education as one of the most researched knowledge. The teaching of literature is also equivalently an interesting research angle which draws upon many to understand, criticize and recommend suggestions.

While the reading of literature remains relevant as part of the school syllabus and major assessments, be it in English or Bahasa Melayu, YB Maszlee Malik echoed greatly on the emphasis for literary appreciation through his early administrative mandates for the national educational practices. When Maszlee launched a national reading campaign in line with his 100 days focusing on national education (Bernama, 22 August 2018) along with other national initiatives of inculcating national reading efforts by the state libraries and continuous efforts to translate Malay literature to other languages, it indirectly suggests the ministry’s direction with regards to literature as part of the national education. It was a trend in the making, encouraging the younger generations to value reading as a popular pastime. There were other similar educational initiatives identified when the young minister spurred a fad in the social media platforms. One of which that quickly gained trending is his promotion for sharing images of book covers which represents local readers’ choice of reading list. The fad was made viral through the inclusion of hashtag either in tweets or Facebook status. In a way, Maszlee revived a forgotten pastime that was once popular either local or abroad. It was a renaissance of reading culture in the attempts to shift common perspectives on learning in Malaysia where he gears towards an easier approach at handling knowledge, while maintain a level of par excellence within the quality of knowledge.

In the analysis of the newly appointed minister and his strings of decisions, Maszlee expressed an inclination towards promoting reading books as one of his tweets writes, “Language represents cultural, etiquettes and thought”, hence encouraging socmed users to apply high quality of language use that represents Malaysians’ well-mannerism (Twitter, 12 August 2018). Not only that, there are numerous tweets that Maszlee dictated, expressing his own reading preferences. In his promotion of the reading Malaysia, he named his set of ten where among his favourites are like Al-Kimyya al-Sa’adah and Al-Munqudh min al-dalal by Al-Ghazali and Sejarah Umat Islam by Hamka, not forgetting The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho. He even applauded the efforts made by Universiti Sains Malaysia to alleviate the level of literary acceptance across the globe (Mohd Azrul Mohd Azhar, Utusan 1 August 2018). Although there isn’t any direction policy that suggests the revamping of reading literature in schools, all these statements and preference by the minister. There are plenty which reading literature is most functional, especially when Maszlee was interviewed by Radio Television
Malaysia (Twitter, 28 July 2018) where he is particularly keen at shaping good characters at primary school level. In his earlier tweets, he made analogies of non-progressive minds which are not willing to accept to new changes, alike dinosaurs which might be big in physical size but small in brain size. The latest addendum to his list of suggestions for schools is reintroducing P.Ramlee’s movies and Upin Ipin into classroom viewing selections.

Despite of the absence of precise directive on such reviving efforts concerning literature, the minister’s excitement over national engagement with items and attitude which are closely related to literature indicates his clear inclination towards reading literary texts. As such, the aims of this study is threefold. Besides rationalising the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) recent effort of bringing back literary appreciation into schools in general in its hopes to achieve a sustainable living space and developing the nation’s civilizational growth, the study also correlates such effort to the enabling of new frontiers in vocalizing opportunities and dreams, where the lack of literary appreciation in the recent past shows vulnerability and lack of respect for both genders. To conclude, the paper later provides a discussion over the merits and flaws of the effort in comparison to other developed countries at maintaining a sustainable nation, either economically, socially and morally through the use of literature in classrooms.

4.0 RATIONALIZING MOE’S EFFORT AT SEEING LITERATURE AS A VEHICLE FOR OPPORTUNITY

Schools play a significant role at moulding individual’s personality and behaviour as suggested by Schon (1983) who urged for every child’s enrolment to schools as a way to help young individuals at undergoing life. Without schools and its disciplined routines, a child lacks his purpose in life and is not shaped to have any means of benefiting time. This could possibly be a reason to the unproductive lifestyle among Malaysian youngsters. Yahya et al. (2003), for example, highlighted on the fact that students’ misbehaviour is a “prevailing problem” both in local landscape as well as abroad (p. 660) where they further identified disruptive behaviour is caused by students’ inability to cope with tasks. They itemized school routines as disciplining students to obey rules in classrooms and schools. Schools in short, is an avenue for training where the mind matches the body in the strive to fit into the society.

Despite of Maszlee’s effort to improve the education system by revising the education policy and bringing in think tanks and expertise at improving it, there is no doubt that the policy-makers had Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 shaped around the philosophy of good. It is within the aspiration for quality that the education system envisions students’ holistic development and melds them into academically-competitive students as compared to the international quality. Healthy competition and diligence are enablers to instilling good values.

