

Malay women as discerning viewers: Negotiating images of transnational modernity in Asian soap operas

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Abstract—Asian soap operas with their spectacular representation of consumer culture, have emerged as the most popular television genre among Malay women audiences. This has caused a certain degree of anxiety amongst the local authorities who fear that consumerism has a corruptive effect on the cultural integrity of Malay womanhood. We conducted interviews with rural Malay women, to investigate how women engaged with the images of consumerist modernity depicted in these soaps. In this paper, we want to argue that Malay women do not passively submit to the lures of consumerism, as the authorities allege. Instead, Malay women are discerning viewers who engage critically with the elements of consumer culture in Asian soaps through a worldview formed by Malay cultural values. We elaborate three tactics of such a process of negotiation with relation to the consumerist images of presentation of self: perceiving image as a distant spectacle, observing Islamic injunctions regarding female and exercising personal judgment.

Keywords—Malay Women; Modernity; Islam; Soap Operas; Cultural Flows

I. INTRODUCTION

As the most popular television genre among Malay women audiences, Asian soap operas or soaps supply the cultural repertoire of images and discourses that inform popular conceptions of modernity for Malay audiences. While the term soap opera in America is often used to refer to daytime serial dramas targeted at housewives, Asian soap operas are broadcast at the primetime night slot and command a large viewership composed of women and their families. Asian soaps have been identified by many scholars as a potent site for local audiences to engage with transnational modernity [1, 2, 3]. In fact, this television genre was promoted by the Malaysian authorities led by the UMNO¹, as Asian soaps were seen as providing appropriate forms of capitalist modernity tempered with culturally proximate values for audiences in Malaysia to watch. Rapid economic progress in East and South-East Asian countries saw the rise of the Asian Values discourse in the 1980s (Kessler 1999; Manan 1999), with a rhetoric promoting Asian societies as possessing unique attributes that distinguished it from the Western world. Malaysia not only entered into economic partnerships with these Asian countries but also made cultural alliances with them. The Malaysian government decided to screen television programs

largely soap operas from Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Indonesia and Philippines [4] to counter domination of the American programs on local television and present images of an Asian-oriented modernity for Malaysians to emulate.

While promoted at first as an effective counter to Western cultural influence, the immense popularity of Asian soap operas among local audiences has now created some discomfort amongst local authorities. A consistent feature of this television genre is the spectacular representation of consumer culture, which generates much of the pleasure of watching soap operas for Malay women audiences, who engage with those images as ideals of a modern lifestyle. This has become a target of criticism of the local authorities who fear that consumerism will have a corruptive effect on the cultural integrity of Malay womanhood [5, 6, 7]. They allege that under the influence of indiscriminate consumerism, Malay women will deviate from the path of appropriate behavior sanctioned by Malay *adat*² and Islamic faith, two important elements that comprise the identity of Malay ethnicity.

Investigating this anxiety about the corruptive effect of Asian soaps on Malay women, this paper will put forth some arguments to surmise how women negotiate the lures of consumerism presented in these soaps. We present findings from a qualitative survey of Malay women in the remote area of Kota Tinggi, Johore³. All the informants were housewives who watched Asian soaps habitually, and were purposely selected [11] through snowballing method [12, 13]. From the feedback gathered from our respondents, we have derived some hypotheses that explain how Malay women engage with the images of consumer culture depicted on these soaps. Firstly, Malay women are not naïve and unthinking viewers who passively consume these images of consumer culture. They are more rightly seen as discerning viewers who employ sophisticated viewing tactics to deal with the images of transnational modernity and consumer culture. Secondly, although many previous scholars have acclaimed the

¹ United Malays National Organization

² *Adat* or Malay norms is often invoked as a more secular code of general ethics or cultural norms that is seen as a timeless tradition with Malay roots. Islam is invoked as the moral and spiritual foundation for Malay life, but discourses of mundane social behaviour tend to be associated with the cultural norms of *adat*.

