

The Analysis of Natrah @ Maria Huberdina Hertogh Background and Marriage Issues by The Straits Times, 1950

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ABSTRACT

The story of Natrah @ Maria Huberdina Hertogh was a significant event in Singapore at the end of 1950. Natrah was part of a tragedy that offended the feelings and sensitivity of the Muslims when the court granted custody to Natrah's biological parents from the Netherlands. The report published by The Straits Times had caused the Natrah Riot that led to several deaths among the Muslim Malays. The Straits Times had its interest in every article which was written about Natrah. Hence, this article investigates the extent of The Straits Times involvement in publishing daily issues about Natrah background and marriage issues, which have not been highlighted by other researchers. An in-depth study of the sensationalised discourse about Natrah by this newspaper would be presented in this paper. In the beginning, The Straits Times seemed to focus on Natrah's background, which aimed to introduce Natrah to the public especially pro-Western readers. The sensationalisation of the issue reached its peak when the article reported Natrah's marriage which was an attempt to instigate and provide a lopsided view on Islam and the Malays. The Straits Times continues to publish prejudiced reports as the proceeding on Natrah's custody was ongoing and the readers' sentiment. Several perceptions touched on religious sentiments, but these issues are not the focus of this discussion since many have discussed it earlier. Nevertheless, it is found that this newspaper attempted to highlight the story of Natrah through background and marriage issues as a strategy to attract the reader's attention.

Keywords: *Natrah, Maria Huberdina Hertogh, The Straits Times, Islam, Malaya.*

INTRODUCTION

The tragedy involving Natrah @ Maria Huberdina Hertogh unfolded in Singapura at the end of 1950, it received wide media coverage, particularly from a local English newspaper known as The Straits Times (Abdullah, 2012). However, conflict ensued when Natrah's biological parents in the Netherlands filed for custody against Mansoor Adabi, Natrah's husband at that time. In short, Maria Huberdina Hertogh, better known as Natrah, was a young Dutch girl,

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and it was claimed that she was given to Che Aminah by her biological mother Mrs. Hertogh, to be raised. However, Mrs. Hertogh resorted to giving away her daughter because she faced hardships when her husband, Mr. Hertogh, became a prisoner of war (POW) during the Japanese occupation in Indonesia (Yaacob, 2010). Natrah was converted to Islam and brought to Kemaman, Terengganu, where she lived with Che Aminah. In 1949, conflict erupted when Arthur Locke, a British Officer, spotted Natrah at a local school. Natrah's marriage to Mansoor Adabi on 1st August 1950 had put Natrah in the public's eyes. This was because this wedding took place on the third day the court returned Natrah to Che Aminah after her birth parents from the Netherlands lost their custody battle. From the day of her wedding, Natrah's life took a different turn until she was ordered by the court to return to her birth parents in the Netherlands. Natrah's struggle with the law offended the Malay community and its sensitivity resulting in the Natrah's Riot on December 12, 1950 that took the lives of 18 individuals, and 173 were wounded (Abdul Manaf, 2022). The Straits Times played a significant role in disseminating issues about Natrah almost on a daily basis. However, this newspaper had its interest in publishing all articles regarding Natrah. Journalists covered Natrah or Maria's background and wedding until the day of her custody proceeding. The Straits Times often took the opportunity to cover issues related to Natrah to the extent that it appeared to be insensitive towards the Muslims (Perak Secretariat 264/195).



Figure 1: "Love at First Sight" - Maria
Source: The Straits Times (1950, August 4)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study consists of a historical research which is carried out using the qualitative method. Several actions and processes such as critics, analysis, heuristic and historiography were carried out to attain the objectivity in historical research (Abd Wahab et al., 2022). Like other historical research, library search was used to collect primary and secondary sources. The

researchers had visited the National Archive, Malaysian National Library, public university libraries all around the country, and others to gather the sources mentioned. This research depends on official documents such as newspapers, the British records, journals, books, and others. In order to complete this research, the first step was to carry out heuristic process or the collection of sources such as *The Straits Times*, official documents and others which were considered as containing important information on Natrah background and marriage issues. All these sources were analysed in depth since they contained each action, thoughts, and significant information on the focus of this research. Next, the following process involved criticism of the source in which the sources obtained would be compared to other records such as books, journals, academic training, and others. This process is significant to determine the authenticity and validity of the sources obtained: as a result, the researchers would be able to remove inaccurate information which was not related to the research topic. Furthermore, this research would go through the analysis process which involved a summary based on primary and secondary sources. Through this analysis, the researchers would produce synthesis of all sources mentioned and it led to the research findings. Lastly, the process ends at the writing of history or also known as historiography. In conclusion, historical research would be completed if it went through all the processes mentioned (Mohd Sharif et al., 2022).



