NEITHER HERE NOR THERE:

THE UNEVEN MODERNISATION OF MALAY MASCULINITY

AHMAD FUAD RAHMAT

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Abstract

Through various far-reaching measures of modernisation the recently independent Malaysian state endeavoured to construct a capitalist infrastructure while demanding Malay men to embrace a new ethos of hard work, conquest and productivity. This thesis analyses Malay films to explore the extent to which the clash of differing temporalities in the aforesaid process problematized Malay masculine power. To explore this I shall turn to a local trend of films about Malay men in transit where they are often shown journeying in search of home and work. Here I point out two things: Firstly, we frequently a see a struggle for men to adapt to modernisation shown against women's relatively more adjusted and advanced position in it. Secondly, this often raises the structural question of which gender ultimately commands the meaning of 'home' and belonging, a question that reveals a tension between a modernity dictated in Malay masculine terms and a longer-standing history of Malay women's cultural influence. Ultimately, I argue that Malaysian modernity is underlined by a cultural battle over the gender of history, as the question of who Malay modernity is for, that is to say if it will be won by its men or women, remains unresolved. This amounts to an uneven gender regime where Malay women's historically established cultural authority actively contends with an expanding patriarchy.

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Dedication

For my mother Azizah Rahmad and my father Rahmat Harun, for giving me the world.

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Project Argument

Through various examples from Malaysian cinematic history I show how the modernisation of Malay masculinity is impeded by Malay women's historically established cultural power. Malay films bring this to the fore through the question of home. This shows how the search for belonging amidst the uncertainties of modernity addresses anxieties over the gender of history, namely, whether the future of Malayness will be determined by men or women. Consequently this paints a picture of an uneven gender regime. It is uneven as it is constituted by the historical antagonisms between various temporalities, namely, the modernity that is constructed in the Malay man's image on one hand, and the Malay context's longer-standing matrifocality and feminine cultural influence on the other, which the androcentric developmental project neglects. This amounts to a common representational pattern where overt misogyny is often depicted alongside equally overt expressions of feminine moral and cultural influence. This introduction explains the background, structure and implications of my study accordingly.

Background

Malay modernisation has been a fundamentally masculine project. A consideration of how the agent of Malay capitalism is often discoursed shows that "he is implicitly understood to be a man" (Stivens, 2002, p. 92). Thus, the *Melayu Baru* or 'New Malay'—the entrepreneurial, innovative and hard-working driver of Malay commerce—was not simply defined against the rural, agrarian

and 'lazy' Malay of old, he was also expected to embody a new masculinity that would thrive in a global and competitive economy. This was structured by the New Economic Policy (1971-1991), the Malaysian government's far reaching modernization drive that saw the state design various policies and institutions to produce Malay capitalists. To this, we can also add how the Malaysian state has consistently become male dominated through its sixty years of Independence. The state-driven Islamisation that grew in tandem with the expansion and strengthening of Malay capital also ensured that men lead in ways that secure their cultural and institutional hold over national development. As Maila Stivens puts it "a dominant sub-text is that only men are seen to make political culture" (2002, p. 93). She observes that, "The national, indeed neonationalist, emphasis on corporate Islam in some of the discourse about *Melayu Baru* seems similarly to exclude women" (Stivens, 2002, p. 92). Looming large throughout are anxieties from the May 13, 1969 riots, when Malay mobs launched a pogrom against Kuala Lumpur's Chinese community out of fear that their special position as *Bumiputeras* (Sons of the Soil) would be jeopardised by the Malaysian-Chinese's greater economic advantage.

As widely documented, Malay films serve as a useful resource into the various psychological and cultural tolls modernisation has inflicted upon Malay men (G. C. Khoo, 2006, 2010; Mokhtar-Ritchie, 2011; Norman, 2013). My study extends this line of observation by exploring two things. First, how the preponderance of films about displaced Malay men indicate that the modernisation of Malay masculinity is particularly impeded by the question of home. Secondly, this is an occasion for Malay films to address uneven development where the transition to capital reveals the convergence of

contradictory times and spaces. Hence films would pose the question of home to show as we would usually see him, in transit in-between houses in constant search of work. It is often the case that this displacement would complicate a rural-urban divide, where different aspects of village norms and lifestyles are depicted in ways that show their relevance despite rapid urbanisation. Here, the struggle to adapt to the city is also made an indictment against the Malay-capitalist project's inability to embed itself into the Malay context, and consequently the difficulty for Malay men to embrace the modern world that was ostensibly made in their image. The big picture we get is one whereby modernisation is encountered and experienced as fundamentally uneven. The demand for Malay men to embrace capitalism makes masculinity as much a question of adjusting to a new experience of history—a previously unseen and unfelt sense of time and space—as it is one of changes in attitude and behaviour.

Thus, cinematic accounts of Malay men displaced by modernity also assume a struggle to adapt to different historical demands, where capitalism is shown to require attitudes and lifestyles that run contrary to long-established norms. Thus, the question of home does not lead to straightforward conclusions about identity. Rather, it would evoke a struggle to make sense of competing symbolic orders from differing histories. This is particularly key for my argument, namely, how the tenuous position of 'home' also translates to the tenuous nature of the gender identities the 'home' is meant to stabilise. The question of home is unsettling because it exposes the untenability and fragility of the public-private distinction—and correspondingly the distinction between civil society and the domestic sphere—upon which the masculine nature of modernisation's power structure is constructed. The oppressive masculine

public is, therefore, not the full story of Malay history. Similarly, the home is not simply a passive apolitical space of domestication but an active terrain of socio-political contestation.

Structure

The predominant trend to feature men in transit makes for a more productive juxtaposition with the Malay context's longer history of matrifocal and feminine cultural influence. While Southeast Asia reveals frequent associations and links between femininity and the household, this does not necessarily translate to confinement or historical exclusion. Rather, masculinity is disrupted from a position of women's influence and prominence. This resonates with the many studies that have shown how Malay women's command of the home still broadly translates to considerable socio-cultural capital (Booth, 2016; Hirschman, 2016). Thus, while Malay women are indeed shown contending with the masculinisation of modernity, it does not occur from the excluded margins but their relevant historical power. This allows me to explore a crucial implication that cinema often assumes, namely how Malay men cannot envision or make sense of modernity without a reckoning with Malay women's cultural significance. Thus, I argue that the need for women to be considered in narratives of an increasingly male-driven historical trajectory reveals the workings of an uneven symbolic order that undulates between the masculine and feminine, indicating that the masculinization of Malay modernity has yet to be secured.

Chapter one offers a general picture of unevenness by explaining two things: The first is what I mean by the 'question of home' that pervades Malay

films. Here I point to a longstanding cinematic trend where Malay men in transit and searching for work or belonging are often put in a confrontation with Malay feminine power. The second is how I shall approach this as a form of allegory in the Jamesonian sense. This will entail a description of the historical presuppositions in the way Malay cinema depicts gender difference and the politics it produces. In particular, I shall explain how we get a picture of uneven development where capitalist modernization sees national development coming to terms with a mix of temporalities, namely one where a masculinizing modernity contends with the Malay woman's longer standing history of cultural privilege.

Key in this chapter is how the sense of time personified by Malay women is often positioned against the national imaginary thereby curtailing the passage of empty homogenous time that the uniformity and fixity of national identity requires. This intervention, to be sure, does not emerge from 'outside' national time as if a return of the repressed. Rather it is very much intertwined into it in ways that indicate an immanent point of incommensurability, a symbolic impasse, in the developmental project. This also allows me to situate Malay films as interventions into the ensemble of other currently existing discourses that are also attempting to make sense of modernization and history. That I have chosen films that I take to be iconic moments in Malay popular-cultural history also allows me to posit—against current scholarly consensus—that Malay women's cultural advantage are still active acknowledgements of how Malay modernity is considerably determined by Malay women. Women remain a constant standpoint for historical thinking.

Lastly, this chapter also allows me to clarify my use of Jamesonian allegory in light of its contested relationship with the national. My conclusion assumes a third position in relation to current debates. Against Jameson and his defenders, I do not take the nation as a necessary condition for thinking about world-historical capitalism. This position strikes me as fundamentally fatalistic, as if the national is the final and taken for granted form that the post-colonial collective imagination takes.[1] Nor do I assume, like Jameson's detractors, that his focus on the national automatically cancels out any use for an allegorical account (in the sense that Jameson means) of the post-colonial. This position has the opposite effect of downplaying ongoing, strategic and political uses of the national in resisting empire. Rather my position takes the basic premise of allegory to its most logical conclusion. If allegory is ultimately about the totality of history that must be thought amidst the contestation of different temporalities, then the national form itself must be antagonised, subject to historical uncertainties, rather than an established epistemic starting point. What this means is that allegory must take into account a local anti-capitalist imagination that is at the same time beyond, and not simply against, the national.

[1] This is the position of Neil Lazarus, for example, who understands Jameson's use of "Third-worldness . . . as a regulative ideal," (Lazarus, 2011, 106). This is grounded on an affinity to the third-world decolonization project (referred to at times in the literature as "The Bandung moment"), which requires that the national form (of the former European colonies) be established as an epistemic condition to think beyond the hegemony of imperial capital. The post-colonial critiques of this approach, as Anne McClintock (1992) argues, emerged at a time when the leftist internationalist decolonization project was thought to have been defeated. This, however, has proven to be a short-lived conclusion as is shown by the emergence of the Latin American left in the early 2000s where Marxism remains a potent theoretical resource.

Malay films would show this 'beyond' by taking on Malay nationalism's masculine and urban aspirations.

The above should also make it clear that I use Jamesonian allegory in a general sense that is not necessarily limited by its concern with the national. With the basis of my use of allegory established I shall proceed to Chapters 2 and 3 to take a close look at the politics of home and marriage via the cultural contests around the notions of 'motherhood' and 'fatherhood' respectively. In chapter 2 I look into how Malay matrifocality troubles the modernisation of masculinity. I turn to P. Ramlee's *Ibu Mertuaku* (My Mother-in-law) (Malay Film Productions, 1962) to show how Malay women's claims to 'home' paint a picture of heterogenous but incompatible modernities, where the main character, Kassim's, prominent place in an emergent technological public clashes with the active culture-shaping force of a historically enduring matrifocality. Thus, the Malay woman's association with the household does not translate to their domestication. Rather home is a base upon which mothers can make broader claims upon the Malay context. The film explores this by constantly comparing the film's lead character Kassim Selamat's homelessness on one hand, and the film's pair of mothers and daughters and their command of domestic spaces on the other. His position in relation to home, and how it signifies history will be described via the Lacanian notion of the extimate. Kassim ends up displaced: he is neither inside nor outside the household. This indicates that the unevenness of Malay development questions whether 'home' can be masculinised.

In Chapter 3 I address the cultural politics of fatherhood to question the extent to which Malay modernity is patriarchal. I do so through looking at how the Malay context can be a useful perspective to question the notion of phallic

identification with the father, which has served as a method to explain how one assumes a gender by internalising a recognisable identity within a masculine symbolic order. Here I introduce the notion of identificatory bargains by making two claims. Firstly, the paternal standpoint does not have an absolute hold over the Malay symbolic order. Secondly, Malay historical thinking requires recourse to the feminine owing to the depth of women's cultural influence and presence. I will make this argument from looking at how identification is depicted in *Azura* (Deddy, 1984). Key is how the film situates the lead character Zack between, on one hand, his strict father Datuk Putih and, on the other, the demure girl Azura. The story pivots around Zack's identification with the latter in order to learn the value of work and adapt himself to the demands of an emergent capitalism. This is contrasted with Datuk Putih's failure to discipline, and by implication modernise, his own son. The film would also depict this as a problem of homelessness as Zack's coming of age sees him ejected from his house where he has to encounter the emergent landscapes of modernity as a poor and jobless youth. But this is only an occasion to stress the unevenness of development, as Zack eventually finds his way through the new spaces of industry with Azura's help, attesting to the Malay feminine's more-significant place in history. I will also take the opportunity to use this example as a way to reflect on the extent to which the Lacanian notion of the 'father' could be understood as an attempt to theorise the patriarchal capitalism's contingency.

