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**GENDER AND RELIGION IN MALAYSIAN CINEMA: A STUDY
ON YASMIN AHMAD'S FILMS**Suria Hani A.Rahman (a)*, Rosidayu Sabran (b), Rosninawati Hussin (c),
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Abstract

This paper examines the Malaysian films which are considered as portraying gender and religion differently within the multicultural context of Malaysia: film *Gubra* or *Anxiety* - produced in 2006, and *Muallaf* or *The Convert* - produced in 2008. Throughout their public viewing, both films received criticism from several conservative groups for not only being too liberal in the storytelling, but also 'unnecessarily' contesting the status of Islam and the Malay-Muslims in Malaysia. For this study, both *Gubra* and *Muallaf* were selected as these films highlight important discussions about race, religion as well as a gender discourse. Using narrative analysis, this study found that the selected films negotiate gender representation between the modern and the traditional values. Using the female figures and embracing the teaching of Islam, it challenges the role and perception of gender within the patriarchal structure, such as domestic violence, the taboo of interracial affairs and strict religious dress code. This paper argues that the films articulate a particular contextual interpretation of religion and gender relations, by illuminating gendered or patriarchal oppression through the display positive and negative characteristics, and at times using religion to justify the actions.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines films which are deemed controversial in representing gender and religion in the multicultural context of Malaysia. The film *Gubra* or *Anxiety* - produced in 2006, and *Muallaf* or *The Convert* - produced in 2008, which were directed by Yasmin Ahmad, were selected as these critically-acclaimed films provide a useful contradiction in their storytelling and have gained criticisms from several local media for not only being 'unrealistic', but also being liberal and are unnecessarily questioning the special position of Islam and the Malay-Muslims in Malaysia (Beng, 2015; Khoo, 2007; Norman, 2011). There is always a meaning within a film, which reflects the dominant beliefs and values of the cultural context that produces them (Turner, 2006, p. 178), hence allowing audience to read the film from their perspective. Since the nature of film production is varied, whether it is in the mainstream or commercial films to independent and alternative films, the process of filmmaking involves the meaning construction which beyond the textual cues in the film, as different contexts may be interpreted the same textual element differently (Bordwell, 1989). For instance, different genres and sociocultural settings may represented the theme of love and power differently, thus emphasising various meaning of the themes, for example, in relation to religion and culture.

1.1. The Malay(sian) New Wave of Filmmaker

The classical trends of film such as melodrama, horror and comedy were popular among audiences in the early Malay film production. Since the golden age of the Malay film, that is from 1950s to 60s, to the present day, the Malaysian filmmaking has progressed significantly in two waves (Hassan, 2013). The first wave emerged in the early 1980s, with the group of alternative filmmakers have joined effort with the mainstream filmmakers and produced films that highlight the subjects of a post-Independent Malaysia in their storytelling. Next in the late 1990s, the wave of digital filmmakers brought more varieties to local films. Formally trained as film directors, names like Shuhaimi Baba, Adman Salleh and U-wei Haji Saari were among those who directed movies that highlighted subjects not only about the Malays, but also concerning the Chinese and Indians as the two other major ethnic groups in Malaysia (Hassan, 2013, p. 3; Khoo, 2006).

The industry also witnessed the new wave of filmmaking in the early 2000s, as groups of independent and art house filmmakers begin to emerge in the Malaysian film scene. Among others, independent filmmakers like Yasmin Ahmad, Ho Yuhang, Amir Muhammad, Deepak Kumaran Menon, and James Lee (Khoo, 2007; Hassan, 2013) managed to attract attention at the international art house festival for narratives that simultaneously challenged issues and conveyed social criticisms in a rich and diverse storytelling (Baumgärtel, 2011) compared to the popular films available in the market.

1.2. The portrayal of gender and religion in Malaysian films

Malaysian film industry is shaped by the condition of politic, social, cultural and religious belief of the country. A discussion by Khoo (2006) about living in modernity as a Malay-Muslim is relatable to a specific condition, a condition where the production of Malaysian film is largely a monocultural (Malay)

production and is influenced by the cultural and religious traditions as well as the condition of politic and socio-economic in the country. To be specific, this situation has its impact on the local film industry primarily on how the identity of the Malay-Muslim and their culture being represented by the writers and filmmakers, hence, recognizes the portrayal of gender and gender relations (Khoo, 2006, p. 4).