Figure 2: The introduction of Natrah's and Mansor Adabi background
Source: *The Straits Times* (1950, August 7)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on Natrah has obtained a lot of attention among many researchers before. It is not an unexpected situation since the Natrah tragedy. It could be analysed and discussed from various studies such as law, media, history, sociology and anthropology, gender, etc. There are several findings of Natrah presented in the academic world, and they offer a clear understanding of her conflicts. The story of Natrah has brought many disciplines of studies

together since they share a similar common interest. Even though there are differences in the findings, all information about Natrah was derived from colonial sources and newspapers, which were the main medium of written communication. Seeking balance in information taken from the colonial source at that time, the researcher considered the fact that the British were toppled by the Japanese in the second world war and local sources such as newspapers and magazines from Malaya became the source of information to compare and contrast relevant information. Today, most studies on Natrah reported that she was a Dutch girl, given away to her adopted mother, Che Aminah and later taken to the Netherlands. Some examples include Yaacob (2010), Maideen (1989), Hughes (1980), Hooker (2014), Hussin (2015), Adam (2004), Aljunied (2009), Mohd Firdaus et al. (2021), Mohd Sharif et al. (2019, 2022, 2024), Abdul Manaf & Abdullah (2024) and others. Based on the previous studies listed, the researcher was able to find common ground in any research about her. Based on the previous studies listed, an in-depth study of the sensationalised discourse about Natrah background and marriage issues by The Straits Times which have not been highlighted by researchers.



Figure 4: The introduction of Natrah biological mother, Mrs. Hertogh
Source: The Straits Times (1950, November 16) titled Maria talks to her mother - After eight years

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Natrah's Background

Efforts by The Straits Times to introduce Natrah to the public could be divided into several sections, namely an introduction to Natrah's background, individuals in her life, the predicament she faced, and others. The Straits Times attempted to highlight the story of Natrah through its first strategy, which was to introduce her as Maria Bertha Hertogh. It was published as such since the newspaper had its strategy to attract its readers. The Straits Times had loyal readers among the pro-Western community, especially the whites who lived in Malaya and countries nearby (Abdullah et al., 2024). Referring to Natrah as Maria was also related to the role this newspaper played to socialise the readers with the idea that she was a Christian and not a Muslim. Hence, readers would be compelled to know more about Natrah @ Maria Bertha Hertogh. Only The Straits Times dan Singapore Standard could refer to "Maria Bertha Hertogh" or "Bertha" in their writing (Singapore Standard, July 7, 1950). However, newspapers, press and magazines such as *Utusan Melayu*, *Warta Negara*, *Majlis*,

Qalam, Pengasuh and others used “Nadra”, which was her name after she became a Muslim (Mohd Sharif, 2022).

The Straits Times carefully selected news to be published as the focus during that trying time with a specific intention. News and information about Natrah appeared to have drawn an interest in certain Europeans who resided in Malaya. One of the main interests was the battle for custody by Maria’s birth parents in the Netherlands to win her back. The newspaper was the most accurate channel for conveying effective information and creating togetherness among readers and Natrah’s parents in the Netherlands (Abdullah et al., 2021). The Straits Times began to introduce Natrah to the public on the front page of the article entitled “Secret Wedding: Love at First Sight”- Maria on 4th August 1950. In all, this article had provided sufficient information on Natrah and incidents which were related to her. Through this article, the author or journalist tried to portray Natrah as a 14-year-old Dutch girl married to Mansoor Adabi, a teacher who cycled to teach at school. In addition, the same article featured Natrah’s adopted mother, Che Aminah Binte Mohamed (The Straits Times, August 4, 1950).

This article also included the marriage between Maria and Mansoor Adabi, Che Aminah and her mother-in-law Che Wook Adabi. Moreover, the journalist tried to highlight the custody case for Natrah by her birth parents from the Netherlands. Nevertheless, her parents lost, and the custody seemed to be on Che Aminah’s side. The Straits Times’ next move was to introduce Natrah to attract readers through these events. In the end, it would be able to produce a brand of followers who religiously followed the progress of this case. Moreover, the newspaper had positively responded to efforts made by Maria’s biological parents in the Netherlands to win the custody battle. Due to this loss, the newspaper was adamant about conveying the news about Maria to the public (The Straits Times, August 4, 1950).