Chapter 4 introduces the notion of the uneven phallus. I will describe this by looking at a spate of slapstick-masquerade comedies that were released in the 1980s. These see a trend of poor characters mocking the pretensions of Malay-male figures of authority (politicians, the nouveau riche, aristocrats etc.) in ways

that show the impossibility of the masculinity desired by Malay nationalism and capitalism. I argue that these parodies assume that the modern Malay body is without an ideal look or shape. Contrary to the masculinity of Western modernity, where hard bodies and phallic conquest are mainstream, modern Malay masculinity does not have a definitive bodily imaginary. To explain this, particular focus will be given to how the penis features in these comedies in ways that signal its dislocation from the broader symbolic order. My argument pays attention to how these gags are particularly sensitive to the tension between rural and urban identity. Indeed the phallus is often doubted where the tension is most apparent. This speaks to how Malay modernisation—far from being a straightforward construction of a male-dominated social order—in effect dislocates masculinity, leaving men, and consequently their power, neither here nor there. This chapter will reference the major comedies of said decade with an emphasis on *Hantu Siang* (A.R. Badul, 1986) for how it brings together the comic tropes of Malay slapstick-masquerade humour while situating it within the question of home. Not only does it feature legendary comedian Badul, who plays a slacker whose sole motivation is to disguise himself as a rich man so that he can sleep with women, it also shows how he has to pretend to own a bungalow—the expected upper-middle-class Malay home—for his disguise to work.

Chapter 5 takes on a question that is implicit in depictions of displaced Malay men, namely how their constant movement situates them in the temporary. I argue that this temporariness could be understood as an alternate temporal standpoint from which the ostensive inevitability of capitalism could be questioned. This argument will be made through a reading of *Kami* (Zain, 1982). This sees Tookoo and Din, two homeless boys, run away from home to the

city to move on from the past while bonding amidst future uncertainties. Their state of 'neither here nor there' stages the reaffirmation of their fragile connection, as the film constantly underscores the eventuality of its end. The temporariness, in other words, resists the dissolution of bonds that is frequently described as a key effect of capitalist modernity through insisting on new ways of relating. I will explain this via Lacan to show how mourning grapples with uneven temporalities. On one hand it is as much about symbolising the new as it is about overcoming the old. But this process requires dealing with the murky fusion of time that calls for the old and the new to be differentiated in the first place. The unique feature of their bonding as 'two' also allows me to reflect on Alain Badiou's notion of the 'Two Scene' where love is about experiencing the world from a perspective of difference. Through *Kami* we see how love is not prized because it resists a triumphant capitalism but because it also brings capitalism's contingency to the fore.

Chapter 6 situates my inquiry more directly in present-day Malay patriarchy by looking at how the female Malay migrant signifies a perspective from the periphery of development. This turns to *Ombak Rindu* (Sharan, 2011) as a film of temporal redress against modernization where the narrative is articulated from outside the mainstream urban-capitalist masculine national ideal, that is, a feminine and rural perspective. I regard this, especially in light of the film's immense popularity, as describing a historical contradiction where an overt misogyny prevails but within a temporality that assumes women to be the markers of history. The film uses landscape to show the city engulfed by a rural chronotope, leaving the emergent urban masculinity diminished by a feminine spatio-temporal sensibility. This sees Haris the misogynist beholden to the

women's command of temporality: he moves from city and village and back to their dictates in ways that indicate Malay women to be authors of historical anxiety. I shall conclude with some thoughts on how the film's mass popularity may inform an account of a Malay intimate public, where complaints of women's suffering organise a realm of mutual reciprocity which would be otherwise unrecognised by an indifferent public sphere.

Scope

My focus on Malay-language films should not be taken to mean that non-Malay films are insignificant. I note that they do provide various valuable insights into Malaysian modernization that should be considered. For example *Jagat* (Anandan, 2016) and its portrayal of the Malaysian-Tamil community's economic woes and history of political disenfranchisement is a much needed contribution towards gaining a more inclusive view of the class and racial divides that are caused by Malaysian nation-building aspirations.[2] Nor is it the case that Malaysian films can be reliably categorized in terms of ethnicity. *Sepet*

[2] Other noteworthy examples include: *Chemman Chaalai* (Tan, 2005), a Tamil language film about the hardship of growing up in a rubber plantation. The rare earth plant in *The River of Exploding Durians* (Woo, 2014) is a clear reference to the controversial Lynas rare earth refining facility in Kuantan, Pahang. Owned by an Australian company, it was alleged to have improperly stored their radioactive waste, endangering local residents. *The Kid from the Big Apple* (Three Production, 2016) is about a Chinese American teenager who reconnects with her grandfather in rural Malaysia and the generational and linguistic gaps that ensue. *Metro Maalai* (Victory Film, 2019) is an independent Tamil language film that situates a love affair amidst the urban alienation of Kuala Lumpur.

(Slit Eyes) (Rosnah, 2005) met critical acclaim precisely because it transcended racial boundaries through its love story between a young working class Chinese man and a Malay girl. Similarly *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (Chong, 2011), while primarily scripted in Mandarin, made significant references to Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) and Malay culture, as it is primarily about discovering *Nasi Lemak*, a customary Malay Dish, amidst a Chinese family-restaurant feud. That said I justify my strict focus on Malay films —Malay language films marketed for and consumed by a largely mass Malay market—for insights into the national superstructure insofar as it is Malay and male dominated. Despite Malaysia's diversity the key mechanisms of legitimate state violence, such as the monarchy, police, the military and the ever-expanding Islamic courts, are based upon Malay privileges and claims of special status over the country. Thus analysing Malay films arguably allows for more insight into the contradictions and limitations of the dominant culture underpinning Malaysian hegemony. This hopefully could be referenced for more incisive critiques on how the hegemony impacts Malaysia's minorities.

My study will be using the terms 'development' 'modernity,' 'modernization,' 'capital' and 'capitalism' interchangeably. References to capital and capitalism are difficult to avoid given the theoretical resources I draw from and thus will be evoked where they will be helpful to elucidate a certain state of affairs. While modernization, modernity and development would more or less assume or refer to the expansion of capitalism, I retain them given they are more prevalently used in Malaysian and Southeast Asian studies. The latter set of terms, in particular, leads me to contexts that may not at first appear capitalistic or economic but are nonetheless a part of the historical subsumption forced

upon newly independent nations in the post-War context, where the nations' developmental projects, however much informed by Third-World liberation, must contend with the duress imposed by global capital. This attempt to be economically independent while subscribing to unjust terms of the broader global economy underpinned Mahathir Mohamad's entire tenure as he tried to impose Bumiputera privileges while welcoming investments from foreign multinationals. The total ensemble of this circumstance will also be assumed when I mention 'history,' which captures the general 'structure of feeling' moving the need to envision and understand a given location amidst the torrent of social changes forced by nation building.

By capital and capitalism I mean the "historically specific configurations of social relations and processes" that structures "*the systematic reproduction of the capital relation*" (Anievas & Nisancioglu, 2015, 8 - 9 Italics in original). By capital relation, I refer to the assemblage of social practices by which the capitalist worldview is taken for granted. This would see the state, family, race relations and nationalism, for example, oriented towards normalizing attitudes about the importance of the capital value form in everyday life. By this a hegemonic capitalism would see subjectivity thoroughly immersed in service of capital's reproduction: The male-headed nuclear household is regulated to make productive citizens who would eventually be assessed by their potential desirability or utility for dominant industries, which are in turn geared to increase profit and consequently their social and political power. This places individuals in direct dependence on the marketplace where time is measured by productivity. The nation-state would in turn design laws and policies to sustain and protect this process. What this amounts to is a state of affairs where the

quotidian is linked to the expansion, if not the gradual takeover, of the capital value form.

Capitalism is best understood as a distinct type of social relations because its value form cannot be reduced to any single object. Immanuel Wallerstein (1995) thus defines capitalism as the aggrandizement of surplus, where the outlook of continuously desiring and accumulating 'more' is prioritised. What makes the capitalist epoch unique is not profit per se—which in any case has existed for far longer than capitalism—but precisely this attitude of expansion where accumulation for accumulation's sake has become normalized.[3] Similarly the exploitation of wage labour occurs because the continued re-production of 'more' is regarded as a norm and an acceptable reason to subject oneself to a work regime. The evidence of this normalization is in how capital is aggrandized despite the detrimental consequences of its expansion: inequality, environmental degradation and imperialism, among other things. Indeed it is through understanding capitalism as a compelling set of social practices, which ensures its successful reproduction, that we begin to understand its material effects. [4]

[3] This is what makes Marxism an amenable theoretical extension for Lacanian psychoanalysis on the interplay of lack and the metonymic object of incessant desire.

[4] Marx maintains that capitalism is hegemonic precisely because it is ideal, that it depends largely upon a set of untenable but compelling abstractions (e.g. profit, money etc). Its power as an ideal is evident in how the obvious oppression it causes are still routinely denied. Communism, in turn, is the material practice of production wherein capital no longer mediates inter-subjective

Thus capitalism is best seen as a historical process of social *configuration*. This entails that we pay attention to its fundamentally contradictory characteristic. For one it produces inequality. It draws from the human and geographical materials available at its disposal in order to expand. It is also premised upon difference as its distinct value form expands through constant revolution: it must posit breaks from the present to ensure its novelty from other modes of production. This produces a landscape that concretely reveals the different valances of history in which the expansion of capital is experienced as heightened time consciousness. On one hand, there is the time of capital as it is driven towards a future of its expansion, wherein everyone becomes a 'productive citizen' in service of its value form. On the other hand there is the present in which the future is being constructed and a past wherein capital's value form was not prominent. Capital's constant process of configuration then amounts to a fundamentally uneven world. It "posits developmental variations both between and within societies, along with the attendant spatial differences between them" (Anievas & Nisancioglu, 2015, 44).

There is nothing about acknowledging the temporal breaks capitalism ushers that requires us to adopt a 'stagiest' point of view, where the West is necessarily regarded as more 'advanced' than the rest of the world. Indeed one can acknowledge capitalism's temporal pressures to question Eurocentrism. In other words the break between past and present could be understood discursively, that is to say, as an occasion to interrogate the politics of time in

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and collective relations. I mention this to specify that while I provide a 'material' definition of capital—via the social practices it sustains—capitalism as a system is not materialist.

which capitalism is merely one stream of temporality co-existing beside others.[5] This in fact is the position of key post-colonial thinkers in Subaltern studies, namely, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty. All undeniably recognise capital's tendency towards universalization, that is to say, to dominate non-European political economies.[6] But these postcolonial thinkers also posit—based on their reading of Marx—that this is not an absolute process. Instead, the expansion of capitalist time makes the presence of other temporalities even more obvious. Indeed recent responses to broadsides against Marxism's supposed Eurocentrism build on this account of capitalism's inherent limitations

[5] Chakrabarty (2001) insists that because capitalism defines itself as a temporality of 'breaks' and expansion it depends upon a continuous negation of another temporality. Thus capitalism is always underlined by a *different* temporality. Similarly the recognition of capitalism's inherently contradictory workings led Ranajit Guha (1997) to describe capitalism's expansion in India as "dominance without hegemony." Capitalism's power is always-only partial and thus need not translate to a complete ideological hold. Guha's statement on capital's contradictory universality alludes to this: "the discrepancy between the universalizing tendency of capital as an ideal and the frustration of that tendency in reality was for him [Marx], a measure of the contradictions of Western bourgeois societies of his time, and the differences which gave each of them its specificity" (Guha, 1997, 16).

