

CAREER PROFILE

Dato' Dr Wazir Jahan Karim B.Soc.Sc (Singapore)M.Phil,PhD
(LSE: LONDON ;) LIFE FELLOW, CAMBRIDGE



Wazir Jahan is an economic anthropologist, Executive Director Distinguished Fellow and Founder of the Academy of *Socio-Economic Research and Analysis [ASERA]* .She is currently a Life Fellow of Clare Hall, U. of Cambridge. ASERA is a global think-tank and research collective comprising professors and professionals from universities and organisations from the developed and developing world and focuses on global research and discourse analysis to promote democracy, social equality and justice.

Wazir Jahan Karim obtained her undergraduate degree in Social Sciences at the University of Singapore (now the National University of Singapore) in 1972. She obtained her Master's in Economic Anthropology in 1974 and Doctorate in Anthropology at the *London School of Economics and Political Sciences*, University of London in 1977. She is the founder of Gender Studies in Malaysia (KANITA, USM: 1978-2001) and Founding Director of the *Women's Development Research Centre* at *Universiti Sains Malaysia(USM)* where she held the post from 2001-2004. She pioneered Gender Studies in rural Malaysia by directing the first field based applied economic anthropological research programme on Women and Children (KANITA) from [1978-1985];[1989- 2001], at a time when women's issues and gender theories and methodologies were marginalised from mainstream discourses in the academe . This programme pioneered the study of Islam and *adat*, engendered poverty, women's leadership, midwifery and participatory action methodologies on women. She is also the first woman to have lived with the indigenous people of Malaysia (Ma' Betisek) to conduct anthropological research in the mangrove rainforests on the West Coast of Malaysia (1974-78;1981-85,1990-92) She remains an active conservationist of intellectual property, indigenous heritage and minority rights. She is also the Founding President of the *Southeast Asian Association for Gender Studies* (SAMA), 1992-1996).

She has authored and edited several books on minorities on Islam and women including *Ma' Betise' Concepts of Living Things [Athlone Press:London:1981]*, *Emotions of Culture: A Malay Perspective [Oxford University Press; Singapore 1990]* *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam {Westview Press: Boulder 1992}*, *'Male and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia [Berg Publishers: Oxford:1995]* and *Gendered Fields: Women, Men , Ethnography [with D.Bell and P.Caplan] [Routledge: London 1994]* She co-authored and co-edited *Cultural Minorities of Peninsular Malaysia: Survivals of Indigenous Heritage [AKASS and Toyota Foundation 2002] [with Mohd Razha Rashid]* Her contributions to chapters in books and referred articles in journals number more than fifty.

She has received several awards, fellowships and citations for outstanding scholarship and academic excellence including the *Raymond Firth Prize (1977)* from the *London School of Economics and Political Sciences*, the *Rotary Golden Medal* for Most Outstanding Scholar in the *Social Sciences in 1999*, the *Anugerah Sanjung* for Best International Scholar, USM in 2004; Outstanding Woman Academician, Penang State (2005) .She is frequently cited in Malaysia's *Whose Who on Women Leaders*. She has been a *Ford Foundation Fellow [1974-1975]*; *Commonwealth Fellow {1975-1977}*; the *Fulbright Fellow {1984}* *British Academy Fellow {1990}*; *Visiting Professor at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Oslo [1991]*; *Visiting Professor at the Centre for the Study of Cultures and Languages of Asia and Africa Tokyo University of Foreign Studies [1995-1996]* ; *Visiting Professor at Sophia University [1996]*; and at the United Nations's University {2003}; *Visiting Professor at the Department of Malay Studies and Centre for Women Studies, University of Victoria, Wellington [1998]* and *Visiting Professor at the University of Kent at Canterbury in 2001* .In 2003, she held the *Andrew's Chair in Asian Studies* at the *University of Hawaii, Manoa*. She was appointed *Distinguished Fellow of The Social Institute, Malaysia in 2005* and is a member of the *National Women's Advisory Council, Malaysia*. In 2006, she was appointed *Life fellow of Clare Hall, U. of Cambridge*. She sits on the Advisory Board of 'Globalisations' and 'Rethinking Globalisation' (Routledge:London)

She was conferred the D.S.P.N. for the State of Penang which carries the title of Dato' in 2007.