On the front page, the picture chosen as a cover had its attraction since it could lead to many interpretations among the readers about Maria. Through an image of a young Dutch girl, Natrah, who lived in the Malay community specifically with Mansoor Adabi, Che Aminah and Che Wook. For the Europeans, it was an image that slapped them with the fact that one of their kinds was living with the Malay community. Readers would speculate and made a conclusion based on their perception about Natrah, who was considered as a child: the newspaper editor highlighted Natrah’s age who was then 14 years old and married when in the Netherlands, girls at that age were not allowed to marry based on the laws applied in the country. Through this article, Maria became widely known to the public, and readers waited with bated breath for each development about her case (Keyse, 2022).

In an article by a journalist in The Straits Times entitled “Give Up Maria”, Husband Told on 5th August 1950, the writer elaborated Maria’s background. Some of the information revealed was Natrah was born on 24th March 1937 and was baptised on 10th April of the same year. It is as though the author insinuated that Natrah was a Christian and not Muslim. Focusing on Natrah’s religion was one of the ways to gain support from the readers, who were mostly Christians. Hence, a religious issue brought forward through the pages of the newspaper was able to unite readers to rally behind Natrah’s biological parents and their custody battle with Che Aminah (The Straits Times, August 5, 1950).

In addition, it was through this article that the writer revealed important information about Maria’s identification card, which was quoted from Mansoor Adabi. Mansoor Adabi had stated that based on Natrah identification card issued in Terengganu, Natrah was 13 years

old (The Straits Times, August 5, 1950). In all, the writer aimed to add to the readers' understanding of the conflicts between Maria and her birth parents. In the article, significant information about Natrah's intention to deliver a letter to her parents in the Netherlands to make them understand her situation and status at that time was included. Based on this written evidence, the writer grabbed every opportunity to sensationalise the plight of Natrah and her parents, who were already abroad at that time. Such strategies aimed to highlight Natrah's issue and gain international attention which would lead to more exposure (Wu, 2021).

The Straits Times, dated 8th August 1950, refused to be left behind when it featured the escalating conflicts between Maria and her birth parents. The writer's attempt at unravelling and exposing the depth of the conflict was found in an article entitled "Maria Will Speak to Parents". In the first paragraph of the article, the writer stated that a young Dutch girl who had lived in the Malay community would make a voice recording in English to be delivered to her parents in the Netherlands. The first voice recording was from Natrah, and the next one was from her husband, Mansoor Adabi. In the recording, Natrah expressed her happiness in living in Malaya, and she had hoped that her birth parents could allow her to lead a normal life with her husband. Mr. John Thiessens Jnr, a reporter with "Life Magazine", had arranged for the voice recordings, and they reached the Netherlands on Saturday of the same week (The Straits Times, August 8, 1950).

Based on this article, the writer seemed to focus more on the predicament between Natrah and her biological parents. Believing that he could create an issue about the real conflict between Natrah and her parents, the writer tried to put her story in the limelight. Consequently, the readers would assume that everything that Natrah said in the voice recording was influenced by her husband, Mansoor Adabi since she was already introduced to the public as a 14-years old Dutch girl. Hence, a young girl of that age could be easily influenced by any strong figures behind her which referred to Mansoor Adabi and Che Aminah. Moreover, the article which covered Natrah and Mansoor Adabi's effort to deliver their voice recordings to the parents was meant to incite hatred among the readers to Mansoor Adabi. Most readers would assume that the whole attempt was curated by Mansoor himself since he was a teacher. It was possible that the idea came from him to prevent Natrah's parents from obtaining custody.

On 9th August 1950, article about Natrah was published, entitled "Govt Takes Maria Case". The Netherlands or "The Dutch Government" was reported to have sponsored the "Netherlands Red Cross" in its effort to bring 13 years old Maria Hertogh back to her parents. Another aspect of Natrah's life included in this article was Maria's wedding to Mansoor Adabi, a Malay teacher. The news was announced in Singapore on Tuesday, 8th August 1950. "Netherlands Red Cross" had informed that The Netherlands' Embassy had taken over Natrah's case. Previously, "Netherlands Red Cross" faced financial challenges in to fund the campaign and the cost of Maria's parents court case to win the custody over Maria and after the organization was supported by the Netherlands government, all the suspended tasks went back into action (The Straits Times, August 9, 1950).