[6] As an example, consider the following quote by Chatterjee: "If there is one great moment that turns the provincial thought of Europe to universal philosophy, the parochial history of Europe to universal history, it is the moment of capital—capital that is global in its territorial reach and universal in its conceptual domina. It is the narrative of capital that can turn the violence of mercantile trade, war, genocide, conquest and colonialism into a story of universal progress, development, modernization and freedom" (Chatterjee, 1993, 235).

to stress the possibility that anti-capitalist resistance need not take proletarian forms. [7]

Malay films are again instructive in this regard. Work is positioned in obvious ways as the demand of a new, and at times other, temporality as in the cases of *Azura*, *Hantu Siang* and *Kami.* The emergent commodity form that accompanies this transition—where the desire for a certain 'more-ness' is instantiated—will also be made obvious: in *Ibu Mertuaku* it occurs via a bourgeoning pop-culture industry; *Azura* also shows this with an emphasis on an equally emergent consumer culture enjoyed by Zack's motorbike gang; in *Hantu Siang* Badul's conquest for women occurred concurrently with his accumulation of jewellery and other objects of new Malay wealth; in *Kami* the boys desired, and often got into trouble, for wanting to listen to cassette tapes which were beyond their reach due to their poverty. *Ombak Rindu*, more interestingly, inverts this pattern by taking its audience—via its urban antagonists—to the rural where work and consumerism are totally absent.

Indeed the broader historical and temporal tension this assumes will be underscored via the rural-urban divide. This indicates a recognition that Malays are living amidst a plurality of times where the emergence of capitalism—in the

[7] A case in point is Anievas & Nisancioglu (2015)'s agreement with Chakrabarty's highly maligned reading of Marx. They argue that the latter errs in neglecting how the development of capitalism is an international, rather than a strictly European process. Otherwise their close reading concludes that Chakrabarty's account of History 2—which other Marxists such as Vivek Chibber, (2013) and Vasant Kaiwar (2014) have accused of being Orientalist for positing a pristine temporality untouched by capital—speaks to fundamentally Marxist premises and conclusions.

many references to emergent industries, media and the necessary infrastructures that must be constructed—is forcing a constant distinction between identities and traits that are desirable for their productivity and those that are not. The protagonists tend to be men from the village who head to the city in search of jobs and greener pastures. The rural connotes the past and this could mean something negative (lack of progress or laziness) or positive (pristine tradition). The city, too, similarly could be coded in ambivalent ways. At times it is regarded as where progress and wealth are happening but it is also seen as a place of moral corruption. The urban and the rural are not necessarily positioned as opposite worlds, however. In fact much of urban space is shown intertwined with clear aspects of rurality. It suffices for our purposes to note that the differing landscapes enable the films to engage this historical thought process. It is almost always the case that the city is where capitalism is happening. Thus urban migration indicates a double recognition. On one hand, capitalism is taking root and is forcing Malays to leave their villages. On the other hand, the fact that rurality persists as moral discourse and spatial imagination indicates that capitalism is not absolutely hegemonic, that there is still a place other to it.

The Malay context will differ from the West in many obvious ways but it is nonetheless a part of a world system wherein global capitalism remains an expanding force to reckon with. This allows me to note how modernization shows a capitalism that is both uniform but also singular. Malaysian modernity is like Western capitalism in how capital's distinct value form is entrenched in its

national-state infrastructure.[8] But it is also singular in the ways in which local circumstances continuously resist and question total subsumption. This is precisely where Malay films are instructive for the question of home visualises this interplay of uniqueness and difference in politically pointed ways. Recognising the global power of capital also allows me to situate the criticality in my project. Something is at stake in the films I turn to because they offer ways to resist a hegemony that would otherwise appear natural or given. Indeed it is in recognition of the full historical force of global capital that I shall say things to the effect of capitalism's or modernization's evitability or inevitability. By this manner of speaking I do not mean to say that it is an absolute transhistorical force. Rather it is, as it stands, the dominant agenda with little to no proper alternatives at the official state level. Malay films, however, are attuned to where the configuration it requires can be questioned at local levels, with the Malay home the basis for staging narratives of implicit and explicit critique.

This brings me to another caveat: my focus on development and capitalism also means that I shall be focusing far less on Islamization. I will mention it where necessary but due to reasons of scope I am not able to dedicate my analysis exclusively on Islam-centred politics. It is a key assumption of my argument that we can sufficiently explain the politics presumed in the selected

[8] Critical studies on capitalism's damaging effects on Malaysia, whether global or local, has been a longstanding fixture of Malaysian studies. Syed Hussein Alatas' *Myth of the Lazy Native* (2013) as one such example. The works of Jomo Kwame Sundaram (Sundaram, 2001; Sundaram, Chang, & Khoo, 2004; Sundaram, Stivens, Cecilia, & Bee, 1994) is also another case in point.

films through a historical-materialist approach with capitalist modernization—the temporal negotiations caused by its infrastructural transitions—being the overt cause of concern. From my survey of Malay films, especially the ones I have chosen, it is 'culture' and the social privileges and demands that could be evoked from certain familial positions that tends to be the films' main concern rather than the espousal of any Islamic doctrine per se. Focusing on modernization is also germane as it resonates with findings by Judith Nagata (1984) and Zainah Anwar (1987) that show how Islamism was a product of the new Malay middle class that emerged as a result of the state's developmental policy.[9] Maila Stivens (2002) and Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006) argue that Islamization is as much a part of the consumer culture demanded by the nation-state developmental agenda.

[9] As Michael Peletz says "Malaysia's Islamic resurgence is an urban based, middle class phenomenon" (Peletz, 2002, 236). It emerged amidst the construction of a modern Malay infrastructure driven by the New Economic Policy, which my subsequent chapters will touch on accordingly. Patricia Sloane-White's (2011) study offers an update of how the middle-class-ization of Islamism in her study of contemporary Malay Islamic commercial culture: it required corporate leaders to commit to business behaviors and social actions which were inscrutably sharia-compliant, requiring a level of individual and collective responsibility — *fard al-ayn and fard al-kifayah* [obligations to God and obligations to the community]— that will justify their significant share of *barakah*." (Sloane-White, 2011, 328). This impacted everyday interpersonal relations as well, leading to a norm premised upon "*equitable* but not *equal* power arrangements implied by the conservative gender roles and status hierarchies of their corporate lives. Differences between leaders and workers, and between men and women were, in their understanding, granted authority by the Sharia so that these statuses seemed natural, logical, and wholly right, part of what is understood to be a fully realized Sharia led life." (Sloane-White, 2011, 327-328).

Strategically speaking it may also be timely to revisit 'culture' as a resource of resistance against patriarchy where the more progressive Islam promoted by urban-liberal discourse seems to have been stifled in mass purchase.

Implications

This attentiveness to the mixture of temporalities bears crucial implications on Lacanian psychoanalysis, which informs a lot of my observations on how Malay films deploy masculinity. I regard Lacanian theory to be useful particularly for how it understands masculine power to be paradoxical: On one hand masculinity is premised upon exclusion. Its power is defined by the extent to which it can bar others from its symbolic locus. But this ability also leaves it with no identity. As Stephen Frosh concludes "masculinity thus has no secure base of its own, no positive content, but is rather premised only on the exclusion of the other" (Frosh, 1994, p. 109). What this means, however, is that such ostentatious domination often obscures a fundamental emptiness. Someone is a 'man' only to the extent that he is not a woman, gay or effeminate and so forth: "woman takes up her place as the Other, as something which stands outside the Symbolic as its negative, giving it its presence through her exclusion" (Frosh, 2005, p. 265). This means that the exclusion masculinity needs to assert its power leaves men with no identity. My study surveys the extent to which this dynamic is at once assumed but also critiqued in the Malay context: my study would concur with how Malay modernity would be marked by distinctly masculine embodiments of power. Fathers are accorded cultural primacy and

films somehow often feature rapists as heroes. But this is also often staged in confrontation with Malay women's cultural influence in ways showing that men are not exclusively authoring the symbolic order.

With this picture in mind I shall argue Malay modernization has produced an uneven gender regime. The Malay gender regime is uneven because it is locked in a contest between a masculine modernization on one hand, where men dominate, and the Malay contexts' longer standing history of matrifocal and feminine cultural influence on the other. This indicates that the construction of a Malaysian national-state infrastructure meets a point of incommensurability in the masculinization of modernity. This diverges from the taken for granted assumption, widely held in critical studies, that modernization is a fundamentally masculine process that culminates in a patriarchal social order.[10] The Malay example then offers a window into where the aforesaid assumption could be questioned. The difficulties of modernizing gender difference is a crucial dimension of uneven development, that is to say, where capitalist expansion links heterogenous temporalities while at the same time heightening their incompatibilities.

This in turns allows me to expand certain assumptions regarding the contextual limits of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In one regard, it takes for granted what Ilan Kapoor deems as "the Universalisability of Psychoanalysis" (2018, p.

[10] The subsequent chapters will make more specific textual references to this argumentation. Mainly I draw from Anne McClintock's (2013) seminal work on the gendering of nationalism by colonial capitalism. Other notable works that expand from critiques of nationalism's masculinization include those by JeanPickering and Susan Kehde (1996) as well as Tahma Mayer (2012).

xxvii). The assumption is that 'the Western symbolic order has become the de facto symbolic order' of the contemporary world (I. Kapoor, 2018, p. xxviii). Psychoanalysis is globally relevant "because of the history of globalisation/colonialism, which has ended up imposing a Western(ised), and increasingly capitalistic, symbolic order" (I. Kapoor, 2018, p. xxviii). This much is evident in how my survey of displaced Malay men will show their immersions into various articulations of an actively expanding Western modernity such as pop-culture, consumerist values and a capitalist work ethic. To this, we can add psychoanalytic-feminist claims about how psychoanalysis "gives an account of patriarchal culture as a transhistorical force" (J. Rose, 2011, p. 36). But my use of Lacan shows how psychoanalysis' global relevance could benefit from the notion of unevenness to show how a given symbolic order is formed amidst the struggle of differing temporalities.

If my argument holds, it is because my study is premised upon a crucial assumption underlying Malay films: the household is not merely a by-product of historical forces. Rather, the form it takes is also significant in determining the character of its modernity. Here Malay cinema would allegorize "home" and its relationship to modernity to leave us with a crucial statement. The family is where Malaysia's hegemonic developmental ambitions are most troubled. Malay films then offer the strategic-narrative advantage of moving within and across family spaces and the broader national-cultural politics it evokes. This enables Malay women to stage a direct contention with patriarchy, which we should recall is not simply about a male dominated social order but one that stems from the power of fathers and their cultural hold. This to be sure should not be understood as a simple appeal to the social capital a woman might yield from

assuming certain familial roles (as wives, mothers, aunts or grandmothers, for example), which merely sustains them in passive privilege. Rather, the films I analyse show Malay women deploying family positions to actively interrupt the modernization of Malay masculinity to the point of reshaping the dominant narrative of national development. This furthermore has the crucial effect of diminishing the advancement of Malay male power. The films do this particularly through positioning Malay-feminine standpoints in ways that overturn the modern Malay spatio-temporal ideal, as we shall see time and time again.