Email: wazir@wazirjahan.net Web: www.wazirjahan.net Address:26, Jl Marie Pitchay, Hillside, Tanjung Bungah 11200 Penang.Tel: 604 8905216. H/P 0124272345. Website:www.wazirjahan.net.

Biodata

Wazir Jahan Karim

Biodata Summary

Wazir Jahan Karim, a scholar of gender, indigenous knowledge and discourse analysis studied economic anthropology at the *London School of Economics and Political Science*. She is the first woman to conduct anthropological research on the Orang Asli (indigenous minorities) in Malaysia and to live for two years with the Ma' Betise' (popularly known as the Mah Meri) on Carey Island, off the west coast of Malaysia. Her first book, "*Ma' Betisek Concepts of Living Things*" (Athlone;1981; Berg 2004) is an example of how "ground theory" (indigenous theoretical discourses) can advance our understanding of universalisms in social dialectics. She shows how thought processes which are seemingly contradictory, inconsistent and isolated are connected in a cyclical chain of ideas, forming logical explanations about things which happen in past, current and future time modes. Indeed, it is an early contribution to cognitive anthropology- a critique of Levi-Strauss's structuralist discourse on binarisms as fundamental structures of human language and culture. By showing how opposing ideas of human relationships to plants and animals are constructed over different time and space constructs, in cycles and oscillating events relating to hunger and the need to eat (to hunt; to kill) or illness and death (to be hunted; to be killed) she shows how endangered destitute communities living in hostile environments which are encroached upon by outsiders, develop such ideas of cognitive transference to express *immediacy* (the concern for "now") and *sustainability* (the concern for "then").

This anthropological experience of people who "brave poverty" by giving it another name compelled her to reject the neo-colonial traditions of participant observation and objectification in anthropology and her writings actively discuss the dilemmas of indigenous anthropologists who invariably marginalise indigenous people as "exotic data" for an influential global readership. Discussions on contradictions in representation appear in her co-edited volume with Diane Bell and Pat Caplan, "*Gendered Fields: Women, Men, Ethnography*" (Routledge: 1994) her chapter, "Anthropology Without Tears" in Henrietta Moore's edited volume on "*The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*" (Routledge: 1996) and her inaugural lecture, "*Do Not Forget Us: The Intellectual in Indigenous Anthropology*" (1997). These form a theoretical sequel of ideas in her Ma' Betisek book that anthropological theory should address social realities and be concerned with knowledge transference and reciprocity- it should be humanistic, compassionate and empowering for indigenous people, if not for reasons of their poverty but for providing relevance and meaning to people who have contributed the substantial material on which anthropology and social sciences is grounded.

In her writings on gender, she again brings out the contributions of Malay and other indigenous women to the theory of local knowledge and shows through social historical analysis and narratives, how spheres of power of women in *adat* (culture) and men in Islam demonstrate the growing politics of devaluing indigenous women's knowledge in modern Muslim society. As gender relations are increasingly constructed through Islam, women circumvent a growing patriarchal order by extensive participation in education, employment and entrepreneurship and empower themselves through practical secularism. Knowledge is engendered and the genders gain strength in different spheres but continue to debate the authenticity of universal truths of faith which render men the advantage of exclusivity in interpretation.

