

## Young Women Speak Out: Healing The Selves Through Narrative Therapy

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### Abstract

This paper explicates the contemporary voices of Malaysian women projected towards raising awareness on violence to the public through *Young Women Speak Out*, an anthology of short stories and poems written by victims of violence and sexual abuse. This collection is published in 2007 by All Women's Action Society (AWAM), an independent feminist organisation committed to improving the lives of women in Malaysia. The writers' writings of life-narratives are analysed in the framework of narrative therapy developed by Michael White and David Epston and Kamsler's theory of revising individuals' relationship with one-self in relation to violence and abuse. By placing the plots of the stories within Kamsler's stages of revising individual's relationship with one-self in relation to violence and abuse, the stories reflect the authors' success in forming a more positive self-dignity, thus allowing them to go on with their lives guided by new perspectives and hopes. By contextualizing their violent experiences in a broader cultural politics of race, gender, class, sexuality, professional and institutional dominance, these stories, when viewed as therapeutic engagement, have helped these women to externalise their problems allowing them to create awareness as well as speaking out to the Malaysian society in order to expose the detrimental effects of sexual and domestic violence.

**Keywords:** violence, sexual abuse, narrative therapy, self-dignity, awareness.

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## Introduction

One of the current trends in Malaysian Literature in English is the use of social texts that forms part of the evolution of Malaysian women writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The writers discussed in this paper cannot be labelled as writers who produce literary works consistently. The literariness of their works can also be questioned, if one were to compare them to writings elsewhere. The literariness of a work, however, is not the focus here. Also, Malaysian writers have been shown to write sporadically because writing is not their professional occupation (Fadillah Merican, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Ganakumaran Subramaniam, Raihanah Mohd Mydin, 2004). The works employed here represent the voices of Malaysian women who address matters relating to their well being and humanity issues that need to be understood by the Malaysian society. As women writers, their concerns, world views and aesthetics are significantly different from the male writers (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Noraini Md Yusof, Raihannah Mohd Mydin & Imran Ho Abdullah 2011, p. 392) for their actions and directions in lives are more confined and dictated by socio-cultural obligations and parameters that give rise to their sensitivity towards injustice and violence especially when their loved ones are implicated. The corpus analysed in this paper, *Young Women Speak Out* (2007) reflects the contention and movement towards women's self-empowerment against violence by breaking the silenced experience of brutality implicated against the victims. The book's agenda is direct and clear in constructing awareness and understanding of women's issues such as domestic violence, rape and sexual molestation.

The volume is a compilation of 13 short stories and 5 poems published by the All Women's Action Society (AWAM), an independent feminist organisation in Malaysia committed to improving the lives of women in Malaysia; and edited by Alina Rastam, the coordinator of the Writers for Women's Rights Programme. The book is a result of a three-year programme funded by the European Commission aimed at training women writers (ages 18-32) on their understanding of gender and women issues, of media and improving their analytical and writing skills to encourage them to promote women's rights in their writings. The book encapsulates the move towards awareness of violence against women and developing understanding about women's right and speaking against social injustice. This is clearly projected by the literary pieces written by young women writers who evidently "are still feeling the effects of the discriminatory practices and structures that women of previous generations were subjected to; and that the gender equality is still far from being a reality in Malaysia" (Alina 2007, p. 5).

The purpose of the book is to develop an understanding of the issues portrayed by these women writers. Their literary texts are reflections of the contemporary writings in Malaysian Literature in English that address the prevailing issues of violence and abuse on women in Malaysia's socio-cultural realities. The writers' fictional writings taken as writing of life narratives can be understood as a form of literature in a social criticism mode that "expose the hollowness of worldly success, the world's corruption, its failure to meet our noblest aspirations [and] expose the predicaments of the oppressed, in stories about readers, through identification, to see certain situations as intolerable" (Culler 1997, p. 92). Readers would be able to comprehend and place themselves in these stories through the writers' style of writing which is simple and direct and understand the need

to develop awareness on women's abuse and the importance of taking action in stopping violence against women as a social responsibility.