The Straits Times started to introduce the individuals who were involved in assisting Maria parents in their plight to win her back. The move made by The Straits Times in delivering the news indicated that the Netherlands government was involved in Maria's issue. Dissemination of this news indirectly had an impact on the chronology of Natrah's case which had already found its way into the readers' hearts and minds. As a result, local and

international organizations were intrigued to know more about the sensational story of Maria @ Natrah. Therefore, The Straits Times worked harder to push Natrah and any narrative related to her in their newspaper after that.

The Straits Times kept on highlighting Natrah's background to the public and it could be traced in the publication of articles in which an elaborated write up on Natrah appeared on 10th August 1950. These articles were "More Legal Talks on Maria Problem", "Challenge to British Law", and "Nadra's Husband Replies" which were featured on page 7. Natrah's birth documents which was registered at the Indonesian Department of Civil Registration in Tjimahi, Indonesia was also included in for the public to peruse. The document was used by the writer to introduce or rebrand Maria's birth date. It was obvious when the writer's review focused on Natrah's birth date according to the birth certificate which stated that Maria was born on 24th March 1937 (The Straits Times, August 10, 1950).

Through this birth certificate, it was clear that Natrah was 13 years old, and this debunked the previous information given by those who claimed that Natrah was 14 years old in other articles. When this statement was shared with the public, it appeared as though the readers' knowledge of Natrah's age was re-programmed. Furthermore, the image of actual birth certificate convinced the readers that Natrah was indeed, a child. Other than the images of Natrah and her husband, the newspaper published documentations of her birth in Indonesia. As a result, readers were able to trace Natrah's birthplace which was Tjimahi, Indonesia, before she was allegedly given to Che Aminah to be raised as her family. Over time, readers began to develop their trust in The Straits Times and its efforts to share news about Maria: it became the newspaper which advocated the fight for custody of Natrah by her biological parents.

In addition, The Straits Times dated August 19, 1950 published an article entitled "Maria: Aid Promised", in which the writer revealed that on August 18 1950, Mansoor Adabi had received several letters from Pakistan Muslim Social Organization: the organisation had offered support and in the form of legal aid, financial support, advice, and others. It was an organisation which represented the Muslim in Pakistan who expressed their strong support for Natrah and Mansoor Adabi in facing the Dutch government for Natrah's custody. An attempt by the Dutch government to separate Natrah from Mansoor Adabi and her family was a hard blow to the Muslims. Natrah and her adopted family had received a lot of support, and assistance from the Islamic circle such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and individuals (The Straits Times, August 19, 1950). Similar issue was found in The Straits Times on September 15, 1950 entitled "Maria Gets \$423 From Upcountry". From this article, readers learnt that "Nadra Adabi Fund" was founded by Pertubuhan Kebajikan Muslim Singapura. The collection made was meant to assist Mansoor Adabi and Che Aminah throughout their proceedings on Natrah's custody. The Straits Times also reported that the fund was ran by the local Malay newspapers themselves. Even though Kebajikan Muslim Singapura had not started their fundraising initiative, \$250 was given to Mansoor Adabi and Che Aminah from Malay organisations in Singapore (The Straits Times, September 15, 1950). Overall, this indicated that The Straits Times wanted to show that Islamic countries were with Natrah and her adopted family. Revealing this piece of information to the readers was to ensure that they knew the Muslim Malay organisation movements and Islamic countries that pledged support for this cause. This situation showed that The Straits Times was concerned with the Islamic community movement which supported Natrah and was often sceptical of their actions. The Straits Times had tried to gain support from the non-Muslim community in the

Malay Archipelago to give unwavering support for Natrah's parents in the Netherlands and the news published. The impression made was that the Islamic community rallied behind Natrah and her adopted family: this indicated that The Straits Times was desperate to generate a sense of unity among the non-Muslims so that they could together stand behind Natrah's birth parents on the basis of religious significance.