Wazir pioneered Gender Studies and gender research in Kedah and Penang Malaysia from as early as 1978 in *Universiti Sains Malaysia* at a time when gender research in Malaysia was an unknown and marginal field of investigation. Her books, "*Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*" (Westview 1992) and her edited volume, "*Male and Female in Developing Southeast Asia*" (Berg: 1995) are some of the first serious studies of Southeast Asian bilateralism which supports the idea that women-centred networks although informal and popular challenge the growing formalised patriarchy of Malay society in Islam and supports the more democratic and egalitarian institutions of Malay-Nusantara *adat* culture. It is her commitment to ground theory and indigenous discourse analysis which elevates her work on gender and minorities above other mainstream scholars in Asian social sciences. It is this interest which also pushed her to pioneer the campaign in 1989 for the appointment of women judges in Syariah courts in Malaysia, to empower Muslim women, both as victims of male-centred knowledge and as keepers of social justice. Currently, Malaysia has adopted this call for women judges in the Syariah and is in the process of implementing it although other Muslim countries like Egypt and Jordan have already made headways in the implementation of women judges. Her arguments on ground theory that social

equity is founded in most cultures which are bilateral and matri-focal although challenged by the prevalence of formalist faith and jural traditions, expresses the growing optimism of “cultural relativists” that women will develop and explore popular cognitive processes to challenge the increasingly control which faith based knowledge has over their lives.

In most of her studies on gender, Wazir opens fresh perspectives on Southeast Asian and Asian women- the legitimation of emotions and “the passions” as ritualised competitions over gendered relationships (1991); reproduction and child-birth as the most powerful phase of womanhood (1984;1991;1992)) which may diminish gendered hierarchies and the phallogocentric idea of women’s multiplicity to distance them from the axis of power (1996). She probes into the psycho-social dimensions of ritualised competition between men and women to reveal fundamental differences in the way men think about women and women about themselves and how gendered discourses are cognitive contestations over the control of secular and ritual knowledge. Whether culture is about representations of power and supports certain kinds of people to promote certain kinds of knowledge to delude and marginalise, she is mostly concerned for the misrepresentation of the less powerful- women, children, minorities, workers, followers and all other people in socially subjugated categories. She is particularly interesting when she relates cognitive contestations between formal and popular discourses. Another way to view her ideas is to understand them in the context of the democratisation of knowledge, to provide spaces in writing which endorse and support the voices of people who are silenced because they are seen to be inadequate or unable to represent themselves. Without their ritualised diminutiveness, there will be no reason to justify the hierarchical structures and trends of indigenous and global knowledge which have emerged in politics and religion. Whether local or global, knowledge can marginalise or empower depending on how formal leadership defines the rules of civility and human “goodness” for others to emulate in the name of universal truths.

Unlike most writers of post-colonial discourses, Wazir seems to believe that intellectual delusions of this kind are embedded in all kinds of human relationships and colonial and post-colonial representations are only one of a kind (2003). What eventually gets adopted, proposed or disseminated as the “best kind”, whether in syllabi, faith, laws, texts and so on depends on those people in advantageous positions to interpret and disseminate and it is more likely related to cultural ideologies than universal wisdoms of undiscovered truths.

Although an international scholar on the indigenisation of the Social Sciences, gendered discourses, development economics, minority heritage and educational philosophy, she has fast gained grounds as an expert in capacity-building and human capital in Malaysia and has been invited as consultant and adviser to Malaysian ministries and centres of higher learning to develop innovations in research in higher and life long education. Her international standing is now being recognised to advance scholarship and innovation in the Social and Economic Sciences in Malaysia. Her academic contributions are also widely sought in Malaysian civil society, particularly in the area of heritage and conservation for which she has received several citations. She is exceedingly popular for her subtle persuasive style of delivery which advances Asian or indigenous perspectives to embrace global viewpoints to bring fresh meanings to the democratisation of knowledge.