This project of articulating repressed emotions reflects the awareness that it is time for women to take charge and change. In the context of creating "new knowledge" (McGinty 2012, p. 13), the experiences of women who had been traumatised in the past and the ways in which they have learnt to face the dark episodes in their lives and move on, stronger and more resilient, provides new knowledge for other women trapped in their own webs of abuse to make a clean break from their respective situations. Furthermore, as Jerome (Jerome 2008, p. 35) rightly notes, "the changing sexual behaviours of men and women in contemporary times have been documented in literary works by Malaysian writers in English," but writings which reveal the trauma inflicted by the opposite sex or by intimate partners have so far been neglected. Thus, the discussion on *Young Women Speak Out* informs us of our own realities of violence and how these women cope with their tribulations.

Literature is an excellent vehicle to exact social change. In her paper entitled "Inculcating social activism in the literature classroom," Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2011, p. 90) elaborates on the ways in which "many writers ... have made use of their writing dexterity to reveal social ills and effect change for the better" and they "describe social conditions, economic development, war and peace, and human development or lack of progress". In another study, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Imran Ho-Abdullah and Noraini Md Yusof (2011, p. 1858) argue that it is crucial "to educate young Malaysians that violence against women is criminal" because aggression against women and "domestic violence is not a private matter within the four walls of a home but a problem which needs to be discussed more openly, and is made as part of their learning". Therefore, AWAM's writing initiative which is a form of therapy for the young women to articulate in a positive and nurturing environment, adds meaning to the publication which also contributes to Malaysia's literary wealth.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework applied in the analysis of the book is a psychological approach based on narrative therapy. The therapy uses storytelling and discusses the influences of a person's social, cultural and political contexts as the factors that cause problems in life. The main method is to focus on the stories of people's lives and analyse these stories in terms of truth and interpretation of the stories as illustrated below:

A wider meaning of narrative therapy relates significantly to a relatively recent way of thinking about the nature of human life and knowledge which has come to be known as 'postmodernism' – which believes there is no one objective 'truth' and that there are many multiple possible interpretations of any event. Thus within a narrative approach, our lives are seen as multi-storied vs. single-storied (Narrative Therapy Centre, Canada).

The therapy is a counselling approach that engages the individuals in narrating the story of their lives by making meaning and interpreting life experiences. In doing this, it would avoid a narrow or restricted interpretation of the experience. This psychological approach to therapy is developed by Michael White and David Epston in the 1980's and is influenced by Foucault, feminism and cultural anthropology (O'Grady 2005, p. 43). The central method to this therapy is "externalising conversation" engaged by therapists in a therapeutic environment that help the patients realise that the problems they face are not caused by themselves through "contextualising the problems in a broader cultural politics of race, gender, class, sexuality and professional and institutional dominance" (Wylie, 1994 as cited in O'Grady 2005, p. 50). In this way, the patients would be able to externalise themselves outside the problem and use the outsider perspectives that allows them to understand the crisis better and thus find solutions to overcome it.

The concept of Narrative Therapy is applied to analyse the chosen stories in the book as the narratives are the writers' alternative views and understanding of the problems that were formerly denied and repressed by socio-cultural factors. The issues that the writers chose to explore are meaningful events that have caused immense pain and sufferings that "camouflage real feelings, intentions, attitudes, desires and the complex array of human emotions and interaction" that resurfaced only after the writers have finally internalised positive values, attitudes and perceptions "brought forward as a part of alternative stories and used to reframe problem stories" (Peine & Allen, 2000). Writing stories that describe the writers' own journey towards positive self-reinforcement allows the writers to externalise the problem as being caused by cultural and social practices. This allows the writers to see themselves not as problematic individuals; but as individuals victimised by conditions around them. When this insight is developed and ingrained in their writers' alternate conceptions of their problems, solution stories are created reflecting the individuals' triumphs against life's adversities.

