The Odyssey tells the story of the same Greek hero, Odysseus, who tried to sail back to his home in Ithaca after the Trojan War, but was confronted with many obstacles that delayed his homecoming for 10 years. His journey was fraught with incredible tales of sympathetic and treacherous gods—some of whom were with him and some against him; of goddesses and strange creatures of the sea who would tempt him with seductive pleasures of heaven and deceitful voice of the ocean; of evil men who were trying to vie for his wife’s attention as suitors to replace him as master of his great estate; of awesome monsters who were terrible to behold; and of his ability to survive the great journey home based on his cunning and wits (Lombardo, 2000).

Initially, he was a reluctant member of the Greek’s invading army that was assembled to punish Paris, The Trojan prince who eloped with Helen, Queen of Menelaus of Sparta, but was forced to go despite his desire to be with his wife Penelope and their month-old son Telemachus. According to Hoena (2004), the odyssey is a quest myth where the protagonist had to perform incredibly painful tasks in order to achieve his objective. It is also a tale of encouragement where we are taught never to give up even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Harold Bloom (2007) in his illuminating book on Homer’s Odyssey discusses several important elements in the epic poem: the ritualistic strands in Odysseus’ homecoming; the theme of endurance as a trait of heroism; the narratives of wandering; and the feminist perspective of the narratives.

This paper will discuss the 4 aforementioned elements in light of Tamar Jalil’s Bercakap Dengan Jin or Discourse with the Jinn. The stories are some of the elements that make the series of stories appeal to its die-hard fans. The series of stories simply had an uncanny effect on the Malay psyche. In its own unique way, the series of stories is akin to a modern-day Malay odyssey.
THE NARRATIVES OF WANDERING

Narrative is a natural part of human life. All of us are involved in narrative as we engage in conversation with a friend; talk to our teachers or employers; enjoy what we read of events unfolding in a work of fiction; or watch a movie. According to Abbott (2008), narrative is “the representation of an event or a series of events” (p.12). It is different from exposition or description in that it has element of action in it. Several writers have written extensively on the significance of the narrative in movies and fiction (Adami, Bellino, & Mengozzi, 2017; Audley-Miller & Dignas, 2018; Blum-Reid, 2016; Di Gennaro, 2015; Reinders, 2016). And Homer’s Odyssey is replete with action involving humans, gods, demi-gods and creatures of different shapes and sizes. The first part tells the story of Telemachus as he frantically searched for his father, traversed the land without fear or favour. It is God who metes out rewards to those who work in his path. In the Malay psyche, the need to help others without expecting any reward in return except that from God is the ultimate sacrifice.

Another interesting element in the story is the prevalence of real-life events and characters. Take this particular scene as an example:

Masa di rumah Dukun Nong, Datuk dijemput oleh seorang lelaki ke Cameron Highlands lagi sekali untuk mencari seorang saudagar sutera dari Thailand yang berbangsa Amerika dan didapati hilang ketika berjalan mengambil angin di kawasan sebuah banglo. Datuk mencari saudagar itu bersama dengan pasukan keselamatan. [When we were at Dukun Nong’s house, Grandfather was invited by a man to go to Cameron Highlands once again to search for a silk trader from Thailand of American descent who went missing while traipsing around a bungalow area. Grandfather went searching for the missing trader together with members of the security forces] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.2).

Dukun Nong is a real-life figure who was appointed Royal Healer by the Sultan of Pahang and died in the seventies. The missing trader alludes to Jim Thompson, an American expatriate living in Thailand and was classified as missing in Cameron Highlands in 1967 (“Misteri Jim Thompson”, 2015). There are numerous allusions to other real-life characters and events in the story which firmly anchors the narrative as one that contains elements of truth and not pure fantasy alone. Prior to mentioning the scene about Jim Thompson’s disappearance, readers are told of how Tamar’s grandfather went to Cameron Highlands to investigate large man-like apes which roamed the highland region and wreaking havoc on an Orang Asli or aborigines’ settlement. Tamar’s grandfather could not really defeat these humanoid primates; they just fled into the hinterland after an ensuing confrontation. Another example of a well-known real-life character mentioned in the story is Pendekar Meor Abdul Rahman:

