Malay Women’s Activities between 1930 and 1948: Hidden Dynamics behind the Nation-Building of Malaya*

Byungkuk Soh**

I. Introduction

After his 1946 tour throughout Malaya, Capt. Gammons recorded his impression of the political awareness among Malay women in the protest against the Malayan Union:

The most impressive event was the women's role in the great national movement. While I stayed in Malaya during 14 years, I seldom had talked to a Malay woman. But nowadays, they turned up on a political platform and made speeches; ladies who were not married yet made speeches at the microphone. ... All these things happened in a short period of only six months.1)

* This work was supported by Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2012. It was presented to the International Conference on ‘Southeast Asian Culture: Trends and Challenges’ held at State University of Surabaya in July 16, 2012

** Professor, Department of Malay–Indonesian Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul

1) British Malaya, August 1946.
In order to explain the sudden flare-up of the political awareness among Malay women, scholars have looked to the Japanese period. In his article, "The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: Interruption or Transformation?" Yoji Akashi argues: Japanese Occupation brought about a psychological, social, and political transformation of a 'land which was a political backwater', and changed it 'into a political maelstrom'.  

As far as Malay women's activities are concerned, a succinct example of what might be called the interruption school's interpretation is found in Virginia H. Dancz's study. In her book, *Women and Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia*, the author maintains:

The Japanese Occupation of Malaya speeded the process by which Malay women increased their role in Malay society. ... Malay language magazines appeared, such as *Fajar Asia* (Asian Dawn) and *Semangat Asia* (Spirit of Asia), which urged women to do useful work and help their race and country. ... Malay women were encouraged to fill the positions which the men vacated. Due to this urging, ... Malay women by the thousands accepted work outside the home. They worked not only in the fields, but as teachers, clerks, telephone operators and traders.

These interpretations are accurate, to some extent. Indeed, the national awareness among Malay women experienced slow