In order to utilise the therapy as the conceptual framework of analysis, the therapeutic environment for the externalising conversation of this approach is taken as the fictional writings of the life narratives. The fictional stories are creative spaces that allow an individual to revise the relationship with oneself. In relation to the paper, Kamsler's theory of revising an individual's relationship with one-self in relation to violence and abuse is used as the enabling method in interpreting the stories written by the women who have experienced violence and sexual abuse.

Kamsler's approach of contextualizing one's experience by "exploring culturally popular ideas about abuse of girls and women which may be contributing to its ongoing legacy in a woman's life" (O'Grady 2005, p. 38) is an apt framework for the book. The stories analysed form the basis of discussion for domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape. Kamsler's theory has three stages which start from revising one's relation to a problem to finding empowerment as a form personal agency. Interestingly, when the stages are juxtaposed on the selected stories of abuse and violence the writers' narrative development fits with Kamsler's stages of helping patients to externalise their traumatic experiences and finding solutions to empower themselves (Refer to Figure 1).

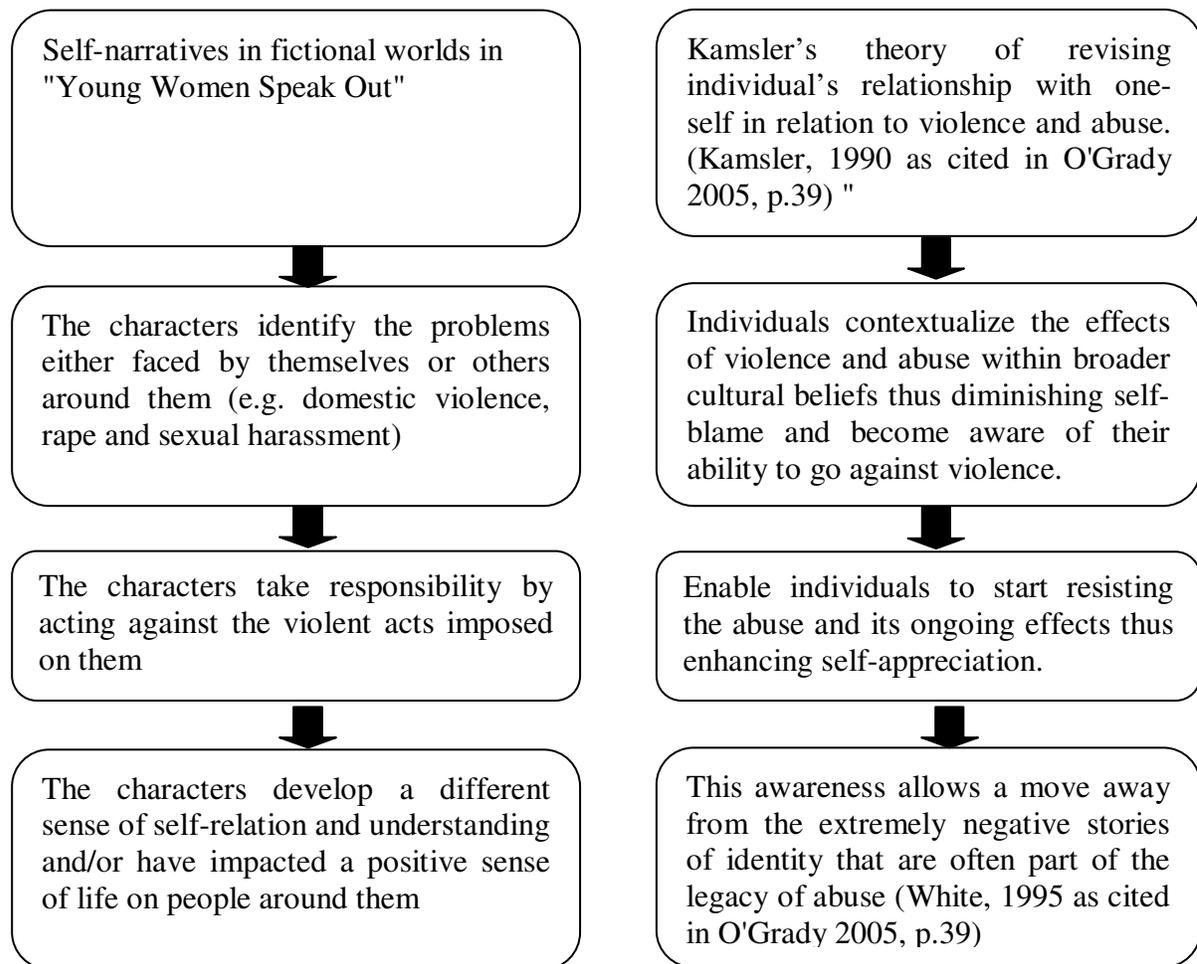


Figure 1: Complementing stages between Kamsler's Theory and the stages in the narratives

Applying Kamsler's theory on the narratives gives the readers a better understanding of the effects of violence and abuse on women that subjugate women as natural targets for violence and cruelty. The first stage contextualizes the victims' experience in wider social, political and cultural practices. By contextualizing the experience within these confines, the victims are able to see that they are not totally responsible for the cruelty against them. Therefore they are able to remove any self-inflicting opinions and misunderstandings about their bodies and stop blaming themselves as helpless victims. The individuals would also be able to understand that self blame will not only continue to destroy their lives but also their loved ones.

The second stage is when the individuals take appropriate actions to stop the abusive cycle or to free themselves from continuously being haunted by their traumatic experience. This means that individuals must aspire and plan a personal resistance to stop