Maria's Matrimonial Report from The Straits Times

Natrah's marriage to Mansoor Adabi was shocking news at that time simply because it happened on the third day of her return to Che Aminah after the Dutch government lost its appeal for custody for the first time. The Straits Times sensationalised the wedding for days on end. The marriage itself could provide some answers and was able to attract the public's attention. Indeed, The Straits Times was smart in its move to announce the wedding to the masses as the news itself could set a range of perceptions among the readers. Through the news of the wedding, the newspaper gained more trust among the readers as it appeared as the daily source of important information on anything about Natrah. The Straits Times made the news about Maria's wedding its headlines such as in the first article entitled "Love At First Sight" – Maria on August 4, 1950. The writer elaborated on the wedding which had recently taken place between Natrah and Mansoor Adabi. It was stated that Maria Bertha Hertogh secretly wed Mansoor Adabi on August 1, 1950 on Tuesday. The wedding took place a few days after Maria returned to her adopted mother, Che Aminah Binte Mohamed, a decision made by the Singapore Court of Appeal (The Straits Times, August 4, 1950).

In addition, the writer stated that this coveted wedding had become a hot topic of discussion among Singaporeans, and it was also one of the most sensational issues in the nation. A comparison was also made between matrimonial norms in The Netherlands and Singapore: under 16 years old young Dutch women who wished to get married must obtain royal and parental consent prior to the wedding. It was the norm among them for ladies before 21 years old. Mansoor Adabi was reported to have been delighted with the union, and he was quoted in the article stating that "It was love at first sight, this is all very embarrassing, I never even told my best friends" (Schrover, 2021).

Che Aminah also expressed her happiness since Maria had married a man that she chose for her. The writer featured a review from Mr. Majid, who declared that "it was not Che Aminah wish that Nadra should get married now, but the girl wanted to, so she let her." Moreover, the writer also included information on Maria and Mansoor Adabi first meeting, which took place when Mansoor Adabi accompanied Che Aminah to York Hill Welfare House (Schrover, 2021). Referring to the entire article, clear and precise information on Natrah and Mansoor Adabi wedding was available in the write-ups. It was the wedding that stole the limelight of main issues in The Straits Times on that fateful day, and the news shocked the party which had lost custody for Natrah. The wedding was a union that brought so much pain into Natrah's life. This was due to the news of her marriage was widely disseminated by the newspapers in Malaya including The Straits Times: the exposure only managed to open the doors for many others to meddle into her life. The Straits Times in its article "Give Up Maria Husband Told" on August 5, 1950 continued to discuss Natrah's wedding to Mansoor Adabi. According to the article, Mansoor Adabi had received a letter from Natrah's birth parents' representative from The Netherlands to send Natrah to the Dutch Consulate before 10th August 1950. The letter contained an order which annulled the wedding of Natrah to Mansoor Adabi. Mansoor Adabi in his reply had stated "that Maria was a Muslim woman now, she had

married him willingly, and so no one can claim her either as their child or relative” (The Straits Times, August 5, 1950).

In addition, the article reported that news of Natrah’s wedding had become the talk of the town in The Netherlands, and the issue was widely publicised in the media through radio and newspaper reports. Mansoor Adabi informed The Straits Times that her marriage to Natrah was conducted in the presence of 16 Muslim and non-Muslim witnesses. Reception was planned on August 13, 1950 only close relatives and friends were invited. Mansoor Adabi was quoted in this article as saying “It will be quiet and will be attended only by close friends and relatives”. It was apparent that The Straits Times constantly seek sensational issues regarding Natrah’s wedding to keep producing their daily reports. Information which was conveyed in the article clearly indicated that Natrah’s marriage was central issues to The Straits Times. The Straits Times became the main source of information to the public. Its move to keep on publishing reports about the marriage from time to time would serve as a wake-up call to the losing party which needed to be resilient and united in getting Natrah back in their arms again (The Straits Times, August 5, 1950).

On August 6, 1950, The Sunday Times in its article entitled “Band Played at Maria’s Party” continued to sensationalise the Natrah’s marriage to the public. It was reported that a music band was part of the celebration of the wedding where close family members and friends were gathered to honour the couple. Well wishes and presents poured in for the newlyweds. The writer described Maria in a red Baju Kurung and appeared to be very happy with the wedding (The Straits Times, August 6, 1950). Undeniably by reporting the wedding in great details, The Straits Times had sparked hatred, and confusion among the readers who were well-aware that as Natrah and her husband were basking in their newfound happiness, her parents were suffering from the losing the custody in the first round. It was a situation which was subtly used by The Straits Times to paint a negative image of Natrah and her husband who were celebrating their marriage as portrayed in the media. Some of the readers might be affected by this situation, and it could be stated that the newspaper was adamant to get in the way of this Islamic couple marriage by creating a religious polemic.