Thus the critical historicisation of 'home' as ideal and space, which Malay films often do incisively, is a useful approach to see where patriarchy cannot come into its own despite the social and institutional resources at its disposal. This insists—against dominant liberal and Western assumptions—that the family is not a separate sphere from culture and politics.[11] Here Ann Laura Stoler's exchange with Indonesian communists is curiously telling: "One of the first questions they asked me (I was thirty-two at the time) was about my children, which I didn't yet have. But how can you be part of a revolution without children? I was baffled and retorted that you can't have time for children if you're doing political work. They laughed at my stubbornness and naiveté" (Dev Kaur & Ravensbergen, 2016, p. 380)

[11] The association of home as a space of women's exclusion was a mainstay of Euro-American second-wave feminism. Sylvia Frederici's (2012) work sustains an engagement with this claim while drawing from current data. In a more psychoanalytic vein Jacqueline Rose's (2018) critique of modern motherhood (strictly in the Western context though she does not specify this) also assumes domesticity, and the spatial politics that sustain it, to be an attribute of how mothering and consequently femininity continues to be politically sidelined.

CHAPTER 1: THE QUESTION OF HOME

Introduction

This chapter will explain the general basis of my thesis in three parts. Part 1 describes how modernization has problematized notions of 'home' in the Malay context to the extent that it is commonly understood as uncertain and dispersed. This means the permeable and confusing relationship between home and world is always already taken for granted. The Malay notion of home cannot be enclosed into the settled nuclear form and is in this sense still grappling with the bourgeois domestic ideal demanded by official national-developmental discourse. Part 2 discusses the implications of this non-enclosure namely in how it amounts to an uneven gender regime. The inability to fence in the family indicates that Malay men are unable to domesticate the household, making it a key terrain of political contestation. Insofar as the production of bourgeois domesticity is crucial in the production of feminine civility the question of who controls 'home' similarly becomes a question about the shape of the modern Malay gender regime to come.

The historical contest this presumes then is key: while the formal institutions of modernization—the nation, commerce, media and the state—are clearly run by men, this does not depict the full picture of modernization and consequently the gender of history. Part 3 explains the implications this contest bears on nationalism. Insofar as the nation and masculinity are correlative, Malay cinematic renditions of Malay women's historical cultural privilege provide a standpoint with which the nation-building project is questioned and subsequently denied. This takes me to a key critical contribution Malay films

make: they enable us to see the extent of Malay women's cultural power. This is especially needed given the skepticism towards this power's contemporary political relevance.

It should be clear from this that I do not evoke the question of home throughout my thesis in reference or concern towards the particulars of any domestic interior. It is also important to note that it does not mean 'homelessness' in the literal sense. Rather I use home methodologically to refer to an encounter with the antagonisms that are assumed when Malay films raise questions of settling, belonging and taking root amidst the confusions of historical change. In other words the Malay experience of home has become an open question because it has been 'torn open' as it were by the infrastructural demands of modernization. This in turn is often shown through its gendered implications. Men, the designated leaders of modernization, are often shown 'neither here nor there' and thus unable to command or inhabit the space they are expected to dominate. It is in upon this basis that I shall argue that the Malay gender regime is uneven. It is cut across divergent times, the one of nationalist-developmental capitalism on one hand, and the historical gender contestations it cannot resolve on the other.

The historical sensitivity Malay films display, and its political relevance, will be explained by recourse to the notion of allegory as used by Frederic Jameson, namely as a symbolic solution to a real situation. By this, the question of 'home' becomes less about a search for an answer. Rather its ubiquity—and the many uses and interpretations it has provoked—indicates that it is a compelling focal point where the enigmas of modernization could be thought through: "their very multiplicity suggests that the vocation of the symbol … lies

less in any single message or meaning than its capacity to absorb and organise all of these quite distinct anxieties together" (Jameson, 2016, p. 26). We can understand the significance of this 'solution' when we consider how for Jameson the real situation refers to the totality of history. By history Jameson does not mean a sequential narrative of events. Rather it is the necessity of interpretation itself, that is to say, the need to understand one's place in the world without which identity would not be possible. It is here that one realizes that meaning is made from the totality of present constraints of collective existence and the weight of the past which shapes a given perspective of which subjectivity is merely a partial moment.

What those constraints would reveal is not simply another perspective. Allegory is about bringing forth the object of history—where history is shown as a contention of incommensurabilities—rather than a clearly formed standpoint. The aim is to reveal the contradictions out of which a coherent picture, however provisionally, could be made of the present. In one sense this speaks to a common assumption in cultural studies, namely that cultural texts are political events in how they have the power to intervene into a given zeitgeist. But Jameson offers more in how allegory is not a solution in the sense of resolving anxieties but is for showing the struggle of meaning-making out of which a given history is shaped. It is in this particular way too then that I regard Malay films to be political. They do not simply 'entertain' or 'shock.' They also "show the transformational labor performed by cultural texts as they simultaneously provoke and rework our cultural anxieties and fantasies"(Buchanan, 2007, p. 64).

With this non-solution in mind, my chapter shall also address the question of the national in relation to Jamesonian allegory, namely how Malay women's constant intervention in the masculine-national drive allows us to rethink the nation in a more critical light. It is neither a fixed condition for thinking modernity nor a conceptual relic but something is continuously troubled and questioned.

Part 1: Indeterminate Home and World

Indeterminate Home

Grasping the contestations of the Malay home as a problem about the gender of modernity requires that we begin with an account of the household. I have chosen films as a productive window for this due to their sensitivity to the Malay domestic sphere's many forms. It is not at all uncommon, even to this day, for a film to show Malay houses in their multi-scalar (big, modern, rich, poor etc) iterations. These houses would also be located amidst a rural and urban (and semi-rural and semi-urban) divide. Where urban is often associated with 'modern' and capitalist, the rural stands it for their opposite, either as backward and 'left behind' from the passage of national progress, or idyllic and innocent when contrasted to the corruption of urban life. These different moments would also translate to material differences. Modern housing is made of brick and concrete as the rural house is almost always made of wood. One's family-status is an additional factor. Films would emphasize the difference between the married house, headed by a parent or two and the bachelor house where unmarried men

and women live together. These differences are furthermore crucial signposts for the characters' journeys and social positions, as we shall see.

The reason why we would often see more than one type of house displayed is because the domestic sphere, and consequently 'home,' is almost always in more than one place. Industrialisation saw the mass migration of rural Malays to the city in search of work. Cities too would grow into a center-periphery divide and not always in neatly organised demarcations. Families and kinship ties, would expand along imprecise lines. This does not simply entail having family members spread across different locations. Rather the connections are sustained actively through regular visits and travel over an extended period of time. So it is not just a matter of a mother being in another state than her children, who themselves are dispersed across different places. Rather, the household retains its coherence and evolves through a mutual coming and going across territories. [12] It is important to note how this is a broader regional factor. Jonathan Rigg observes how forty years of capitalism has seen more Southeast Asians "living in households which are separated across national space than there are those which are divided transnationally" (Rigg, 2016, p. 133). Thus where capitalism may have divided migrant labour families in the global south across national divides, the Southeast Asian case shows the extension and evolution of family ties to intensify locally. The indeterminacy of the Malay

[12] Caces, Arnold, Fawcett & Gardner's (1985 account of "shadow households" in their study of migrant workers in the Philippines speaks to this: "The shadow household consists of all individuals who are not presently living in a household but whose principal obligations and commitments are to that household" (Caces, Arnold, Fawcett, & Gardner, 1985, 5).

household becomes more evident when we consider the fact that there are no words for 'home' in Bahasa Malaysia. '*Rumah'* comes closest although this always refers to a physical house rather than ideals of 'dwelling' or 'settlement,' for which Bahasa also has no equivalent concepts. To this we could add that 'boundaries' and 'privacy'—cornerstones of the liberal project—are also without translations of common local significance. [13] There is not even a term for 'belonging,' where identity is tied to a place. This is not to say that the home or household is not at all idealised. [14] Rather it is to point out that its idealisation has not translated to the demand for fixed or insulated notions of belonging.

The key implication here is that even after sixty years of capitalism the Malay notion of home still remains fluid. We are better able to understand this 'difficulty to dwell' as a unique historical statement when we note how the evolution of the Malay family and domestic sphere runs contrary to the ideal of the modern bourgeois family, which is defined precisely for its static form,

[13] '*Perbatasan'* is more frequently used in Bahasa Indonesia to indicate subjective boundaries in the liberal sense although far less so, if not at all, in Bahasa Malaysia. *Had* and *sempadan* are used in Bahasa Malaysia in reference to physical boundaries of property but not in the same epistemic connotations of personal subjective boundaries in liberal philosophy that distinguishes a self from an other in demarcated terms. "Self" and "other" as separate objects—which would translate to *"diri dan lain"* in Bahasa Malaysia—also makes no sense.

[14] There are sayings such as *rumahku syurgaku* ("my house, my paradise") that comes close to expressing 'homeliness' though this is neither a frequent feature of everyday talk nor a concept as such.

enabling the public-private division to hold.[15] Each nuclear household marks "a new independent economic unit and a neolocal residence" (Stone 2014, p. 207).[1] For "it was assumed that nobody would get married until there was a place for the couple to live and a way for them to have a livelihood" (Gottlieb 1993, p. 13). This furthermore is definitive of the Western context. As Beatrice Gottlieb notes, "the outstanding fact about the nuclear family households is that all through the past in the Western world, no matter where we look or how far back we go in time, they were extremely common" (Ibid). To this we can add another implication: Malay modernisation has not atomised the Malay family only for it to then be superseded by the atomised individual. Modernisation did not diminish kinship. Rather it retains its form through an elastic network of bonds across states and regions, thereby embedding domestic contradictions and dynamics in its broader cultural fabric. We shall see this assumed and reiterated throughout Malay films.

[15] This is to be organised around the ideal model of difference: the mother and father and husband and wife together to regenerate new bodies that would be also construed as opposites. The nuclear family is built upon the stasis of bodies that was not seen in previous more fluid models of kinship: "The 'family', in the sense in which the term is used today, emerged only after a long process of historical development. The many figures that populated the family in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gradually disappeared until the couple of husband and wife took the centre of the stage, and the marriage contract became constitutive of domestic relations" (Pateman 2014, p. 116).