the abuse and its ongoing effects. In the narratives analysed, this is the stage where the characters are described as stopping the violence against them after identifying the type of violence they have endured. The actions are sensible and practical to save themselves from the vicious cycle for the sake of themselves and their loved ones. This triumph is then translated as a positive empowerment and as an appreciation of oneself for having the courage to change their lives for the better.

The last stage describes how the individuals developed a different sense of self-relation and understanding of their own experience. It is a transition state towards self-betterment by neutralizing the negative stories of identity to a more self-positive acceptance of one self. It is also the phase whereby the renewed individuals would also transmit the positivity to others around them. This is a form of self-acceptance that is positive and nurtures one's ability; that contradicts the often negative and degrading self-impression that many victims suffer due to lack of positive personal agency. In this final stage, the characters are depicted as having found the inner strength to overcome the negative impact of cultural beliefs.

The framework discloses the intolerable situations that the characters have to endure, deconstruct the writers' personal agency in finding their lost voices against injustice and expose predicaments of the oppressed through stories. The stories also criticises society's hollowness in fulfilling social and moral responsibilities in creating a safe and loving society. The characters, although depicted as facing terrible experiences, are portrayed as having the determination to find their inner strength. They also realise that in order to reclaim their lives and sanity, they must change their attitudes, their mindsets as well as taking prompt and practical actions. Readers are also educated when reading the self narratives which portrayed the writers' personal agency in liberating themselves and their loved ones from the cycle of violence.

## **Discussion**

Kamsler's theory is appropriated in tandem with AWAM's definitions of domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape. In this paper, three stories of domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape are chosen for the analysis and placed within Kamsler's framework.

The first story "The decision" by J. Arumugam centres on domestic violence. This violence according to AWAM;

... occurs when a partner, former partner or family member attempts to control and dominate a person through violence, the threat of violence or other means of control such as deprivation. Domestic violence often takes many forms such as physical and psychological abuse. The latter includes put-downs and insults. This takes an emotional toll on survivors who may experience fear, stress, guilt and depression (AWAM, 2010a).