Datuk dan saya terus naik bas ke Kampung Air Kuning. Rumah yang kami tuju ialah sebuah rumah berbumbung
he performed an exorcism or fight evil the supernatural way.
Here is one example where he prepared himself for battle
against evil, in this case a gang of thieves who would use
an old skull as part of their ritual to hypnotize their victims:
Malam itu Datu berusaha untuk memberkas ketua pukau.
Dia berazam untuk menangkap ketua pukau itu dan mahu
menasihatinya supaya jangan menersukur kerja yang boleh
menyusahkan orang ramai. Datuk mahu menasihatkan ketua
pukau itu supaya mencari rezeki yang halal. Datuk memben-
mangkan kain hitam di tengah ruang pondok. Dia meletakkan
keris panjang di tengah kain. Mangkuk putih yang berisi
air ditempatkan di buci kain hitam sebelah kanan. Buci sebe-
lah kiri diletakkan tempurung serta sabut. Datuk berdiri tegak
menghadapi benda-benda itu semuanya. Datuk memakai seluar
hitam serta baju hitam dan pinggangnya diikat kain merah.
Kepala diiliti dengan kain kuning. Datuk berdiri sambil me-
meluk tubuh. Datuk terus membara surah Al-Iqra’ hingga
tamatan. [That night grandfather strove to apprehend the
gang leader. He was determined to apprehend the gang leader
and advise him not to further engage in an act that had caused
much grievance to others. Grandfather wanted to advise the
man to take up a permissible profession.

Grandfather spread a piece of black cloth in the middle
of the hut. He placed a long kris in the middle of the cloth.
A white bowl filled with water was placed on the right-hand
corner of the black cloth. A coconut frond and some husks
were placed on the left-hand corner of the cloth. Grandfa-
ther stood up straight, facing the things he had prepared. He
wore dark pants and shirt, his waist was wound a piece of
black cloth. A white bowl filled with water was placed on the
right-hand corner of the cloth. Grandfather would not allow
him to take up a permissible profession.

RITUALISTIC STRANDS OF THE STORY

The Malay psyche is very much governed by beliefs in the
supernatural but wrought within the folds of Islamic teach-
ings. Islam teaches its followers that other-worldly beings
exist; in fact, they co-exist with Man in this ephemeral world
from the time Adam and Eve were cast out of Heaven due to
their insubordination not to eat the forbidden fruit. Accomp-
panying them in this world are Iblis and his entourage of
jinn. If Shakespeare sees this world as a stage where man
struts his stuff then Islam sees terra firma as a place where
there is constant struggle between Man and his nemesis Iblis,
the former having determinate shape and form and prone to
forgetfulness, as the name “insan” implies in Arabic, while
the latter amorphous, deceitful and is always in hiding, as the
Arabic root word “Jann” denotes. In the opening scene of the
first series in the collection of stories we are told:

Datuk tidak menembak sebarangan pada binatang-bina-
tang buruannya. Dia akan memilih tepat di kening di antara
dua-dua kening binatang itu. Dan setiap kali datuk ma-
suk ke hutan dia akan memulakan langkah kaki kiri dahulu.
Kedua belah tumitnya tidak memijak bumi, kecuali sesudah
lima langkah melangkah. Lepas itu datuk berhenti dia memba-
cam sesuatu, lalu mematih ranting kayu yang berada di bawah
ekikau kanannya. Dilemparkannya sebelah kiri [Grandfather
wouldn’t shoot wantonly at the games. He would shoot them
for being faithful followers of the series. In Homer’s
Odyssey the first four books tell of Telemachus’ journey to
various parts of Greece and it is only after that Odysseus
began his narration.

THEME OF ENDURANCE AS A MODE OF
HEROISM

Odysseus is definitely one of ancient Greeks’ most famous
heroes. Many books have been written to commemorate
his traits as a hero (Barnouw, 2004; Fajardo-Acosta, 1990;
Houston, 1992; Montiglio, 2011; Swain, 2014). In a very
early article published in 1922 in the English Journal, Od-
ysseus is described as a military hero “who ranks far below
Achilles, but he is a much greater figure-one who can en-
dure without despair even the disfavour of the gods and can
by strength of will and the guidance of reason eventually
triumph against unbelievable odds” (The Study Club, 1922,
p.115). Tamar’s grandfather Long Piah is definitely no mili-
tary hero, but his exploits against the evil jinns has endeared
him to such a huge cadre of readers that the horror serials
managed to weather the stormy sea of print for more than
In the Malay psyche, it is believed that not every man has the power to fight evil; only those who steadfastly carry out their obligation as Muslims will be rewarded by God with powers that equal or exceed those of Iblis and his followers. A man like Tamar’s grandfather is one of those who have the ability to mediate between man and God and deliver the much-needed help in the fight against evil. Normally a person who is accorded the ability to do this is called Bomoh. According to Drake (2003), the Bomoh “mediates between the world of reality and the world of spirits… Bomohs are knowledgeable of bringing about energetic shifts in the client’s environment, thereby, facilitating a total healing process” (p.127). And in the Malay psyche this is all possible only if Gods wills it; if not the healing process will not be efficacious. But Tamar’s grandfather is one who does not like to be referred to as a Bomoh since it connotes one who partakes in the power of the supernatural rather than God’s. In a scene when someone calls him a Bomoh, Tamar says:

Datuk terdiam, tahu Datuk tidak berapa senang kalau dia di panggil pawang atau bomoh. Itu bukanlah cita-citanya, tetapi kalau dia dipanggil pemburu atau tok buru, dia memang tidak menolak [Grandfather was reticent; I knew he was not comfortable when someone called him a pawang or Bomoh. That was not his calling, but if someone called him a hunter or master hunter, he wouldn’t mind] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.16).