Indeterminate World

In any case the fluidity of the Malay home corresponds to the fluidity of Malay identity. *Melayu* [the local word for Malay] could be used to refer to a *rumpun,* or a cluster of sub-ethnic groups in Peninsula and island Southeast Asia which includes the Javanese, Minangkabaus, Bugis, Sundanese, Banjar and Patanis among others that are spread across the tens of thousands of islands that make up the Malay Archipelago. [16] In this sense *Melayu* also refers to a diffuse ethnic category spread throughout the region, from Southern Thailand, to Indonesia and even Southern Philippines. But this expansiveness belies the fact that *Melayu* has been formalised to refer to a distinct racial category by the Malaysian state, to be differentiated from its Chinese and Indian minorities. 'Fluidity' takes a slightly more literal resonance in the Malay context, owing to how it evolved through centuries of maritime trade and migratory practices as Island Southeast Asia became a crucial point of commercial contact for Indian, Chinese, Arab and eventually Western traders between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Malay would be the lingua franca facilitating this development, and as a result Malayness too would evolve to meet with and

[16] I am refusing to total the seven odd thousand islands of the Philippines and the fourteen odd thousands of Indonesia's given the contention around whether Filipinos too should count as Malays (Curaming, 2011). While there are accounts that indicate Filipinos consider themselves of Malay roots, the literature on the Malay side of the discourse do not. Without getting into the particulars of the arguments on both sides, it would suffice for me to point out the ambiguities around the term to make the point that Malay identity remains difficult to contain relative to other nations.

weave into other ethnic groups to become a regional identity rather than anything bounded to set territory.

In the case of Malaysia, the tension between Malayness as expansive and Malayness as legally bounded has to do with colonialism: "In the days of yore, Melayu did not bear the burden of being an exclusive or comprehensive term leading to restrictions and constraints" (Maier, 2004, p. 7). The British in particular, informed by their Orientalist science, became invested in determining the origins of Malayness in their enterprise to classify the regional geography for administrative purposes: "They felt the need to construct sets of norms that could be used to make distinctions between various heterogeneous yet familial communities on the island" (Ibid).[17] As a result Malayness from a once dynamic and thriving diaspora of various religious, ethnic and linguistic communities

[17] As Alatas (2013) notes, the notion of 'race' that was eventually imported into the Malay world emerged out of the then distinctly European preoccupations with nationhood. It assumed a unity of origin and descent, a preoccupation that for centuries was foreign to the Malay diaspora, evidenced by the cultural fluidity that had shaped it for centuries. It in turn also regarded race as a basic unit of nationality, that is to say, territorial ownership. Both depend on the more prior assumption of uniformity across and within the group, a uniformity that is evaluated based on physiognomy. To ascribe "race" to a group of people is to categorize them primarily based on physiological characteristics as the prior feature of identity. This too had ostensive scientific presuppositions: all that was empirical was taken to be more factually verifiable. The more of such facts that can be observed as shared among a people, the more accurate the generalization. According to this worldview, history, cultural practices, socio-economic factors and internal dynamisms – the indispensable features of any community – are less relevant than the physical, racial, outward bottom line. To understand Malayness in racial terms evades the entirety of its complex depth and myriad histories, migrations, interactions and creolizations.

across the Nusantara, in constant migration and interaction, had to be made uniform. Boundaries, geographical and cultural, of location and membership, had to be imposed where there were none before, to realize and make the construction of the nation more concrete and intelligible. This would be institutionalised by the Malaysian state in its census and constitution as Malayness became more closely connected to loyalty to its nine fuedal rulers (who Malays outside the Peninsula do not recognise and vice versa) than its regional and archipelagic history. But even by the early 20th century, when the definition of Malayness was considerably restricted by an emergent nation state informed by colonial science, it was still largely acknowledged that Malays referred to a migrating population. Thus "although of territorially diverse origin, many having been born outside peninsular Malaya, and in spite of the fact that a number of other groups might be seen as at least equally to that status, Malays as a group came to be perceived as the indigenous inhabitants of peninsular Malaya" (Kahn, 2017, p. 47).

It is also telling in any case that Malays have a longer history as seafarers than settlers. Khoo Kay Kim (1991) notes how, up to the eighteenth century, the notion of Malay was more associated with maritime practices than rural life. There is also much to suggest that these communities knew little of one another and in fact did not regard each other as part of a unified culture, despite being ascribed the same label. It goes without saying then that this fluidity runs contrary to the hard boundaries required to crystalise national identity. Anthony Milner observed how historically for Malay rulers 'Territorial borders were often unknown … the actual location of the Malay state, in fact, appears to have been a matter of relatively little importance' (Milner, 2016, p. 4). Thus a similar pattern

of subjects shifting allegiances to different kings ('Malays did not even acknowledge a single sovereign') was a common historical occurrence (Milner, 2016, p. 2). The constant shifting corresponds to how there appears to be little concern over permanent ownership. Indeed, Milner notes how orientalists observing these characteristics would conclude that Malays are unsettled and turbulent.

Viewed from the present, as the Malay nation-building process has deepened its foothold, the Malay discourse of 'home' appears located at the crossroads of two different historical demands. On one hand it is imprinted in the construction of a modern nation state. Maila Stivens (2002) explains how the idea of a stable household was crucial for the state's goal to ensure the discourse of family values would also translate to the intergenerational transmission of capitalism. This was effective as it amounted to an immensely popular discourse where owning and furnishing houses were indicators of one's arrival to the new consumerist modernity. On the other hand, its long diasporic history of migration indicates that the meaning of 'home' isn't limited to modern bourgeois domesticity. Joel Kahn notes that the cosmopolitanism presumed in the varied articulations of 'home' in the Malay context to conclude that Malays are often 'at home in a diversity of places at different times in their lives, and particular localities were either impermanent or flexible, continuously made and remade' (J. Kahn, 2017, p. 64). The Malay experience of home then cannot be understood in terms of settlement. This indeed is what Malay films would bring to the fore in very obvious ways.

Unsettled Men

We can begin by noting how even a brief survey would point to the curious preponderance of what I describe as unsettled men. This would see them in various states of movement, whether journeying or in transit in between destinations or simply suspended and unable to settle in a desired location. It has been a trope from the earliest days of the industry through the *merantau* genre of films, which refers to an early modern practice that sees young men leave their home to come of age and learn about independence. In *Nilam* (1949), Ahmad the protagonist travels in honour of his father's death all the way to Cairo as he transforms from a meek boy to a warrior. The misadventures in the classic *Musang Berjanggut* (Bearded Fox; 1959) centre on Tun Nila Utama's journey to faraway lands in search of the ideal wife. In *Sri Mersing* (1961), Damaq sojourns to Mersing only to be cast out after being slandered for kidnapping Sri, the beautiful and prized village girl. The same link between masculinity and wandering would inform the *Bujang Lapok* (Worn-out Bachelors) trilogy. The classic *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (Worn-Out Bachelors become Warriors) (Run Run Shaw, 1959) for example is about three friends and their comedic journey into the world of Malay martial arts. A chance encounter with a *silat* (a Southeast Asian martial art) guru led them to discover love, literacy and the skills of survival. This began after encountering a hostile world. They learned about the importance of fighting after being trapped in a mass brawl at the port they docked while on their journey. The same idea remains compelling even in more recent cinema. *Bunohan* (Solomon, 2011) takes the viewer across national borders as Adil, a prize fighter in Thailand, evades his assassination by hiding in his village in Kelantan.

It is difficult to ignore how work has been a crucial part of this narrative. *Kembara Seniman Jalanan* (Street Musicians Explore; 1986) features aspiring musicians trying to make it in Kuala Lumpur's bourgeoning entertainment industry. *Mat Som* (1989) features an up-and-coming journalist who refuses marriage in order to pursue his dreams of travelling the world. *Balada* (1993) speaks to migration by reversing it as Desa returns to the village after failing to adapt to city life. The question of work is made more obvious in films of love across classes. The typical plot sees the male protagonist falling in love with a woman only to be obstructed by the forces of history, as we find them situated at opposing poles in the expanding gulf between rich and poor. Movement is now recast along the lines of an awareness of new and rapidly proliferating social stratifications. The P. Ramlee classic *Penarek Becha* (Trishaw Puller; 1955) is an example. It tells the story of the poor Amran, who falls in love with the rich Azizah while in constant transit, through trishaw rides as he takes her from her house to her workplace, traversing the class divisions that stand in between their romance. In these films work is significant as a marker of history as it would organise a narrative around the emergence of modernity and the new demands it makes on Malay culture. This would be shown via a landscape of gaps where the class and rural-urban divides sees Malay culture transformed in profound ways.

But that men are more usually shown displaced, in a state of 'neither here nor there' also indicates the tenuous nature of their dominance. This tenuousness becomes more apparent when we consider how their search for wage labour is frequently linked to their equally fraught relationship to home. Indeed, it is here that we see how Malay cinema is particularly attuned to a

specific type of mobility under capitalism. For the displacements that are constantly featured indicates how Malay men are the ones who are most disturbed by modernization. In other words, Malay men are often portrayed in a state of inconstancy, between joblessness and homelessness to imply that they cannot be rooted. This is where 'home'—whether as ideal, place or question—is frequently staged to think of history, that is to say, how the disruptions in modernity's transformations reveal uneven temporalities where past and present are negotiated in violent ways for capital to be entrenched.[18] In other

[18] How films would render a historical and regional coming of age practice such as *merantau* in terms of displacement and homelessness is a fascinating question that requires in depth historical and sociological study. What my thesis may be able to suggest is that *merantau* became subsumed by capital where its role as a coming of age migratory practice became absorbed into the capitalist value form. Thus finding one's masculinity and independence is now represented in terms of one's desirability in the marketplace and the ability to command the household. This historical situation resonates in Malay films in particular, as displacement or being in the state of transition is presented as a way to narrate a broader confrontation with capitalism's emergence and its demands upon the Malay context. The link between capitalism and *merantau* is actually presumed in in Zawawi (1998) Ong (2010). Each mention that *merantau* is frequently evoked in narratives about the Malay experience of modernization, as an entirely new generation move to newly formed cities in search of work and opportunities. But while informative they merely position *merantau* as a passive process, namely one that is ultimately determined by capitalism. Recognizing the uneven nature of development, however, necessitates that we consider of *merantau's* longer history in the archipelago. Thus while *merantau* does flow to where capitalism takes root, it is also underlined by a longer and more established history of movement that predates capitalism. Hence while the abundance of narratives about displaced Malay men may indicate certain recognition of capitalism's power, their inability to settle into neat enclosures also attests to how *merantau* carries a distinct logic that is also antagonistic to capital's demands.

words, it is through the constant display of unsettled men that home becomes a question. The relationsihp to a 'home' is presumed only for it to be challenged by historical transformation.

Home Undone

To an extent this echoes how Anthony Vidler links homelessness to a more profound sense of historical displacement, "a homelessness generated sometimes by war, sometimes by the unequal distribution of wealth" (Vidler, 1992, p. 6). But the question of home raised by Malay films makes it less about losing one's identity in a hostile and ever changing world, than it is about a fundamental inability to adapt to historical demands. [19] Thus in addition to men on the move, where and when the house is deployed as an effect of modernity is crucial: The men would be shown at times homeless, temporarily in between houses or forbidden to enter a desired home as they travel across modernization. Houses in turn would be positioned relationally or comparatively in light of another different place. The houses are uneven insofar as they mark tensions between the past and present, the rich and poor, urban and rural,

[19] The many reasons postulated for this is beyond the scope of my study. But the ensuing chapters do echo Joel Kahn's (2017) observation about how the Malay notion of community is not reliant on settlement. Kahn refers to this to argue for the archipelagic and regional cosmopolitanism that has allowed for the Malay context's assimilation of different ethnicities into its fold. This also speaks to the difference between the state as it formed in Western modernity, which as James Scott (2017) writes is defined by settlement, and the cosmopolitan migrant flows of the state in Southeast Asia.

traditional and modern. Indeed, it would not be unusual that a home would embody more than one social contradiction, as the family, owing to the instabilities of modernity, is comprised of children of different classes or spatial backgrounds (for example, parents of a rural background with children who have made it in urban capitalist-modernity).