³ Kota Tinggi is a small remote town made up of a large number of unorganised and organised Malay village settlements in the southern part of the Malaysian Peninsula. It is located approximately 42 kilometers to the capital city state of Johore – Johor Bahru and can be reached easily by ferry from Changi Terminal of Singapore. This area also has a very clear reception of Singapore and Indonesia free to air television channels which broadcast many Asian soap operas.

potential of soap operas to be a particularly potent site for women to stage resistance against a patriarchal social order [8, 9, 10], we want to extend upon this view with reference to the specificities of Malay society. We find that Malay women are so saturated with the dominant ideological discourses of *adat* and Islam that they do not challenge the paternalistic stance of the Malay social order, even if it seeks to govern what they watch on television. Thus, they exercise viewing tactics as a discerning viewer who takes pleasure in the images of consumerist culture, while navigating it through a worldview that adheres to Malay cultural norms of *adat* and Islamic values.

We argue that we cannot categorically label Malay women audiences as either resistive or submissive to the patriarchal order, but their continuing devotion to Asian soaps despite the criticism from the authorities, has to be seen more as a process of negotiation between the state and its female subjects. This paper will explore this process of negotiation of consumer culture on soaps and Malay cultural expectations in relation to the presentation of self. We have collated the feedback from Malay women in three main negotiation tactics through which they engage with the lure of consumerist on self-appearance: perceiving image as spectacle not role model, adhering to cultural conventions and exercising personal judgment.

II. ASIAN SOAP OPERAS AND CRITICISM

In a globalised world marked by complex cross-border cultural flows, there are many sites that help to form and construct identity. In his seminal work *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai argues that the electronic media has emerged as the prime vehicle to govern, shape and modify popular imagination and identity in this era of late capitalist modernity. As he states, 'the electronic media decisively change the wider field of mass media and other traditional media. Such media transforms the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds' [14]. In this sense, Asian soap operas have also emerged as such a new site where Malay women are able to imagine a world beyond the immediate bonds of local culture, identity and values. As Morley and Robins also argue, 'places are no longer the clear supports of our identity' [15]. In other words, while being located in a specific cultural and physical locale, a person's conception of the self and the world are influenced by images from a distance on media like the television.

The cultural influence of popular culture from foreign locations on local audiences has incited the authorities in Malaysia to criticise these Asian soaps as well. Anxiety about the depiction of consumerism in Asian soaps is part of a broader concern about the path of modernity unfolding in Malaysia. Malaysia, like other nations in the Asian region, has emphasised the need for synthesising a local version of modernity, defined by Malay cosmology⁴ that retains the cultural and historical integrity of the nation [16, 17]. In Malaysia, consumer culture is not promoted indiscriminately

⁴ This includes Malay *adat* and Islamic values.

as a positive and salient feature of economic development, but it is subjected to constant scrutiny according to local cultural norms. As Fischer notes, consumerism in Malaysia has been subjected to '...intense political and religious contestation' [18]. This contestation is governed by a strict code of what is permissible and what is forbidden by Islamic values, where the Islamic code of *halal/haram* (allowed/forbidden) consistently '...informs and controls ideas and practices such as the wearing of gold and ornaments; wigs and hairpieces; statues; paintings; photograph; keeping dogs; cleanliness; industries and crafts; sexual appetite; spreading the secret of conjugal life and innumerable other areas' [19].

Given this imperative of monitoring consumer goods according to the Islamic code of *halal/haram*⁵, local authorities have also criticised Asian soaps for propagating excessive consumerism, which is *haram* or opposed to Islamic values and Malay cultural integrity. The women's wing of UMNO, Puteri⁶ UMNO urged the government to 'curb the addiction to soap operas which deviated from the Islamic faith or propagated new ideas to do wrong, practice free sex or damage society's norms and social fabric'. The Puteri UMNO spokesperson asked the government to broadcast these programs in adherence with Islamic law and not, 'slip in a slot or airtime with dramas that go against our culture during the time for Zuhur, Asar and Maghrib prayers' [20]. In unison with the UMNO women's wing's condemnation of these soaps, the UMNO youth wing has also criticised the popularity of Indonesian soaps like *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* for compromising religious faith, cultural values and domestic duties of Malay women and even deforming the national project of modernity for an enlightened middle class [14]. Given this criticism, the contestation over depiction of modern consumerist lifestyle in the Asian soap operas is an interesting avenue to explore how Malay women watch these soaps and cope with the negative criticism.