According to Tamar, his grandfather was an extremely pious man who would recite the Quran every day, perform supererogatory prayers and fast. His training to become one who was able to confront evil began early in life in Jambi, Sumatera under the tutelage of his mentor. The ability to heal and confront evil was gained through years of training and observing the proper practices of Islam. This is something which is deeply entrenched in the Malay psyche where if one desires to become a faith healer then he must submit himself completely to the ways of Islam. This sounds simple, but in reality it is something that only the steadfast and committed can do. And the collection of stories reinforces this belief, ergo its drawing power.

In the Malay psyche, humans are considered frail in comparison to Iblis and his followers from amongst the jinns. This is what the Quran says about Jins: “Indeed We created man from dried clay of black smooth mud. And We created the Jinn before that from the smokeless flame of fire” (Quran 15:26-27). The Quran also tells us that the jinns have been endowed with great power and ability of which humans do not. One of the abilities granted by God to them is great speed. In the story when a prominent leader among the Jinns promised King Solomon that it would only take him a shorter time than that taken by someone standing from his sitting place to bring the throne of Sheba to Jerusalem, and when Solomon saw it placed before him, “he said: this is by the Grace of my Lord”(Quran 27:39-40).

Humans definitely do not possess such magnificent power except for those who are considered Wali Allah or one who is close to God and whose wishes shall be granted by God, like a saint. Would Tamar’s grandfather be accorded such a coveted appellation? The collection of stories does carry that undertone but we are also told that his grandfather did suffer from occasional bodily suffering in his fight against evil:

Dua bulan berselang sesudah peristiwa itu, datuk telah diserang penyakit, seluruh badannya sakit dan beng-kak-bengkak. Anak cucu membawa datuk ke klinik kerajaan dan swasta, tapi sakit datuk tidak juga mahu hilang.[Two months after the incident, Grandfather was inflicted with a malady; his whole body was aching and swollen. His prophecies took him to see both private and government doctors but his sickness did not abate] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S. 5)

This motif of the frailty of human nature could be one of the reasons why the story endears itself greatly to its cadre of readers. If someone like Tamar’s grandfather can suffer bodily harm then those who do not possess his abilities can suffer even more. And Tamar’s grandfather definitely displayed great courage and endurance to be able to stand up against evil again and again without fail despite being inflicted with bodily harm. This is a trait of heroism that no ordinary man possesses.

FEMINIST ROLE IN THE STORY

Several female characters appear in the Odyssey, the most notable being Penelope, Odysseus’ wife. Barbara Clayton (2004) says that Homer’s Iliad is more of a story for men than for women because it depicts the heroics and exploits of men on the battlefield, but in the Odyssey “powerful females are prominently featured” (p.2). Despite coming under tremendous pressure to marry one of the many suitors that thronged her palace she stoically stood firm in her decision to wait for her husband’s return. She displayed what Clayton (2004) called metis or “the like-mindedness that establishes parity with Odysseus” (p.15).

Other important female characters in the Odyssey are Athena, Zeus’ daughter and Goddess of Wisdom and War, who came to Telemachus disguised as a Mentor and prod-ded him to start his task of finding out what happened to Odysseus—she was the one who really started the ball rolling in the epic poem; Calypso the nymph of Ogygia who detained Odysseus as her lover on her island kingdom for seven years before granting him his freedom; Circe the beautiful goddess-enchantress who not only became Odysseus’ lover but also helped him with knowledge of several important rites and rituals that enabled Odysseus to travel to Hades for much needed information and supplies for him and his men to reach Ithaca; other female characters are the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis, who were depicted as thoroughly evil beings (Houston, 1992).