In a local film production, it is noticeable that controversy occurs when the film content is against the guidelines provided by The Censorship Board. For example, several films by Yasmin Ahmad - *Rabun* or *My Failing Eyesight* - produced in 2003, *Gubra* or *Anxiety* - produced in 2006, and *Muallaf* or *The Convert* - produced in 2008, have issues with the Board as these films depicted Islam differently, which contravene the prescribed and conventional version that is being practiced in Malaysia. In particular, the films were regarded as challenging Islamic conventions: for example, film *Gubra* featured the bond between sex workers and their religious neighbour, and *Muallaf* depicted interracial affair without the scene of conversion to Islam. However, Norman (2013) emphasises that the criticism has made people to reflect about how those films represent religion, specifically Islam. It is important to note that there are four key aspects to be considered in the censorship guideline and standard for a film production, which governed by the Malaysian Film Censorship Board (LPF): 1) public safety and security, 2) religion, 3) socioculture, and 4) morality and decency (Lembaga Penapisan Filem, 2011). While this standard is to help a production in creating decent film contents, it is also to avoid films that might 'abuse' or manipulate audience because of inappropriate content, particularly films that promote 'disorder' in life including fanaticism, cultism, and the condemnation of faith and belief with no regret at the end of the story.

While scholars argue that Islam and cinema are in ambivalent relationship (Donmez-Colin, 2004, p.7), there is always a debate concerning the on-screen stereotype representations of gender. From the theory of gender, Nelmes (2012) explains that concept of male depicted as 'norm' and female is referred as 'other' is somewhat relevant to a classical cinema of Hollywood. Similarly, Mulvey (1975) argued that cinema offers a variety of pleasure, including a pleasure in looking itself, as well as a condition that offers pleasure of being looked at. Hence, this pleasure provides an illusion for audience to investigate a world beyond film, not only what is appeared on screen. In the context of depiction of women on screen, Mulvey (1975, p. 19) emphasised that they symbolised the exhibitionist role and 'to-be-looked-at-ness', as they possess a strong voyeuristic visual and erotic impact caused by a condition of being looked at and displayed for, which may turn to oppression. This condition appears largely in conventional narrative structure, as the male character represents dynamic and powerful characters i.e. dramatic action gets unfold via the male characters and the appearance are well-organised. On a contrary, the female characters are always passive or submissive and powerless, and turn into an object of desire for male character. Since the general structure represents an intersection between activity and passivity in plot, this binary of pleasure is regarded as gendered (Smelik, 2007).

Smelik asserts that if gender is a social construction, then the gender constructions in film are not absolute and are subject to change (p. 285). From the Western perspectives on the representation of gender on-screen, the above brief literature provides a useful connection to the discussion of Malaysian films, particularly on the coexistence and continuity of the on-screen gender depiction, and how the local film narratives adapted them (Suria Hani, 2019). While the conventional structure of narrative is regarded

as gendered for highlighting a traditional female-male character, it is interesting and also important to observe whether the Malaysian film continues to show gender binary in various genres.

2. Problem Statement

Even though Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation, films in Malaysia are mostly about one ethnic, that is the Malays. According to Mahyuddin and Lee (2014, p. 3), cinema in Malaysia is not only a popular national cinema but is also known as a Malay cinema for some reasons. First, the films are mainly in Malay language, and secondly, these films highlight issues and themes that merely about the Malays - the storylines are mainly about the Malay community and their culture, whereas a story of other ethnic groups remain underrepresented. Drawing on this monocultural film scene and the new wave of filmmaking, this paper will analyse films that address familiar subjects related to Malay films, such as family problems and societal conflict among the Malays in the community in a less conventional way (Hassan, 2013). The films by Yasmin Ahmad - *Gubra* (Anxiety, produced in 2006), and *Muallaf* (The Convert, produced in 2008) - were chosen for this study to demonstrate how films negotiate about gender and religion in their narrative. It is also known that these films are controversial, primarily for keep on delving into sensitive matters such as religion and interracial relationships (reuters.com, 2007). Thus, in this context, the selected films seek to discuss on the representation of gender and religion from a different viewpoint, hence they provide a useful contradiction to other popular locally produced films.

3. Research Questions

This paper analyses films by Yasmin Ahmad - *Gubra* (Anxiety, produced in 2006), and *Muallaf* (The Convert, produced in 2008). Drawing on the narrative analysis, this paper aims to answer the following questions: How are gender and religion being represented in the selected films? And how this representation embraces and challenges gender roles and arrangements from a Malaysian film perspective?