Karim was the Founding Director of the *Gender Development Research Centre* (KANITA; 1978-1995; 1997-2001; 2001- Feb.2004) at Universiti Sains Malaysia and Founding President of the Southeast Asian Association of Gender Studies (SAMA; 1992-1995) which is hosted by research universities in Malaysia and currently hosted by KANITA. She was also the Founding Director-General of the *Academy of Social Sciences* (AKASS;1996- 2004), based in Universiti Sains Malaysia and Founding Executive Director of the *Academy of Socio-Economic Research and Analysis*(ASERA;2004-08), a private think-tank focusing on economic justice.

In 1977, she was awarded the Raymond Firth Award from the London School of Economics and Political Sciences for the best ethnographic research, thesis and essay, which she shared with Prof Olivia Harris and was consequently invited to publish her thesis with LSE, entitled “*Ma Betise’ Concepts of Living Things*” LSE, Monograph No 54. Currently she is working on issues of poverty, Muslim heritage, economic development and policy. For her outstanding achievements in these critical fields of Social Sciences, she has been awarded several fellowships and visiting professorships. Among the awards she has received for academic excellence include the *Ford Foundation Fellowship* (1974-1975); *Commonwealth Scholarship* (1975-1977); the *Fulbright Fellowship* (1984) *British Academy Fellowship* (1990); *University of Oslo Visiting Professorship at the Institute of Anthropology* (1991); the *Anthropology Senior Professorship at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies* (1995-1996) ,*Visiting Professorship at the Department of Malay Studies and Centre for Women Studies, University of Wellington* (1998). She was also *Visiting Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Kent at Canterbury* (2001), *Visiting Professor at the Centre for Asian Studies, University of Hawaii* (2003) and *Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge University* (2006).

In 1999, she was awarded the *Rotary Gold Medal* for most outstanding scholar in the Social Sciences in Malaysia. In 2003 she was invited to be a member of the Council of the TODA Institute for Peace and Public and in 2004, was conferred the *Anugerah Sanggung* for Outstanding International Scholar by Universiti Sains Malaysia. In 2006, she received the *Maal Hijrah* award for Outstanding Educationist (Malay Society of Penang or *Pemenang*). Policy and in 2007, was appointed Senior Research Fellow of the Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya. In 2007, she was appointed to the Board of the Journal “Globalisations” and “Rethinking Globalisation” (Routledge, Taylor and Francis), an international journal which focuses on economic and social development. She was conferred the *Darjah Setia Pingat Negeri* (Penang) (equivalent to a knighthood) which carries the title of *Dato’* in 2007. She is Adviser to Muslim Heritage, in Penang Heritage Trust (2006-10). Currently she is a Life Member of Clare Hall, Cambridge and is completing a book entitled “People Economics”.

The Mission Statement of ASERA is taken from one of her public lectures (2001), “*New knowledge is power but power is only powerful if it empowers others to seek new knowledge*”

Karim’s Works Cited

- (1981) *Ma’ Betisek Concepts of Living Things*, London, New Jersey: Athlone ; Berg 2004
(1884) “Malay Wives and Midwives”, in *Social Science and Medicine* 18(22), 159-166
(1987) “The Status of Malay Women in Malaysia: From Culture to Islam and Industrialization”, in *International Journal of the Family*”, 17 (1), 41-45
(1992) *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*, Boulder: Westview
(1993) *Gendered Fields: Women, Men, Ethnography* (with D. Bell and P. Caplan), London: Routledge
(1995) *Male and Female in Developing Southeast Asia*, Oxford: Berg
(1996) “Anthropology Without Tears: How a “Local” sees the “Local” and the “Global”, in H. Moore ed. *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*”, London: Routledge
(1996) *Gender and Empowerment* Wertheim Lecture Series, CASA, U. of Amsterdam
(1997) *Do Not Forget Us: The Intellectual in Indigenous Anthropology* Inaugural Professorial Lecture, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia
(2003) “Islam and America”, Andrew’s Lecture Series, U. of Hawaii, Manoa, in *J. of Peace and Policy*, TODA Institute, 8, 40-45

(Prepared by the Academy of Socio-Economic Research and Analysis, (ASERA) in George Town, Penang)