The author narrates the story of her mother who is abused and violated by her own father. She recounts specific events while growing up in the house where violence and abuse are the norm. She translates the events into a constructive narrative to depict her mother's struggle in releasing herself and her children from the torment. The analysis of the story using Kamsler's theory first depicts how the writer's mother realises that she is a victim of domestic violence. In their marriage, the husband provides cruelty, not love and understanding. Arumugam recollects that her mother's initial response to the abuse is to be passive and accept her husband's behaviour as culturally appropriate. The children as well, being innocent, seem to think that all Tamil families experience similar situations. This acceptance is also reinforced by the stories depicted in Tamil movies in which the father has the right to "exercise control [over the family] and dictate [to them] how [they] should live their lives" (Arumugam 2007, p. 11).

Arumugam describes how the mother endures the beatings, the insults and put-downs by the father to the mother in front of the children.

The littlest things set him off – a dish that was too salty for his taste, excess food, lousy report cards, messy rooms. My mother always held back, immobilized by his unleashed madness. He would rain blows on her and she would cower in pain and shame, humiliated before her children and humbled by his brute force (Arumugam, 2007, p. 11)

The cultural context reinforces the ideology that a wife must accept and tolerate any punishment or beatings from her husband. It takes 15 years before Arumugam's mother could stand up against the husband to exercise her rights as a wife and resist the violent treatment. She also recognizes the need for her children to understand that the beatings and the insults were not normal behaviour of a father towards his own wife and children.

The mother's realisation reflects the externalising attitude that she has taken as the first step towards her own liberation. She also realises that she must free herself from the confinement of cultural acceptance of wife beatings or silently accepting her fate. This forms the agency in her personal mission to break the chain of violence, compelling her to make the most rational and sound decision for the sake of herself and of her children.

In 1989, when I was 15, my mother made the most important decision in our lives. This decision probably saved our collective sanity and delivered us from our father. After a particularly violent and vicious beating, she made a police report against my father (Arumugam 2007, p. 12).

Arumugam's appreciative and relieved tones reflect her gratefulness towards her mother who finally makes the call to save their sanity and their physical well beings. Her mother's daring action reflect the mother's courage and will to break her silent suffering by making a public statement of her condition. Putting the mother's action in Kamsler's second stage shows that the decision is beneficial for both mother and daughter. The child learns what being empowered means; the mother finds her own strength to fight violence though she has to face rejection from the policeman who considers wife beatings

a domestic matter. As the Domestic Violence Act had not been implemented in Malaysia, the mother's resolute act is considered courageous and heroic because in those days abused wives were rarely given help and support either by their own communities or by private organisations.

By taking charge of her situation, Arumugam's mother has displayed her heightened sense of self empowerment and become the active agent of change; going against her previous role as the victimised wife. Her triumph against cruelty not only frees herself and reconciles a more positive relationship with herself but also impacts a positive sense of life on her children. The mother's wisdom to save herself from her abusive husband, read in Kamsler's third stage has allowed the mother and her children to move away from the negative effects of abuse and violence that they had experienced. The decision has changed her life and her children's for the better, creating more sensible and morally conscious members of society who understand the importance of stopping and curbing domestic violence from prevailing and being accepted as a norm in cultural practice.

The second story analysed is by D. Martin, "The Sluts" that deals with the issue of sexual harassment among teenagers in school. The writer narrates the story of two young urban girls who were reputed to be sluts among the boys. Being labelled sluts, the boys around them think they have the power to harass these girls sexually. AWAM defines sexual harassment as,

...[to receive] any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature including sexual comments, fondling, lewd gestures, jokes, emails, smses, pornographic pictures, coercion and more. Sexual harassment consists of a wide range of behaviors and actions, most common of these are verbal forms of harassment such as jokes, obscene language and suggestive remarks (AWAM, 2010b).