4. Purpose of the Study

The selected films in this paper bring significant trademarks of the director, Yasmin Ahmad, as one of prominent filmmakers in contemporary Malaysian films and who constantly exhibited the idea of 'art film' in her films. Most of her films received high recognition at international film festivals, for example *Sepet* won the Best Asian Film Award at the 2005 Tokyo International Film Festival, and the award for Best Director at the 54th Asia Pacific Film Festival 2010 in Taiwan through film *Muallaf*. For this study, *Gubra* and *Muallaf* were examined as they provide a notable contradiction to various popular films in Malaysia, particularly on the theme of the story, which simultaneously embraces and questions the teaching of religion (Islam). In addition, these films portray a particular system of belief including narratives about gender, mostly on how women and their position are being represented in the multi-ethnic society like Malaysia.

5. Research Methods

This study employs narrative analysis to answer the research questions, especially to facilitate in identifying the structure of the film narrative as well as how and what gender and religion are signified in the narrative. The plot analysis, adapted from Todorov's narrative pattern (Gillespie, 2006, p. 97) was conducted to discover the basic narrative structure: (1) **Exposition** refers to the initial equilibrium, which refers to a state of normality, stability, and social order (i.e. the beginning of the story), 2) **Disruption** represents a causal event by an agent of change, creates a de-equilibrium, a problem or a quest, 3) **Complication** denotes the portrayal of a series of obstacles, (4) **Climax** depicts dramatic highpoint of the conflict, excitement or tension; and then the release; and, (5) **Resolution and closure** expose how the main protagonist resolves the problem, obtains their goal and fulfills their desire; this instigates a revised equilibrium as the story ends. By identifying the plot structure of both films, *Gubra* and *Muallaf*, this study will explore the meaning of religion and gender from the representation of plot, characters, time, and space.

6. Findings

The selected films for this article introduce a rather different storyline compared to the conventional cause-and-effect plot and also utilise visual editing techniques to incorporate an ambiguous narrative presentation. For example, the films disrupt the storyline by embedded multiple stories in the plot, and the continuous flashback throughout the storytelling. From the plot structure, it is noticeable that both films define love from the lens of humanity, race, and religious belief (Khoo, 2007, p. 52-57). Also, the style of storytelling in both films display the recurrent use of melodramatic appeals, particularly in the representation of women, but simultaneously assesses their role in society.

6.1. Anxiety over Malay-Muslim sensitivities in *Gubra*

- **The plot:** *Gubra* is a sequence of film *Sepet* (produced in 2004, which established the story of Orked and Jason and their interracial love affair). The film portrays the lives of two conventional families belong to Orked and Temah, and they are forced to adapt to change in the face of adversity. The first story is about the marriage life of Orked and her husband (Ariff). The problem begins when Orked meet Jason's elder brother, Alan, at the hospital and this 'reunion' represents plot disruption – reveals the story of Orked's marriage and her memories with Jason. The following story tells about a Malay-Muslim woman named Temah, a sex worker (together with her colleague, Kiah) and also a single mother who loves her son (named Shahrin) and always making sure that Shahrin gets proper education in school and also to attend religious lessons (i.e. Quranic classes). Temah is grateful to get helps from their neighbour, Mas, and her family. Mas' husband is known as the bilal/muezzin in the community, and they always regarded Temah, Shahrin and Kiah as part of their family. Later on, Temah has contracted HIV and she try to get Mas to guide and to help her back to the teaching of Islam.

Literally, the word *gubra* signifies anxiety and this film speaks about anxieties concerning the women and their position in Islam as well as the Malay-Muslim identity in a multicultural society. The life quest of Temah and Kiah in this film signify how this film problematises the position of women in a modern patriarchal society. Also, *Gubra* represents women's perspectives within their restricted world from a character of Temah, who is portrayed as a sex worker and a single mother. The film juxtaposes the role of mother and sex worker in the character of Temah, hence represented her as a person with positive and negative qualities. Therefore, these types of women possess characteristics that allow them not only to reassess their personal identity, but also their place in society (Donmez-Colin, 2004, p. 105). On the whole, this film represents a social critique about the deprived position of women.