Tamar Jalis’ Bercakap Dengan Jin is not without its fair share of good, strong women and femme evil incarnates. Like Odysseus’ Penelope, Long Piah’s wife, whom Tamar identified only as Nenek or Grandmother, is a woman who can be described as loving, caring and strong. Take as an example:

Nenek pun menceritakan pada anak cucu, sepanjang bulan puasa yang lalu, datuk tidak pergi turun memburu, ia banyak menghabiskan masanya di kampung orang buni-
an, bersama isteri barunya., Setiap kali datuk pulang, ia membawa buah tangan untuk nenek yang dibekalkan oleh orang bunian. Sebagai isteri yang setia, nenek tidak pernah bertanya tentang isteri muda datuk. Nenek tahu, kalau ditanya dan disoaljawab nanti datuk nak darah, akiatnya akan berlaku pertengkaran.[Grandmother told her proge

nies that during the whole of the previous fasting month Grandfather did not go hunting; he was idling his time at the home of his other wife, a forest nymph, in her village. Every time he came back he would bring with him goodies for Grandmother provided by the nymph fairy. As a devoted wife Grandmother never asked Grandfather about his other wife. She knew that Grandfather would be angry if she asked him about her, and this would lead to heated argument](Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.4)

This scene speaks volume about her patience, degree of tolerance and matrimonial bonds. In many parts of the story Tamar would always speak of her metis or cleverness, equaling that of Odysseus’ Penelope. His Grandfather’s other wife, the forest nymph is described by Tamar as a figure cloaked in a veil of mystery:

Bila hari sudah remang-remang senja, datuk pun meng-hentakkan kakinya ke bumi. Seluruh kawasan itu berbau harum. Saya terpandangkan bayang orang perempuan yang tidak begitu jelas duduk bersimpuh di hadapan datuk.

Tetapi melihat gaya perempuan itu duduk dan cara dia bertudung, saya tak pernah perempuan itu adalah isteri muda datuk iaitu, orang bunian. Perempuan itu bercakap dengan datuk. Saya tidak dapat menangkap dengan jelas apa yang diperkatakan oleh datuk dengan perempuan itu. Dengan sekelip mata perempuan itu hilang.[When dusk was about to come, Grandfather stomped his foot on the ground. The whole area smelled wonderful. I saw the silhouette of a woman sitting demurely in front of Grandfather. But looking at the way she sat and the veil she was wearing I was confident that it was his forest nymph wife. She spoke to him but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. And in a blink and she was gone] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.35)

Tamar would describe her as always wearing the veil and every time she came the whole place would be filled with a most beautiful smell. No doubt she was the one who would provide his Grandfather with valuable assistance when the need arose or whenever he was in dire straits. It sometimes takes otherworldly beings to assist one in one’s fight against creatures that cannot be seen with the naked eyes. This is reminiscent of Tolkien’s Lady Galadriel and Arien.

Bercakap Dengan Jin is not short of its share of evil women or femme-like evils. There are many, but the strongest and vilest goes by the name of Halijah Supandi or Bo

moh Munah Supandi. Readers are introduced to her when Tamar’s Grandfather was attacked by a black-clad figure in Series 151. He was one of Munah Supandi’s disciples. The female Bomoh Munah Supandi could be described as evil incarnate that had defeated other male Bomohs and she came to rule at the top of the echelon. The story that revolves around her begins with Series 151 and continues until Series 165. The number of series dedicated to confronting and defeating this vile female bomoh is testimony enough of her dark powers.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has sought to show that the extremely popular supernatural thriller narrated by Tamar Jalis Bercakap Dengan Jin is a journey undertaken by a teenager and his grandfather, a faith healer and ghost buster par excellence, to many parts of Malaysia and Indonesia to help those who were in dire needs of assistance to combat evil; for the teenager it is a coming-of-age travel experience, and for the grandfather it is a journey that was done to fulfill his social and moral obligation as a Muslim and whose deeds were done with gratis. Their journey is one fantastic series of story that straddles the line between the real and the bizarre. It was in print for more than 23 years and has gathered a huge following of die-hard fans that have set up blogs to keep memories of the stories alive. The paper draws parallel to Homer’s Odyssey, not to show how one imitates the other, but to showcase how the two contain elements that are similar to one another. Homer’s Odyssey contains elements of the narratives of wandering, a ritualistic strand, the theme of endurance as a mode of heroism, and a strong cast of feminist characters who help carry the story forward. Likewise, Tamar Jalis’ Bercakap Dengan Jin contains all these elements albeit hailing from a different time and cultural space. Both stories have enlivened the literary landscape of their respective tradition and created public interest in things obscure and arcane. Homer’s Odyssey has inspired well-known modern writers like James Joyce, Margaret Atwood, and Charles Frazier to write their version of the epic poem but in the form of the novels. Bercakap Dengan Jin has definitely set a standard that would be hard to follow for those who want to write horror fiction in the Malay tradition. Hitherto, no other writers have managed to command such a huge following despite their attempt to write stories that offer a mimetic reproduction of the series. They would all seem to pale in comparison to it.

**REFERENCES**