In the story, Yolanda's boyfriend dumps her after sleeping with her. Yolanda moves on with her life and finds herself a new boyfriend. In revenge the ex-boyfriend smears her reputation. "Everyone was calling me a whore, and they had special nickname for me – 'Yo the ho'" (Martin 2007, p. 74). Adding to her frustration, the school authority did not take action when she admits to the principal that she had slept with her ex-boyfriend. The school's insensitive and uncaring attitude reinforces the label that she has to bear throughout her school life. "I felt that it was all my fault that my sleeping with a guy had meant I'd brought all of it on myself" (Martin 2007, p 74). Placing Yolanda's story in Kamsler's first stage, Yolanda realised that she is a victim of sexual harassment that is reinforced by the school's pupils and the administrators who had allowed the insults to continue.

In Kamsler's second stage, Yolanda starts to change by resisting the degrading insults and seeing beyond the experience, empowering her sense of determination and self-hood. Yolanda realises that she has to find the inner strength in herself by ignoring the verbal abuses and to get on with her life.

In Kamsler's third stage, Yolanda has successfully found the positive voice in her and she no longer feels sad.

... I was just pissed. It was like, "What the hell. I have a right to my sexuality, and nobody has any right to tell me otherwise" (Martin 2007, p. 74).

This determination has enabled her to move away from the negative impact of sexual harassment that could have a detrimental effect on her mental and psychological well being later in her life.

The other "slut" is Ashley who is sexually harassed in school due to her beauty. The boys feel that they have the authority to molest her because of her attractiveness as dictated by cultural and societal practices.

"Everyone believed it was my fault," Ashley reflected. "Or they wouldn't believe it was happening. Even if they did accept it was happening, and they didn't think it was my fault, people still didn't see it as a problem. As far they were concerned, it was a guy thing" (Martin 2007, p. 76)

Placing the first part of Ashley's story in Kamsler's approach, Ashley has identified the sexual violence that she is facing and knows that it is not acceptable. The boys should stop harassing and must respect her as an individual. Ashley shares her experience of being wolf-whistled by the boys when she passes by them in the school corridors; the lewd remarks about her breasts that she gets when she enters the classrooms; the other girls labelling her a slut. When a boy lifts her top and grabs her chest, she then decides to be home schooled for fear that the taunting and bullying would affect her life. She realises that it is impossible to change society's mindset. It is this understanding that Ashley has gained from the experience and made her more knowledgeable of society's popular belief about pretty girls like her. This knowledge enables Ashley to chart her own personal resistance against the unjust treatment. Her decision empowers her to overcome the sexual attacks, to save her dignity and to protect her from continuously being placed in a denigrating position in school as she knows that it is difficult to act against the inherent cultural and societal beliefs when it concerns a girl like her.

Ashley also reflects her sensibility of the ways to survive in facing sexual harassment and its effects. Reading this awareness in the second and third stages of Kamsler's theory where she is shown to gain maturity and knowledge about the opposite sex and uses the knowledge to help her to survive in society.

I think guys have a license to act as they want with girls and girls have a license to judge other girls...I see now that people view it same way that people will excuse a teenage boy's interest in pornography – it's a rite of passage. Boys will be boys. They're entitled to this. And if you're a decent girl, you'll learn to live with it (Martin 2007, p. 78).

For Ashley, boys will continue to behave like boys and it is a fact that girls are the ones who have to be sharp in protecting themselves. Ashley's smart attitude has saved her sanity and also manifests her awareness to defend her body and her life against them.