From the character of Temah and Kiah, it is noticeable that this story represents the subjugation of female sexuality in social and cultural life (as emphasised in Gledhill, 2007). Despite her being a sex worker for a living, Temah also accentuates her natural instinct as a mother who is full of love and affection for her son. More importantly, Temah is always making sure that her son receives proper education in both worldly and religious teaching. Besides, Temah brings out the relocation of the role of woman in a family – not only as a mother, but also struggling as the head of the family and sustaining the family survival. As for the bilal and his family, whom has been providing comfort and guidance to Temah, Shahrin, Kiah and their life quest, they represent the role of 'helpers'- they signify the life of devout Muslims and reflects stability in life. The role of 'helpers' depicted by the bilal's family is visible especially in the later part of their story, as Mas is gladly helping Temah to recite the Quran and to pray (again). The scene is also representing the return of Temah to the path of Islam and morality. However, the depiction of bilal's compassion toward his neighbour's moral deviance in the film is considered provocative by some of local conservative groups, as Sim (2009) emphasised that these critics are particularly with regards to its non-secular constitution and how it gives privilege to the Malays. The film ends with the return of Temah to morality, through her depiction not only as a helpless woman and a sexual object, but also is thriving to restore her morality and religious belief, mainly as a Muslim woman and a mother.

In another key scene is about the Bilal, who is portrayed patting a dog on his way to the mosque. Although the scene when Bilal is worried about the dog getting hit is deemed unnecessary by the local conservative Malay-Muslims (Khoo, 2007), this brief scene which depicts an interaction between a man and a dog is also to represent humanist angle from the bilal's character, hence blurring the human-animal boundary. On another note, the scene also juxtaposes the 'untouchable' issue between the dog and later, the sex worker. Based on the analysis, this part of narrative implicitly represents anxiety regarding the common understanding among the Malay-Muslims on the connection between religiosity and humanity. The scene that involves Bilal and his family as well as Temah represent significant connections between love and compassion from the Islamic perspective, and deeds toward God's creations.

6.2. Patriarchal oppression in the name of religion in *Muallaf*

- **The plot:** *Muallaf*, an award-winning film is about Rohani and Rohana (the two Muslim sisters), a Chinese-Catholic man named Brian, as well as their struggle to achieve goals in life. While

Rohani and Rohana are on the run from their wealthy but abusive father and found their hide-out in a small town, they meet Brian (a 30-year-old Catholic school teacher). After knowing the sisters, Brian finds himself irresistibly drawn to them, especially to their extraordinary courage. Also, this relationship inevitably forces Brian to confront his own troubled childhood memories (Muallaf, 2020).

Muallaf brings to the fore the theme of love from the parents to their children. However, love in the film surfaces differently and has turned to violence; Rohani, Rohana and Brian were abused by their fathers and these miserable memories keep haunting them. As the plot develops, the film disrupts the meaning of love through the depiction violent act by the father (who represents the villain of the story). A scene when Brian being dragged out of the room by his father as he shouts, “What kind of magazine are you reading? God will punish you!” is deemed a notable event. What happen next is Brian being pushed into the car by his father and they immediately leaves the house. The scene ends with Brian was left naked and crying alone on the street. This scene portrays an abusive act of the father, and the screaming, ‘God will punish you’ alludes to the ‘exploitation’ of religion to punish the child. Simultaneously, this scene is subtly criticising abusive behaviours in the name of religion. As the film sets within multicultural values, the critic on the violent act using religion is contradicting any religious principles. Furthermore, the ‘naked’ punishment leaves Brian with humiliation as it signifies the ‘removal’ of masculinity from a young man.

Equally significant is the story of Rohani who is being abused by her father, which also emerges as the way to show his love and concern for his daughter. One of the key scenes is a flashback of a dispute about going to the hairdresser, which involves Rohani and her stepmother. The argument ends with a crucial incident, as Rohani’s hair is being shaved by the father. From aesthetical point of view, this critical moment is framed in a close-up (CU) shot of Rohani from a lower angle, as Rohani is sitting on the floor. Then, the camera tilts up to establish the figure of Rohani’s father, which implies his dominance in a family. The hair, which symbolises femininity, is being robbed from Rohani and this scene exposes her father’s abusive act. The punishment scenes that involved Brian and Rohani are also appears gendered; Rohani’s hair being shaved because of her refusal to go to a hairdresser, and Brian is left alone naked on the street for reading a woman’s magazine.

7. Conclusion

Films by Yasmin Ahmad were described as politically progressive and intellectually evocative, yet blatantly sentimental as they move towards melodrama and the power of emotion (Hanita, 2011, p. 123). By analysing how the plot and characters are depicted, both films highlight the notion of embracing and questioning the portrayal of religion, particularly Islam, as the central theme. Equally important is this ‘framed’ situation acknowledges diverse ways in understanding race and religion, and as well as mobilises religion to discuss on gender representation. As a result, *Gubra* and *Muallaf* manage to introduce alternative and aesthetically unique storytelling that is particularly challenged the Malaysian populist films.

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