Antara Dua Darjat

The classic film *Antara Dua Darjat* [Between Two Classes] (1962) illustrates the way houses are deployed to depict historical tensions. This film is about the relationship between Ghazali, a poor music teacher, played by the legendary P. Ramlee, and Tengku Zaleha, an aristocrat's daughter played by Saadiah. The plot revolves around the different obstacles they face as Zaleha's family refused to be associated with a commoner. The tension of their romance is captured in the famous 'piano scene'. This sees Ghazali at Zaleha's house for her lessons, where he teaches her how to play *Getaran Jiwa* [*Soulful Vibrations*]. The scene is typically understood as a statement about music's power to bring different classes together. But what is less acknowledged is how this moment inaugurated Ghazali's infiltration into aristocratic spaces. Not only was Zaleha wooed in the very living room of the elitist household that rejected Ghazali, he would also steal the show again later when he performed there for her birthday party, crooning at the grand piano while admired by a crowd of the young and rich.

Ghazali's uncanny presence among the wealthy is foreshadowed in the fim's opening scene where his antagonistic relationship to the elite household is

clearly pointed out. *Antara Dua Darjat* begins in the future when Ghazali and Zaleha are no longer together owing to her forced marriage to the wealthy Tengku Mukri. We see her awoken one thunderous and rainy evening by Ghazali's low and ghastly voice calling her from afar. She leaves her bed to approach it and find his dark figure by the bedroom window at which point she faints in shock, thinking she saw a ghost when actually Ghazali was stalking her in the dark. We then see him dash to his wooden home, set as an obviously more spartan space than Zaleha's family's luxurious *Anggrek Villa [Orchid Villa]*. This short span establishes them in different worlds marked by different types of houses as Ghazali flees the villa to return to his far more basic wooden house, depicting his poverty and consequently the class gap that stood in between their love.

Antara Dua Darjat ends with the defeat of its aristicoratic male characters and the triumph of its poor commoner hero. But the bigger picture it reveals is also one of historical dislocation. Ghazali's dashing back and forth from elite territory to his village also maps a geopolitical tension. Ghazali is from Singapore, *the* city-state of the region at the time and the Malay world's center of trade and entertainment. This situates him in what was then the most modern part of Malaya (before Singapore seceded in 1965). Zaleha meanwhile lives in Johor which was (and is still known as) the most feudal part of the country. Thus Ghazali articulates his displacement not simply by struggling against the arbitrariness of class hierarchy, but amidst contrasting ideals of a newly-independent country facing modernity. He is 'neither here nor there' not simply because of forbidden love but because modernisation left Malays even more

stratified.[20] Crucially, this suspension in between spaces is marked by contrasting types of houses. This is captured in the conclusion when the rich find themselves in the poor neighbourhood. Tengku Mukri is finally defeated in a fist fight as Zaleha ends up in Ghazali's arms amidst the cluster of wooden-stilted homes where the poor live, far cry from the lush and marbled bungalow she was more accustomed to. Love triumphs but it also exposes the extent to which the question of home is unresolved: the boundaries between rich and poor, private and public are inverted as a newly decolonised nation tries to establish its identity.

Part 2: The Gender of History

Women Apparent and Present

That this love story translates to a tussle between men of different classes —with Zaleha as the feminine object to be fought over—offers a window into the unevenness of Malay masculinity. On one hand it speaks to a presumed link between masculinity and modernity. In this regard allegory takes on an overtly gendered form as the question of belonging is articulated through male insecurities. If allegory visualises the contradictions of a given time, then Malay cinema certainly assumes men to be modernisation's 'cartographers,' as it were.

[20] It is a widely documented fact that the Malay monarchy was far more drastically enriched in the modern era of the Malay-nation state than they ever were before, when feudal allegiances were more fluid. For more see Milner, (2016) and Suwannathat-Pian (2011).

This is not surprising as Malay cinema, a convergence of the media, state and capital, remains a male dominated industry. But that it would continue to feature and market narratives of men and their divided place in modernity also indicates a tacit recognition of masculine power's limits. This furthermore assumes a certain politics as we would also find men usually diminished or emasculated alongside women's relative cultural power and advantage. Indeed, this would see men perform in overt melodramatic gestures of crying, wailing and moaning in loss in recognition of confusion. It will be worth considering some examples before specifying the implications this has on our understanding the question of home.

Antara Dua Darjat's concluding fight scene was decided by Zaleha. At some point during the brawl, Ghazali found himself on the floor as Tengku Mukri was about to shoot him. She suddenly appears in the scene to grab the rifle. When the shocked Tengku Mukri asked what she was doing she loudly declared that she was there to save Ghazali her lover. Tengku Mukri is irate and aims the weapon at her when it jammed, giving Ghazali the opportunity to strike back. The fight continues with Zaleha once again stepping in at a crucial moment. Ghazali falls after Tengku Mukri beats his back with a stick and runs to the rifle again. She steps up to grab it before he can and then points it at him.[21] Tengku

[21] *Annie Oakley* (1935) appears to be the first American / Western film to feature a woman with a rifle although she does not at any stage in the film point it to a man as a threat. She is primarily a sharpshooting competitor. It seems that a woman would not be shown to shoot a man until 1965 in *The 10th Victim*, an Italian Sci-Fi film starring Ursula Andress though this did not take place inside spaces of supposed domestic tranquil. A Hollywood film that captures the tension of Zaleha's warning shot is *Goodfellas* (1990) when Karen hill took Henry's gun and threatened to

Mukri then ran for an axe nearby but is shot and finally stopped. Everyone is stunned into silence and turns to Zaleha thinking that it was her when it was actually Tengku Aziz, Tengku Mukri's cousin. The camera spends a split second to show a confused Zaleha checking her hands to see if she might have fired her weapon.

This brief turn to her heightens the suspense leaving the viewer waiting a little longer before revealing the source of the gunshot. But it also reflects an earlier moment in the film when Zaleha pointed a pistol at her half-brother, in a bedroom no less, and fired a warning shot after he murdered her mother when it was revealed that she was a cabaret singer. She called the police on him to have him arrested, tried and sentenced to death. The father witnesses the collapse of his household and loses his mind. The film then takes us to the asylum where Zaleha pays him a visit. We see her taking a slow walk down the corridor, intimidated but calmly passing by cell after cell of shirtless men ranting in exaggerated madness, before arriving to where her father is locked up. I take this to be the film's clearest historical statement. Its patriarch, depicted so authoritatively in the beginning of the film, is now institutionalised in one of modernity's most definitive state apparatuses. He is behind bars, for nothing other than fate, seen in a maniacal exaggeration of his rich man persona, marking the long decline from the lavish bungalow spaces in which we first saw him.

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shoot him (although no shot was fired). This did not end up well for Karen who was soon beaten to a pulp for it. In any case it is not yet clear to me that Hollywood has a comparable scene of a woman stepping in the line of fire to proclaim "I am here to save my [male] lover" without any irony. I bring Hollywood into this discussion given how so much of the literature on Southeast Asian women's cultural power use the West as a yardstick for what 'empowerment' should mean.

Zaleha's intervention in the film's concluding duel then was not the first time she was placed amidst dangerous men. The taken for granted esteem she assumes is marked in the film's closing crane shot. She is in Ghazali's arms but she is also holding the only rifle in the film, which also happens to be the biggest weapon in the film. This also indicates the limits of a male-authored ground, as her power is stated at the heart of inequality's spatial divisions, and the toll it has taken on men.

It is worth considering another example. Adapted from a local fairy tale, the classic comedy *Musang Berjanggut* [Bearded Fox] (1959) sees Tun Nila Utama, an adopted prince also played by P. Ramlee, leave his kingdom for a lenghty and trying journey across oceans and hills in search of an ideal wife. He eventually chose Puspawangi who impressed him with her wisdom and wit. They fall in love and marry but upon returning to the kingdom are met with jealous men of the palace (including Tun Nila's stepfather the king) who wanted Puspawangi for themselves. They concoct a mission that has Tun Nila leaving the province so that they could compete to seduce her. But it was during Tun Nila's absence, when he was sent on another journey, that the film became about her intelligence. Realising how she had become the forbidden object, she anticipates the different powerful men's attempts to seduce her and proceeds to toy with their stupidity. This leads to the classic scene in the royal bedroom where she rides on the king's back while whipping his behind as she is fooling the senators at the same time. This not only mocked the king's folly and desperation, but featured a common woman's ability to wreak havoc in the palace. We should note how the story's folk quality belies many indicators of a bourgeoning modern context. A vibrant maritime trade was referenced as a background to

Tun Nila's sojourn which extended both his and Puspawangi's family across the wide terrain the film constantly shows. But more than that the film presumed the need to redefine the woman. Tun Nila had to leave his kingdom in the first place in search of women who would not just be sex objects. That Puspawangi manipulated the entire palace leadership after their attempts to bed her does not only indicate that she is beyond reach on account of her intelligence but that she is also smarter than the most powerful men in the kingdom. [22]

The classic *Menanti Hari Esok* [Waiting for Tomorrow] (1977) is a more recent case in point. It tells the story of a former headmaster named Cikgu Talib who loses control of his family. His daughter Rahayu (played by Noor Kumalasari) gets pregnant out of wedlock and attempts suicide while his son Jalil (played by Jins Shamsuddin, who also plays the father) just wants his money and has no issues showing his utter disdain to his father whom he only sees as weak and pathetic. This is especially difficult not only because Cikgu Talib is struggling with cancer, with only six more months to live, but also because he hid news of his disease, and suffering, from his family. The film would demonstrate his stressed state of mind in a cartographic gesture. We see him depressed and wandering through Kuala Lumpur's busy highways. The scene places his face in the middle of a tripartite frame with modern edifices (skyscrapers, banks, night clubs massage parlors and pubs) featured in the frame to his right, while we see Kuala Lumpur's main mosques to his left. He turns his head up, down and around, frowning and looking confused at the vastness of cultural contradictions

[22] Barbara Andaya (1997) argues for a regional Southeast Asian modernity before colonial modernity through looking at a cosmopolitan global trade and knowledge production that thrived before European colonialism.

around him and almost gets hit by a motorbike when he tries to cross a busy street. His wife meanwhile is sexually unsatisfied and seduces, in broad daylight in his living room while he was out at the mosque, the very doctor who is treating his cancer.

Women's Power

While Malay cinema put men front and center in encounters with history—as their search for home embodies modernity's instabilities and disruptions—they are not the only constituents of the journey. Read historically, masculine mobility, which is a hallmark of modern conquest, must always contend with its opposite gender. This, however, is not about token ways of including women. As I explained above, while stereotypes are arguably evoked they are rarely not without some cost to the male characters, especially as they struggle to discover a modernity that is ostensibly meant for them. In other words, the Malay masculine search for home also demands that women's power is shown so as to present modernity in a more complete light. This is rendered in various ways, as we shall see in the chapters to follow. But while the films depict historical contradictions, they do so by deploying the unenclosed Malay home to demonstrate an acute awareness of how the masculine quality of Malay modernity, or even its gender, has yet to be confirmed. If narratives of home feature men, the confusion they encounter is never without some reckoning with or nod to women's active cultural power.