As 21st century knocks on the door, school practitioners welcome innovative means of teaching and students are exposed to different ways of learning, where the pen-and-paper is not the only approach of measuring the latter’s level understanding. Feedbacks range from numerous classroom activities that yield upon the use of critical and creative thinking. Students are encouraged to perform collaborative learning, taking up roles, engage in field works, execute enquiries, etc. These are some of the 21st century hallmarks of teaching and learning, taking place in the present classrooms where students are expected to take charge of their own learning upon their teacher’s guidance, besides the fact that they are prone to be more
expressive and communicative. It is a synergy between two – students’ expected outcome in line with teachers’ role towards providing a system that facilitates these outcomes, as envisioned in Figure 2 (see p. 7); “interconnected” in a partnership between the two – learners and teachers (P21 Framework Definition, 2018)

![Figure 2: Framework for 21st century learning, taken from P21 Partnership for 21st century learning](image)

There is a pattern identified in the shift that is identified in the 21st century teaching and learning where it gears towards achieving student-centred. Learners are now more independent at directing their learning. They are more involved in their own learning and try to engage in a meta-learning process. All these are exactly what literature encourages its patrons. As explained in the P21 Framework, students will be equipped with essentials skills (such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration) for success in the present world, besides the fact that one of the named key subjects of the 21st century is English. Interestingly, P21 also names Civic Literacy as one of the 21st century key subjects.

For years, English language has been the vehicle for knowledge-sharing and knowledge-expansion that it mobilizes the dissemination of knowledge as it empowers worldwide. The next language that aspires to replace this Anglo-Saxon language has to work twice harder at enriching its lexical range. Similarly, for years, when a literary text is discussed in classrooms, students are yielded upon self-initiated efforts at uncovering meaning within meaning where they are engaged in this simultaneous effort of thinking outside the box. They critically think beyond what is written in the text; they are in this process of critical thinking. A text can be read in so many different ways that it keeps them engrossed within the whole process of deciphering the text. This is one of the several ways of transforming students into holistic individuals who look at many aspects at their attempt to understand the world in general. Literature shapes thinking individuals into inquisitive minds that attempt to understand better the complexity of life, which is one of the few aspirations that is outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, besides the fact that in each literary text, there is a lesson to be learnt from, which only explains the lack of civic-mindedness among some Malaysian younger generation. As such, literature also plays an essential role of providing exemplary tales that we can learn from others in the attempt of surviving the complexity of life.
At the same time, literature offers another edge, which is the opportunity to dream. As Krashen (1997) pointed out the limited advantages that children in the least developed countries have as due to the range of reading materials offered, one can draw an association between the opportunities that reading literature offers to the vastness of freedom where it “opens up remarkable possibilities” (Bennett & Royle 2015). It is this window of opportunity that prepares the new generation at handling the 21st century work demands and it is a common sighting in schools and higher learning institutions where teachers and students are engaged with teaching and learning initiatives. In shared report, Americans are expected envision state of work as a that cultivates creativity either in research, development, design, marketing and management. Because of that, literature is also able to function as a mechanism of awareness towards an equal opportunity between the genders through careful selection of narrative themes that generate an ideal picture of how the world works better if both genders are offered equally. Men and women are better operatives if they understand that each plays a role in maintaining and sustaining this world.

If conventional gender roles are continuously reinstated and maintained, it jeopardizes a possibility for options. As women are better academic performers in schools, they have a better chance of contributing towards the household income. Sceptics and traditionalists might see a disrupted order in the old-school way of domestic order yet here lies a possibility of improving any household – one of which is to provide gender equality in the long run. When students read inspiring literary texts that exposes them to opportunities that are promised to them beyond their homes, their eyelids are now opened wider to a world that is yet explored. Exemplary novels that champion on women independence, besides winning their men’s heart are like Jane Austen’s Emma (1815) and Sense and Sensibility (1811), Louisa M. Alcott’s Little Women (1868). Featured female characters are written in a way to dismantle the patriarchal system of withholding the possibilities that women might be allowed to have. These women work in groups at strengthening their talents and minds, like the sisters in Little Women. Despite the fact that these canonical texts derived from the Victorian age where women fought hard for their independence, one should not be mistaken these novels as suggesting feminism; these works move beyond such ideology. It simply suggests for equality in chance and opportunity for the other gender; one that was once deprived of its possibility to survive in decent world where food can be provided and security can be ensured.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In short, literature is powerful change agent that enables dreams to operate and lives to transformed. Its use should not be overlooked for many great civilisations are maintained through effective workings of its literary-reading citizens. England, for example, reformed its state of moral collapse in the eighteenth century as due to its powerful literary movement. Malaysia should return to its forefathers’ practices of reading and not just any reading; these readings should guide the younger generations of functional life rules, of good manners, of wise decisions.

Future researchers ought to consider the weight of this issue where without its appropriation, human environment which is coexistent to other issues like global warming and environmental protection will be greatly impacted. Improper consideration for better gender roles at home runs a longer and more terminal effect. Future researchers ought to consider into bring back older values into the younger generation and their lifestyles. There is nothing at loss when it comes to values.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was presented at the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan international conference in 2018 on Civilization, Language and Sustainability. The paper did not receive neither grant nor funding for its pursuit of knowledge.

REFERENCES


i-zionism and Anti-semitism. s.l.:Routledge.