The Straits Times article on 10th August 1950 entitled “Nadra’s Husband Replies” revolved around her marriage. In this article, the writer included a reply from Mansoor Adabi for a letter sent by Mr. A. Corvin Romanski, and a columnist in The Straits Times. In the letter, Mansoor Adabi had stated the details about his marriage. He explained that his marriage to Natrah was not arranged by anybody, but it was based on mutual feelings that both of them had on each other without any influence. Publishing the letters indicated that The Straits Times aimed to create negative judgement towards the wedding since Mansoor Adabi’s statements could result in negative perceptions about the marriage. Readers might find it hard to believe in Mansoor Adabi since a 13-year-old girl was still considered a child and could be easily influenced. If this issue persisted, more hatred would be generated among the readers. Should that happen, The Straits Times’ cunning strategy had worked (The Straits Times, August 10, 1950).

Next, The Straits Times grew bolder when it published an article which centred on marriage especially Natrah’s. Even though the article published in their newspaper did not specifically refer to any individuals, it was obvious that the discussion revolved around the sensational wedding of Natrah and Mansoor Adabi. An example of this could be found in an article entitled “Control Child Marriages Demand in Singapore” on August 21, 1950. It explained that the Singaporean government was going to enact a new law to reduce child

marriage in its vicinity. Implementation of this new law was done before Natrah's wedding, but it was included in the marital laws of the Christians. It was a law which was also applicable to all Christians who live in countries in which Christian was not the official religion (The Straits Times, 1950, August 21).

As for the Hindu Religious Advisory Board, it wanted to review the Hindu marital laws to be used in the colonies. Mr. Pakirisamy who was the President of the board had informed The Straits Times that "we are now drafting legislation to raise the marriageable age for Hindus and we expect to be able to submit this to government before long". Discussion on marital laws was extended to the implementation of Islamic marital laws to be used in the colonies as well. President of Islamic Advisory Board, Mr. Alsogoff informed that, the matter would be brought up in the next meeting. He told The Straits Times "my view is that we should follow Egypt's example, and fix the marriage age of Muslim girls under statutory law" (The Straits Times, 1950, August 21).

Mr Alsogoff also believed that existing marital law had stated that 16 was the minimum age for Muslim girls to get married in Singapore. Based on the article published by The Straits Times which discussed child marriage, Natrah's marriage had a great implication on the legal system which was used in the colonies at that time. As a reaction to the controversial wedding, the British colony had the right to amend the marital law which had been used for so long. Relevant authorities would like to prevent the same child marriage to happen again in the British colony. Indirectly, the authority's concern over the issue indicated that Natrah's marriage had managed to reach the attention of the current leaders (The Straits Times, 1950, August 21). As child marriage was the main focus of the article, it was apparent that The Straits Times attempted to socialize the readers by stating that Natrah was still a child when she became a wife to Mansoor Adabi. Undeniably, the perception was crucial to influence readers since it was the point of their discussion in the news regarding the marriage, almost on a daily basis. Therefore, it went without saying that they did get the readers' attention by asking the right questions, and providing the accurate answers when it came to the issue pertaining Natrah's wedding.

On August 23, 1950, The Straits Times had again sensationalized child marriage through an article entitled "Marriage of Minor is Alleged". In the article, the writer cited a case from Batu Pahat Johor Court on the marriage of Kathi Haji Ahmad who wed an under 15 years old girl, and it was done via suspended marriage contract commonly known as *Nikah Gantung*. Discussion on this issue was based on Islamic perspective which stated that *Nikah Gantung* was not encouraged in Islam (The Straits Times, August 23, 1950). Going through the essence of this article, it was definitely related to Natrah's marriage. It was part of an effort by The Straits Times to feed information regarding the situation of child marriage which happened in Malaya (Trakic & Tajuddin, 2021). For The Straits Times, the effort had created negative understanding of the Muslim Malay weddings in Malaya: that many of them advocated child marriages. Such blatant act by The Straits Times had ruffled some feathers among the Malay community who are Muslims. It was uncalled for when The Straits Times published an article which was indirectly meant to connect the issue to Natrah and Mansoor Adabi. These attempts at unravelling other similar cases which were like Natrah's wedding indicated that some people at the newspaper agency did not fully understand Islamic teachings. Moreover, the articles published with regard to Natrah, and her issues showed that the newspaper had crossed the boundary of Malay culture and custom when it was clear that

the British had agreed not to meddle in local issues such as the custom and religion, particularly Islam when they colonized Malaya (Muslim, 2014).