Understanding why the gender of history should be a question in Malay films requires that we consider Southeast Asia's unique position as a region with

a considerable past of relative gender 'harmony.' To be sure, men embody the institutionalization of, and immediate encounters with, modernization. Insofar as they benefit from "ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion," their privilege is certainly hegemonic (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Men control well-funded state-driven Islamic courts, which in addition to prohibiting women judges oversee an increasingly powerful moral police force that routinely nabs unwed couples for close proximity. This is also the very institution that publicly canes lesbians and Muslims caught for drinking alcohol or gambling.[23] Islamization grew in tandem with state driven measures to develop Malay capitalists during the New Economic Policy, which spanned from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. This saw government initiatives to fund local Bumiputera enterprises—and correspondingly exclusive Bumiputera schools, universities, banks, townships and land agreements—to ensure that they would be globally innovative and competitive. Maila Stivens notes the hypermasculine form of Malay capitalism during that period, as women were not figured or considered for this initiative owing to unchecked and taken for granted associations of men with commerce (Stivens, 2002, p. 107). To this we

[23] The extent to which Malay matrifocality or womanhood disrupts the system in surreptitious or indirect ways is worth exploring. Michael Peletz (2002) documents how women are heard in considerable ways to gain advantage in Malay-Muslim domestic proceedings. Raihanah, Martinez and Wirdati (2010) chart how *harta sepencharian* (jointly acquired property over time by a husband and wife) is recognized by the *Syariah* courts as a crucial legal source, indicating Islamic jurisprudence's flexibility to adapt to different contexts. It is noteworthy, however, that the films I chose, insofar as they are iconic moments in Malay cinema, in addition to showing men emasculated before women's cultural power, do not feature or explore Islam in depth.

could add that the more historically established Malay institutions such as the monarchy, police force and military have only ever been male-led.

But this sixty-year turn of events is embedded within a much longer history of women's cultural power. Historical literature is abundant with frequent observations regarding the "lack of exaggerated opposition of male and female ideologies" owing to the general "complementarity" of masculine and feminine roles and duties in Southeast Asian gender dynamics (King & Wilder 2003, 263). Similarly, Wazir Jahan points out a "culture of informality" where expectations of behavior and conduct—both in private and public—are not rigidly differentiated in gendered terms (Wazir Jahan, 1992, p. 17). This has remained more or less a constant pattern despite far reaching structural and institutional modernising measures. For example Hirschman in his 2016 review of the global literature on gender difference point out the relative equality between Malay men and women in the family context, especially when it comes to work and other household duties and expectations.[24] David Gilmore, who upon decades of comparing masculinities across cultures cited Malaysia as an example of a non-patriarchal society due to its "very gentle cultures" (Gilmore 2008, p. 32).

Thus it is noteworthy that this circumstance of general complementarity has endured despite the modernization of the state and its absorption into the global economy (Healey, 1999; Peletz, 2009). Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz in their extensive survey of gender in Southeast Asia emphasizes the region's location as a key passageway of global capital's expansion but they also recognise the salience of the scholarly consensus around the "egalitarianism" of

gender relations that still pervades the context (Peletz & Ong, 1995, p. 12). Thus while certain modern patriarchal forms of governance dominate—where men write the laws, control the state's security apparatuses and capitalism imposes a gendered division of labour—the same dynamic is not necessarily mirrored in other aspects of the culture more broadly. This explains why a certain "pluralism with regard to gender and sexuality has long been rather robust, and typically far more expansive than its counterparts in the West" (Peletz, 2012, p. 910).[25] As Maila Stivens also concludes, "women in much of Southeast Asia, it is argued, have 'relatively high status' or 'relative autonomy'; this is seen to contrast with women's experience in East and South Asia" (Stivens, 2010, p. 28). To this we can also add Southeast Asian women's historical advantage in commerce. As Anthony Reid concludes "up until the late nineteenth century most Southeast Asian women had more freedom and economic agency than their European or (Chinese or Indian) counterparts, and played economic roles equivalent to (though different from) those of men" (Reid, 2014, p. 149). [26]

[25] See Davies (2007) for a history behind the Bugis community's recognition of 5 genders. This often remains the most commonly cited example to show the uniqueness of the Southeast Asian development of gender identity. Wade & Ferree (2014) list the Borneo ethnic group Dayak as an example of gender ambiguity as well.

[26] Reid showed that the trend of female control of production and trade declined with the advent of modernization where technology replaced a lot of traditional forms of physical and manual labor. Men would soon dominate the newly formed industries but only to an extent. Even early on there was a "huge socio-cultural gap" that "divided the rational modern economy operated by Europeans and Chinese from the traditional rural one. Indigenous societies, it was claimed, simply failed to respond to the profit motive of liberal economic theory, either by producing the

Barbara Andaya (2006) therefore cautions against concluding that Southeast Asian men's formal advantage over modern commercial and state institutions should translate to their control over culture: "A hierarchy that assumed male superiority was implicit in the world religions and in the state structures they supported, but the effects of idealized gender roles were felt primarily among the elite. Even here, however, the model of male authority and female compliance was often at variance with the ways in which men and women actually related to each other" (Andaya, 2006, p. 228). Thus the formal levels of institutions and laws only tell one side of a larger story, as the final instance of 'power' still remains negotiated at a cultural level. The examples I listed above indeed echoes her broader observation that "constraints imposed by state and religious ideologies were constantly subverted by social status, by age, and by personal initiative, so that women were well able to establish a reputation for religious piety, as repositories of cultural lore, as skillful mediators, and as leaders knowledgeable in public affairs" (Andaya, 2006, p. 231).

The masculinization of Malay modernity then is not the full story of contemporary Malayness. Women too are shown to stake their claims in how the process should be narrated. This explains why narratives of men in search of home would routinely assume that history is not just meant for one gender. Thus Malay masculinity is uneven amidst the failure to embed himself in modernity. Malay masculinity is constructed amidst a "transition from a more egalitarian

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entrepreneurial movers and shakers or the capital accumulators who would move the economy forward" (Reid, 2014, p. 155).

sense of gender identification, in which the idea of the androgyne prevails, to a more modern contemporary patriarchal sense of masculinity that is more in line with the bourgeois colonial notion of masculinity" as Khoo Gaik Cheng observes (Khoo, 2006 p. 163). Femininity too sways across symbolic codes, between assuming an object position in an androcentric modernity and the autonomy and leverage it could claim and express from its pre-colonial contexts. This compels Anthony Reid to question "if there is a less patriarchal modernity" (Reid, 2014, p. 162).

Part 3: Seeing Women's Power

Where is Women's Power?

For argument's sake, before detailing Malay women's enduring cultural power and its resonance in film, it is worth considering a skeptical perspective. For example, Anthony Reid is forthright in stating that the socio-cultural privilege Malay women enjoy throughout much of history has not translated to actual impact: "Given their past roles, it is disappointing to find so little explicit female contestation of the maleness of modernity" (Reid, 2014, p. 159). To this we could also add a similar observation. The ascendance of a masculine modernity means that resistance can only occur in masculine terms. This echoes Barbara Andaya's observation regarding how politics remains a "domain that seems quintessentially male" (Andaya, 2007, p. 125). In other words, where women do participate politically, they have had to do so in masculine terms, internalizing the rhetoric and codes of male-dominated institutions. This sees

women embodying phallic standpoints and postures of aggressiveness to wield state power and attention. Various Malaysian feminist organizations have indeed taken this approach, where the chief strategy is to write and re-write state legislation. The quintessential maleness of modernity itself remains dominant: The political option is to take on masculine attitudes of conquest and acquisition —in essence, immersing themselves in the rat race—without contesting the fundamentally alienating effects of modernization itself.

We should also note that the studies arguing for Malay and Southeast Asian women's relative empowerment, such as those by Shelly Errington and Jane Monnig Atkinson (1990), Wazir Jahan Karim (1992), Michael Peletz and Aihwa Ong (1995), are matched by equally compelling disagreements, namely by Penny Van Esterik (1996), Robert Winzeler (1996) and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2003). Even Barbara Andaya (2006), who affirms Southeast Asian Women's historically higher esteem than women in other regions, would concede that its erosion under modernization suggests that their privileged social position isn't as politically forceful as it may appear. Indeed, even the most optimistic accounts of Malay women's relatively high status would qualify it as informal or positioned in contradictory ways. All in all, while Malay and Southeast Asian women's cultural authority is generally recognised, the extent to which they may be of any importance in the more formal state-arena of rights-based politics appears to be undetermined. It doesn't look especially good today, with the overtly male led state-modernity in the making is over sixty years old. Women only constitute ten per cent of total parliamentarians while the question of whether or not a woman could be a chief minister is still debated as recently as 2017. One would be justified to suppose then that much of what has been said

about Malay women's informal cultural power appears no match for nation-state capitalism.

Allegory

It is in this specific historical location that I understand Malay films to enable the longstanding history of Malay feminine power and its political efficacy to be seen. This, to be sure, does not make it feminist as it does after all emerge amidst male-focused narratives of home and homelessness amidst modernization. Here women's power would be shown entangled in various scenarios of anxieties about Malay maleness in ways that do not exclude misogyny. It is amidst this mix of temporalities, however, that the notion of allegory as theorized by Frederic Jameson is useful. This understands films as allegorical, as opposed to literal, because allegory brings together the contradictory totality of its broader historical context into narrative coherence.[27]

[27] It should be clear then that allegory in the distinct mode Jameson means it differs significantly from other similar literary forms such as "parables" or "fables." Conventionally understood, allegory long thrived – and was eventually criticized – as a dominant mode of literature from the classical period to the European Middle Ages because it was deployed to convey moral lessons. Its didactic quality presumes a similarly outdated metaphysics where narrative is taken to resemble an underlying fixed set of assumptions. There is a correspondence between text and meaning. Jameson, on the other hand, denies this equivalence presumed in "traditional" allegory: "the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol"(Jameson, 1986, 73). Jameson's modified notion of allegory is drawn from his reading of Walter Benjamin's essay on story telling where a link is drawn between a distinct style of presentation and the similarly chaotic modern world it aims to describe: "Allegory is . . . the

The totality is symbolized, however provisionally, into a distinct combination of temporalities by which history could be thought. But this does not and cannot happen without reason. Rather the distinct combination of times—in this case the modernity of a masculinized state against women's profound cultural advantage—speaks to an experience unique to the Real of history in the Malay context, that is, the totality of events and their contradictions that affect, and are turn affected by, modernization. Thus allegory aims to represent history by seeking "a designation for a form able to hold radical discontinuities and incommensurabilities together without annulling precisely those 'differences'" (Jameson, 2007, p. 28).

Thus understood as allegory, a cultural text does not simply contain historical information. It works with the materiality of its present and is thus thinking about history. Jameson understands it as "the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical and ideological subtext, it being always understood that the subtext is not immediately present as such but must itself be (re)constructed after the fact" (Jameson, 2013, p. 81). The insight that is yielded then is less about the particular text or genre but the distinct temporal processes it personifies. Thus it is not about what a particular text says or stands for but how it is an attempt to make sense of its present. This description of allegory as a way of

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privileged mode of our own life in time, a clumsy deciphering of meaning from moment to moment, the painful attempt to restore a continuity to heterogeneous, disconnected instants" (Jameson, 2016a, 72). While this formulation clearly functions within a certain stagist view of history I think the general idea that modernization has troubled pre-existing modes of signification – and that any account of the big picture must necessarily contend with the mixture of times this troubling causes – sufficiently justifies for my usage of allegory for my purposes.

reading history resonates with Jameson's account of it as a "a form of just such [cognitive] mapping of the totality" (Jameson, 1986, p. 88).[28] Viewed from here Malay cinema speaks to how feminine power remains compelling despite the male led modernization process. Insofar as it is neglected by historical research and civil society, and even local discourse as a whole for that matter, the Malay cinematic fixation with men in transit—understood as allegories of unresolved historical tensions—will be approached as a resource to reflect on the contests surrounding the gender of Malay modernity and consequently the distinct path Malaysian politics would take as a result.