The final story analysed using Kamsler's theory is RK Boo's narration of a date rape entitled "Raped...or not". The act of raping in AWAM's definition is:

Sex without consent is rape, including any form of oral or anal penetration using objects without someone's consent. Rape is a violent crime using sex as a weapon – rape is used to assert one's domination over another. It is not committed to satisfy a sexual urge. Rape is a gross violation of a person's rights and is a form of discrimination. (AWAM, 2010c)

In the story, Eve Chang is raped by Rob, her boyfriend of three months, during a date at his apartment. Eve resists Rob's advances after both of them have had some alcoholic drinks and she is raped. Eve admits that she had willingly gone to his apartment to be intimate with him but not with the intention of engaging in sexual intercourse. Her story goes public where the media highlights the way she dresses, the clubbing and drinking that she engages in which consequently contribute to her being labelled as "cheap". The society, including her own mother, who read the report judges Eve as "deserving" to be raped in accordance with the cultural belief that women must not behave or wear indecent clothes because men could never control their sexual desire when they see an attractive and sexy woman. This is made obvious by Eve's mum at the hospital after the attack:

You know how guys are – always thinking with their brain downstairs. You should have prepared yourself. Avoid such situations. Guys can't control themselves. It's the girl who draws the line (Boo 2007, p. 18).

To add insult to injury, her story is reported side by side with another girl, a church goer who is raped on the way to church. Again, this reinforces the socially accepted belief that a woman like her deserves to be raped on the basis that she is asking for it to happen. From the lens of Kamsler's theory, Boo's narration discloses that Eve realises that her rape incident is against her will although society sees it otherwise.

Sometimes, she asked herself: was she wrong for going to her boyfriend's place alone at night, expecting him to respect her all the same and to stop when she said 'No' to sex? The answer came in the dark, sad and true. She was not wrong. But society thought she was, sticking responsibility on her like blood (Boo 2007, p. 27).

Eve is able to see clearly what she should do to fight the negative stigma as the deserving rape victim by externalising the injustice done on her as a result of the society's ignorance of the nature and act of rape. Listening to her inner voice, Eve, as analysed in the third stage of Kamsler's theory, is shown as having the ability to move on with her life. She realises that she can help other women in the same situation, and she sets up a support group for date rape survivors. This positive outcome reflects Eve's sense of

personal agency to liberate herself from the traumatic experience by confronting her anger and channelling her negative emotions into a constructive effort to help other women.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the three stories using Kamsler's theory reflects a strong message through its theme of fighting violence against women. The writers have empowered the main characters as having a strong will and determination to overcome the negative legacy of abuse and/or violence. Situating the stories as narrative therapy within Kamsler's framework shows how each character has successfully found her voice through personal struggle that is analysed in three stages that are read in the stories.

The anthology *Young Women Speak Out* depicts narratives that are clear and loud in its agenda to encourage women to talk and share their experiences of being abused and how these dark episodes have affected them and their loved ones. Stories exposing violence and abuse experiences in Malaysian Literature in English create the awareness for Malaysian society to understand and address the prevailing issues of violence against women. This effort by AWAM gives new insights and raises concerns about the issues that are considered important to young women in today's society. Applying Kamsler's theory to analyse the selected stories of domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape has disclosed the personal, emotional and physical struggles that the characters have endured in facing the violence imposed on them. Interestingly, the stories do not only reflect the nature and the violence experienced by the characters but also how the victims found ways and strengths to regain their self worth and new perspectives in life after the traumatic experience of being abused. The characters are strong willed, determined to make changes in their lives and also for their loved ones. It is done out of love and displays a sense of responsibility to educate other women about the need to speak out as victims of violence. The title itself *Young Women Speak Out* speaks volumes about its agenda and its strong message to the readers and the public to act and be responsible in dealing with issues of violence in contemporary Malaysian society. It is a book that certainly calls out for Malaysians to be aware and become active agents of change in creating a better society and future for women and children especially on issues of violence and abuse.

In conclusion, *Young Women Speak Out*, a collection of contemporary writings by Malaysian women writers is a social text towards creating and understanding the issues of violence and abuse on women in Malaysian society. The book also highlights the emergence of women's discourse taking centre stage in the Malaysian literary scene. The purpose of the book is clear and reflects Malaysian women's unwavering efforts in breaking the muted narratives of the abused women and children and educating Malaysians on civil society. The publication of the book is a timely act in curbing and fighting against violence and abuse that still prevail in today's society.

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