III. ASIAN SOAP OPERAS AND PRESENTATION OF SELF

In Malay culture, the concept of ideal femininity or *santun* (gracious woman) is associated with a genteel, cultivated, groomed, hygienic, beautiful woman [15]. By this definition, beauty is not seen as a standalone physical characteristic of a woman, but mediated through these characteristics of genteel and modest femininity. Furthermore, cultivating one's physical appearance for beauty is not seen as a free pursuit of individual desire, but an act prescribed by societal codes of appropriate behaviour for women. According to these societal norms, beauty as an ideal is only desirable as a means for women to satisfy their husbands and maintain conjugal love in their marriage. Not only must women appear modest as per the Islamic code of

⁵ Permitted/forbidden

⁶ Puteri UMNO is a women's wing of UMNO (United Malays National Organization), the ruling political party in Malaysia. *Puteri* is a Malay word for princess.

dress, but also the very idea of pursuing beauty is an act that is permitted for married Malay women alone.⁷

It is within this scenario of rigorous cultural contestation over female physicality that Asian soap operas and their propagation of glamorous female characters is criticised by the local Malaysian authorities. They allege that the glamorous images of soap opera characters might influence Malay women to not only dress inappropriately, but also pursue a self-centred desire for beauty that transgresses the boundaries of appropriate femininity. However, we want to argue that while Malay women express their attraction to consumer culture depicted in these Asian soaps, such an attitude does not necessarily mean that these women reject Malay cultural conventions regarding appropriate womanly behaviour. Instead, they negotiate their desire to watch the aspirational images of glamorous female beauty depicted on the soaps as a discerning consumer from a distance, through a worldview developed with their cultural resources of Islam and *adat*.

Exercising such negotiation as discerning consumers, some respondents said that they only looked at the images of the glamorous women on the soaps to merely ease their minds after finishing the tiring domestic chores at home. According to Aunty B, even if she watched these soaps, she did not seek to emulate the images of the glamorous women but only viewed them as a distant images.

I just love to watch these glamorous heroines for pleasure (smiling). I cannot wear the kind of outfits they wear. It is just enjoyable to watch. (Aunty B, 49, Homemaker, 20.1.2009)⁸

Although she may derive pleasure from watching women in these Asian soaps wearing clothes that may be forbidden by the Islamic code of cultural propriety, it does not mean that she would want to emulate those women. Instead, this response reflects Aunty B exercising the tactic of a discerning consumer, where she negotiates the pleasure of watching these soaps with the expectations of the Malay cultural order. Revealing strict adherence to Islamic values, she outrightly rejects any possibility of wearing such clothes in her actual life. She insists that she does not perceive these images of women in revealing costumes as a role model to emulate. Far from it, she only derives pleasure from the depictions of women in this manner as a distant image.

The trend of using cosmetics among Malay women to enhance their physical appearance has increasingly become a point of discussion in the local press. A few of my participants said that they watched Asian soaps specifically to get tips on personal grooming and make-up. Given the criticism of the authorities, we asked these women how they engaged with the consumerist desire of cultivating one's physical appearance. Instead of rejecting traditional norms

governing female propriety, Malay women negotiated the consumerist desire while being mindful of the cultural strictures against female vanity.

A regular user of cosmetics, Aunty G said that she dressed up and put on make-up to make herself presentable for her husband, when he returned home after a tiring day of work at the plantation. Pointing to the lead female character of a Filipino soap as her idol, she claimed that it is her wifely duty to please her husband in this manner.