The Straits Times in its article “Marriage in Islam” on September 5, 1950 had seriously discussed marriage from the perspective of Islam. With the article, the editor added an image of married Muslim Malay woman who was deep in thoughts. Overall, this article discussed in detail Islamic marriage which referred to a marriage in Muslim Malay community in Malaya and other colonies. The focus in this article was the minimum age of marriage, understanding with the Guardian or Wali, life after marriage, and others. Having given a thorough discussion on marriage and Islam, The Straits Times had attempted to convey information to the readers with regard to this issue (The Straits Times, 1950, September 5; Mohd Sharif et al., 2021).

Readers who were non-Muslim might be confused with the concept of marriage in Islam since they were given the idea that there were Muslim matrimony which did not comply with the actual Islamic teachings. One example of marriage which did not adhere to the marital laws in Islam was the marriage of Natrah and Mansoor Adabi. As a result, the news generated negative reactions among readers, and they looked down and degraded Natrah’s marriage. Those negative reactions affected the Malays who were Muslims, and it was a terrible blow to them. Meanwhile, The Straits Times became bolder, and it continues to cover issues pertaining custom, culture and beliefs of the Malays through daily reports in their newspaper.

The Straits Times in “Muslim to Discuss Brides’ Ages” published on September 9, 1950 had exposed several incidents which took place in the Islamic organization in relation to the marital practices in Malaya, and the colonies. Muslim Women Welfare Organization had announced that it would hold a large scale meeting with Islamic organisations in Singapore, the objective was to discuss the minimum age for Muslim women to get married. Che Zahrah Noor Mohammad, who was the President, had informed The Straits Times that the meeting would be held to discuss matters pertaining enactment of legislation to determine the minimum age for marriage for the Muslims in Malaya or Singapore to prevent divorce cases among young couples or spouses. She added that the regulation discussed would not be limited to couples who planned to get married, but it also involved their parents (The Straits Times, 1950, September 9).

Overall, this article proved that The Straits Times had taken a brilliant step in using this report, and linked it to the controversial marriage of Natrah and her husband, Mansoor Adabi. The report on this issue showed that there was an implication that resulted from Natrah’s marriage: one of them was it caught the attention of Islamic organisations in Malaya and Singapore. It further convinced the readers that the matrimonial union between Natrah and Mansoor Adabi did not adhere to the actual Islamic teachings. By then, the readers had accepted this observation, and it dominated their understanding of the issue. Hence, The Straits Times continued to seek for information which according to the press, most valuable to portray the marriage of Maria and Mansoor Adabi to the public.

The Straits Times in another article entitled “Marriage Still Business Deal” published on September 25, 1950, still focused on the issue of marriage. In all, the article discussed the issue of matrimony based on the concept of arranged marriage. Furthermore, the elaboration touched on the scenario of marriage among working individuals which were arranged by their respective families (The Straits Times, September 25, 1950). Based on data from Annual Report of Negeri Sembilan Plantation Workers’ Union, it was stated that “we are discouraging these ‘business deal’, and persuading the workers to understand the real matrimonial

relationship. It is admittedly a very big task, requires careful handling. Our motto in this case is 'Slow and Steady'. Conclusively, this article clearly related to Natrah or Maria's marriage because The Straits Times through their articles had assumed that Maria's marriage was pre-arranged by the families which had planned it (Atkins, 2021). The Straits Times stretched this far to convey the idea to the readers that Natrah's marriage to Mansoor Adabi was arranged by their respective families, and this statement defied the Mansoor Adabi's claim that it was based on mutual attraction. Devious strategy employed by The Straits Times was meant to incite hatred among the readers towards the marriage. Their attempts were to ensure that readers would gain undivided trust in their reports about Natrah (The Straits Times, September 25, 1950).

As for the perception that Natrah was still a child when she got married caught the attention of Singapore Woman Organization. This was mentioned in The Straits Times through an article entitled "Marriages Under 16 Are Unfair" published on September 29, 1950. In this article, Che Azizah Jaffar was interviewed, and she was the Principal for Sekolah Sains Domestic, Johor Bahru, and members of Johor Consulate. She believed that the matrimonial situation in Malaya, and the colonies were unfair as she shared her thought which was "It is very unfair to allow any child under 16 years of age to be married". In addition, she stated they would stage a demonstration about child marriage to protect Malay girls, and obtain support from the men. She stated that "Child marriages would hardly ever take place, but for the encouragement given by the *kathis*, and *ulemas*" (The Straits Times, 1950, September 29).

The emphasis on child marriage in the whole article signified the determination of The Straits Times to influence the readers that there was a conflict in Natrah and Mansoor Adabi's marriage. By interviewing Singapore Woman Organization, the newspaper had progressed in disseminating some additional ideas in relation to the controversial wedding. Singapore Woman Organization's objection of child marriage which was rampant in Malaya was not surprising since everywhere around the world, including Malaya was faced with the spread of forceful feminist movements in fighting for women's rights that involved daily life issues (Suhaizad et al., 2021). In relation to the movement, Singapore Woman Organization's rejection of child marriage in Malaya was a challenge to the patriarchal monopoly which was common in the society (Fee, 2021). Child marriages was the norm since it was the male figure in every traditional family which made the decision, and the rights of the female family members were denied (Che Ya, 2009). The objection of child marriage by this organization had assured the readers that issues, and conflicts which were extensively discussed in The Straits Times regarding Natrah's marriage was an issue which benefited one party, and many unwanted events as well as morale issues surfaced. It was clear that the marriage was wrong from the perspective of the norms in human lives.

The Straits Times grew bolder and continued to discuss the traditional Malay wedding practice which indirectly mocking Natrah's marriage to Mansoor Adabi. This was exemplified in an article entitled "Finished with Men' They Say, Child Brides Tell Tragic Stories" published on 1st October 1950. It was derived from the interviews conducted by The Straits Times with young women who went through child marriages and later divorced while they were still young. These young women were brought to The Straits Times by Che Zaharah to be interviewed. Inclusive in the article were pictures of these ladies namely Hamida, Rugayah, and Endon. Based on the information provided by Hamida who was 19 years old at that time, at 13, she was married to a man who was 20 years old. The marriage lasted for a week, and she was later divorced by the husband. After that, she remarried, and this time, her husband

was a 30 years old man who was a driver. In 1949, they were divorced, and their two children were left with her to raise alone (The Straits Times, October 1, 1950).

As for Rugayah, she was only 14 when she first got married, and since then she had gone through three marriages. Endon was also 14 years old when her parents married her off after they arranged it for her. She stated that her marriage did not last, and left her broken hearted, they couple went separate ways. It was indeed a bold move by The Straits Times which was made possible through the collaboration with Che Zaharah Noor Mohamed who was the President of Malay Women Welfare and Head of Women Movement (Ketua Angkatan Wanita) in Singapore. The Straits Times seemed desperate to come out with such exposure as it needed to convince the readers that Maria's marriage to Mansoor Adabi was based on similar grounds, just like the unfortunate girls. Sharing of those failed marriages which started as child marriages was The Straits Times secret weapon to invite modern Malays to go against child marriages, and this was linked to Maria's or Natrah's wedding as they had read in the reports. In addition, it was a move which further added sensation to Maria's marriage. Even though the writer did not name any individuals, research had found that these articles were written in relation to the controversial union between Maria and her husband. Hence, the way The Straits Times approached this issue had challenged the Malay community's sensitivity since the interviewees were all young Malay women who had experienced child marriages. Constant publication of articles in this matter by The Straits Times had led to the emergence of the women's voice. Conservative Malay community would assume that The Straits Times had influenced the Malay women to go against all common practices in matrimony (The Straits Times, October 1, 1950).

CONCLUSION

This research found that this newspaper attempted to highlight the story of Natrah through Natrah background and marriage issues as a strategy to attract the reader's attention. This research is seen to provide in-depth analysis related to Natrah background and marriage issues that is not given another research. As an official colonial newspaper, The Straits Times approach in representing the British regarding issues such as Islam and the Malay was in line with the Soviet Media Theory (Harmonis, 2022). It was obvious that The Straits Times played the role of the colonial instrument as listed in the authoritarian theory. The fact that The Straits Times was owned by the colonial advocated the said theory. Moreover, The Straits Times publications were not focused on profit-making but rather the production of news were strictly controlled, and little freedom was given to the press. Based on the news reported by this newspaper about Natrah, it was apparent that they were free to highlight any truths which were deemed as valid by the government of the day. For the press, the public required guidance and they must not be exposed to news against the government. Only information and ideas chosen and approved by the government could reach the public through official government media. It goes without saying Islam, and the Malay community failed to protect Natrah since the court had asked her to return to her birth parents from the Netherlands. From another aspect, Natrah's tragedy served as a lesson for the colonials as they witnessed the Muslims around the world united and made Malaya their focal point after the end of World War Two.

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