I guess it is not wrong if we groom ourselves a bit to impress our husband. Who would want to live with a dirty, unkempt wife? In fact, our tradition tells us to do so. Our religion encourages us to pay attention to personal hygiene. The problem arises when you over-indulge in such activities. People will talk behind your back if you don't pay attention to your appearance. And people also will talk if you put too much make up like soap's star on television. It's important, my dear. (Aunty G, 46, Homemaker, 11.2.2009)

Although she cited the glamorous heroine of a Filipino soap opera as her ideal of feminine beauty, she justifies using cosmetics and taking care of her physical appearance as part of her traditional duty as a wife. Malay cultural conventions and Islamic law stipulate that women must cultivate their physical beauty not for personal vanity but only to please their husbands. By conflating her use of cosmetics and idolisation of an Asian soap opera heroine with the Islamic values of appropriate feminine beauty, she exercises the tactic of being a discerning consumer who adheres to cultural conventions.

Apart adhering to the stipulated norms of Malay culture, Malay women exercised personal judgment to exercise their as a discerning consumer with regards to issues where cultural norms may not be explicitly articulated. Unlike the responses invoking the stipulated norms of consumption like *halal/haram*; these responses reflect Malay women exercising their discernment through personal judgment. A fan of Indonesian soaps, Aunty F said that she admired some female characters in the modern outfits they wore.

I love watching Indonesian soaps because I love to see the way the female characters dress up. They look very modern and trendy. I have to admit that I wear short pants at home sometimes, when it is too hot to wear a *sarong*. But I only wear short pants inside my house where no one can see me. (Aunty F, 50, Homemaker, 9.2.2009)

Although she is aware that the modern clothes worn by characters on Indonesian soaps are not permitted in the strict Islamic code of female dress, she still wears short pants in her house when the weather is unpleasant. But this does not mean that she rejects the traditional norms of Malay female dress. Instead, she exercises personal judgment to make use of the freedom to wear such revealing clothes only within the private space of her home when she is alone.

Although the depiction of glamorous, modern female characters from Asian soap operas may have promoted the consumerist trends of fashion and cosmetics amongst Malay women, these responses reveal how this issue needs to be explored as a process of negotiation beyond the allegation of authorities that women will blindly follow all the trends shown on television. Our argument about Malay women as

⁷ The concept of beauty in Malay culture is associated with *akhlak yang mulia* (good behaviour). See Omar (1994). Beauty is associated with a devoted wife and mother - loyal and respectful, attractive, clean and well groomed. While ideas of glamour and sexuality have now percolated into popular perceptions of beauty, my respondents continue to invoke the older notion of beauty as the feature of a dutiful wife and mother.

⁸ This system of identification should be read as: respondent's pseudo name, age, job, and date of interview).

discerning consumers has shown the multiple modes through which they negotiate the images of consumerism relating to self-presentation while adhering to Malay cultural values. Malay women perceived the glamorous images of heroines on the soap operas not as ideals to be emulated but as distant spectacles removed from their actual lives. They also consistently invoked the *halal/haram* code of Islamic law to scrutinise the products they consume. Finally, with regards to certain objects that may not transgress any stipulated norms of Malay values, they exercise personal judgment to further exercise their adherence to their cultural conventions.

IV. CONCLUSION

While the local authorities claim that soaps have a degenerative effect on the women audiences, some scholars have claimed that soaps provide a site for women to claim emancipation for a patriarchal society in an imaginary world. We want to affirm a perspective that transcends the extreme arguments of both kinds. As we found in our fieldwork, while Malay women may follow these Asian soaps, but do not necessarily oppose the cultural injunctions set by the patriarchal Malay social order. We argue that the scenario cannot be summed up as a question of Malay women being manipulated as passive vulnerable subjects not do Malay women challenge their cultural constraints. Instead, Malay women are discerning viewers who engage critically with the elements of consumer culture on Asian soaps through a mode of negotiation where they consistently position the ideological discourses of *adat* and Islam as their cultural resources. Asian soap operas can be conceptualised as a site of fluid negotiation where women invoke their interpretations of the soaps and the cultural resources to negotiate any potential conflict.

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