The criticality of allegory is not simply in how it captures a certain historical moment. Allegory is also productive in how it mediates and intervenes in history. Mediation is best distinguished from a straightforward account of 'reflection' where a given novel, film, painting or cultural product simply mirrors its surroundings. The problem with this approach is that it assumes that the product is merely a passive object that is imprinted by the social forces that surround it. Reflection is unable to account for the product's historical relevance, namely, how it is able to endure through time and resonate across demographics

[28] In brief, the three concepts are interrelated. Allegory is the representation of the Real of history, the totality of contradictions and incommensurabilities in a given time, which Jameson would also call the political unconscious. That allegory symbolizes the real is why Jameson describes it as fundamentally impossible: "Allegorical interpretation is then first and foremost an interpretive operation which begins by acknowledging the impossibility of interpretation in the older sense, and by including that impossibility in its own provisional or even aleatory movements." (Jameson, 1991, 126) Cognitive mapping is when allegory pays particular attention to how the spatial fragmentations caused by capitalism is linked and visualized by a cultural text.

and generations despite the many differing meanings and interpretations it has acquired along the way. As an alternative to reflection, mediation can explain how a cultural product is both reactive and productive. It is reactive in how it is necessarily situated amidst the different historical standpoints that converge under capitalism: The text is a "porous and receptive object that soaks up all such complicated and coexistent levels of fantasy or desire" (Jameson, 2006, 126). It is productive, however, in how it would attempt to make sense of those differences in its own way, that is to say out of its own moment of iteration, thereby stating its claim regarding its historical situation.[29] It "does not fix the meaning of art as a reified reflection of its society but rather opens the field of relations in which art is always contingently intervening" (Kornbluh, 2019, p. 60).

To understand how a cultural product mediates, in other words, is to understand how it is also a way of grappling with and challenging history. In other words "texts are in themselves 'historical events' for the distinct way they try to negotiate the contradictions of history" (Buchanan, 2007, p. 59) Thus allegories convert capitalism's divergent temporalities into a narrative, however partial, that accounts for the world it is situated in. This is a form of historical intervention in how it becomes an additional text in an ensemble of already existing texts that constitute the understanding of a given time.

[29] Qin Wang's (2013) defense of Jameson is key in emphasizing how allegory outside the West must necessarily work with the historicity of the medium with which it works with: "particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel" (Jameson, 1986, 69).

The Nation is Evitable

Evoking Jamesonian allegory at this juncture inevitably takes me to the disputes around his use of nationalism. Jameson's Marxist framework understands capitalism in the third world, or the former colonies, to be subjugated by a world system in which the nation is a fundamental unit capital needs to regulate for its expansion. Jameson's (1986) claim that third-world texts necessarily allegorize through the perspective of nationalism has been thoroughly critiqued by Aijaz Ahmad (1992), Lydia Liu (1995) Thomas Palakeel (1996) among others. [30] Jameson responds to this by claiming that insofar as any analysis of empire requires some account of capital, no situation in the global south can be understood in abstraction from the world system and the role the nation plays in perpetuating the hierarchy between center and periphery. Allegory aims precisely to capture how narratives of modernization in the global south negotiate this relationship as it would bring together the plurality of times that antagonistically merge in this arrangement into narrative form out of which critiques distinct to particular lived experiences in the materiality of capitalism

[30] The backlash to Jameson's article was followed by what Margaret Hillenbrand calls "the backlash against the backlash" (Hillenbrand, 2006. p. 636). It was met with a stream of critical defenses of Jameson, notably by Imre Szeman (2001), Juliet McGonegal (2006), Ian Buchanan (2007), Neil Lazarus (2011), Qin Wang (2013)James Christie (2015) and Auritro Majumder (2017). According to Fredric Jameson (2019) Ahmad has since regretted his criticism although the former did not cite the exact text whereby Ahmad actually states as much. It should be said, however, that Ahmad's (1995) later critique of post-colonial theory, which is relatively uncited compared to his critique of national allegory, takes a more approving position towards Jameson, going so far as to correct certain post-colonial assumptions regarding the latter's approach.

in the third world could be developed. The problem is not in Jameson's conviction that this necessarily requires for some form of a collective to be visualized. Rather it is in his insistence that the nation is the only conduit through which the third world subject's account of and relationship to the world could be made intelligible.[31]

It is arguable that Malay films are national insofar as they bear the out-and-out characteristic of featuring only Malays. In many ways this resonates with a kind of ethnocentrism unique to the Malay right-wing tendency to envision and speak of Malaysia as if non-Malays do not exist. Thus insofar as Malay films picture a world where Malay issues are isolable, this speaks to the need to

[31] Jameson's account of the non-West is also vindicated in how the historicism on which it is premised is having a resurgence of sorts in two emerging fields. The first is occurring in Global Modernism Studies: "recent efforts to 'globalize' modernism have turned to Jameson's work in the hopes of finding a way to broaden modernism beyond its traditional Euro-American boundaries. This impulse can be best seen in the Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms, which adopts a largely Jamesonian definition of what it means to 'globalize' modernism" (Eatough, 2015, 599). The second is the study of Combined and Uneven Development. Sparked by Justin Rosenberg's (2008) reading of Leon Trotsky for International Relations, the discourse has now made its way to cultural and literary studies where the plurality of times that uneven development presupposes is regarded to be a more comprehensive approach to explain the chronopolitics of the global south given post-colonial theory's ambivalent relationship to the Marxist account of capitalism. The Warwick Research Collective alongside James Christie & Nesrin Değirmencioğlu (2019) have been at the forefront of this initiative where Jameson is reread for how combined and uneven development could be utilised for the humanities. The link to Trotsky is also evident in how Jameson builds his historicism through World Systems Theory, of which the Trotskyist Ernest Mandel is a key thinker.

imagine an ethnically uniform world that unmistakably bears the hallmarks of nationalism, especially when we consider the Malay context's recent history of migration, hybridity and indeterminacy where a drive to strengthen uniformity was arguably non-existent. We should also note that the local film industry underwent a strict Malayization process especially after Singapore's secession after which a Malaysian film industry, spearheaded by a Malay led government, had to be constructed anew. This occurred after the Malay-nationalist coup of Tunku Abdul Rahman's purportedly more inclusive government, which was seen to be soft on Chinese business. The coup occurred in the wake of the May 13th 1969 riots, in which working-class Malay mobs tore through Kuala Lumpur's working class Chinese neighborhoods on a murderous rampage. This is a key historical detail for this chapter in particular as the aftermath saw the establishment of the National Cultural Congress in 1972 which demanded for Malay cultural products to abide by the core constituents of Malay identity, namely Islam. [32]

[32] Although this is not to be regarded as unusual given that it is occurring at the same time that liberals are forging their own counter-nationalism. The success of the film *M for Malaysia* (2018) linked to organizations such as Malaysians 4 Malaysia and Kita Malaysia are attempts to imagine a more inclusive nationality where Malaysia will not be limited to strictly Malay aspirations. As Margaret Hillenbrand says of Taiwan, it is very hard to abstract concerns about the nation when evaluating cultural products in the post-colony. Even raising the question of what a particular text does with the nation is to assume that the nation is an inevitable interpretative horizon one must work with. In the Malaysian case, even the supposedly more inclusive liberal imagination of a tolerant Malaysia would have nothing to say about the huge population of migrant workers that now constitutes a key part of the local cultural landscape.

This example could suggest that while Jameson may have erred in reducing all third world narratives to the national, it is equally difficult to think that the nation is not a factor at all. Thus Ian Buchanan (2007) reminds critics that Jameson is stressing how the nation, be it as something to challenge or accept, is an undeniable starting point for thinking about the present. Margaret Hillenbrand's (2006) critical reappraisal of national allegory is more instructive in stressing how the nation is in fact allegorized not as a mere historical given but a means of addressing Real incommensurabilities (which she concedes Jameson's account did not sufficiently finesse). In emphasizing that allegory is fundamentally about capturing discontinuities, the nation does not become a fixed thing but rather a terrain where various interpretations of history come together, where nationalism is to be questioned as much as it is to be accepted as a basic historical fact. That allegory in the national context is concurrently wrestling with its own contentious history while coming to terms with its experience with empire means that its "two-tier structure allows it to be both didactic and indeterminate, both affirmative of meaning and suspicious of it, both reconstructive and deconstructive, both committed to the retelling of lost histories and suspicious of any attempt to know the past" (Hillenbrand, 2006, p. 648). This approach would present an immediate convenient option for my project: the question of home visualizes how the contradictions underlying the nation building process are gendered.

Is the Nation a fact?

But Malay films allow us to see more, namely in how they ultimately evoke the nation only to provincialize it. This does not simply deconstruct the nation to show its historical presuppositions. It provincializes it by showing the failure of the nation to expand. The sense of dislocation, loss and migrancy we shall see various male icons embody throughout Malay cinema will showcase spaces that cannot be tamed and made uniform by their discoveries and journeys. But key is how this resistance occurs through displaying women presenting a differing temporal sensibility in two ways. The first is that it is contemporaneous with the development of a masculine modern order. This indicates that its history of cultural power is neither erased nor sidelined by modernization. Thus it does not simply contend with Malaysia's male led modernization as an alternate modern temporality, it does so from a longer standing historical presence. The immediate picture we get is that this confrontation with Malay-feminine temporality is an indication that official nationalism cannot perform the emptying of history required to homogenize time.

The nation's standardization of identity and erasure of difference is how the messiness of history is overcome. For Ernst Bloch "'nationhood' drives time, indeed history out of history: it is space and organic fate, nothing else; it is that 'true collective' whose underground elements are supposed to swallow the uncomfortable class struggle of the present" (Bloch, 2009, p. 90). National time is thus "empty," driven out, in how progress occurs against the concrete contextual limitations, "the result of a streamlining and pruning process which abstracts its trajectory from the tangled thickets of being in which events are immersed

(West-Pavlov, 2013, p. 167). Empty time ushers forgetting "because its context and environment have been cleared away" (Ibid.) On the contrary Malay films would show the difficulty to clear out time, and consequently, the difficulty of leveling space in ways that history is homogenized.

It is in this difficulty of emptying out time that Malay films also brings women's cultural power into view. This is particularly significant given how the latter is often understood as unarticulated. This positions my study as a response to longer standing concerns regarding the actual status of Malay feminine power: Shelly Errington and Jane Monnig Atkinson's (1990) observation here is worth considering:

> We in Euro-America tend to identify power with economic control and coercive force: any status or prestige not linked to it we tend to conceptualize as empty prestige, mere symbolism. We also tend to identify power with activity, forcefulness, getting things done, instrumentality and effectiveness brought about through calculation of means to achieve goals. The prevalent view of many parts of Southeast Asia, however, is that to exert force and make explicit commands, or to engage in direct activity— in other words to exert power in the Western sense— is to reveal a lack of spiritual power and effective potency, and consequently diminishes prestige (Errington & Atkinson, 1990, p. 5).

This resonates with how histories of Southeast Asian women are replete with various references to "informal power" where demands could be made in ways that oblige men to relent. This power is "informal" as it is expressed outside legal national-state frameworks and institutions but is nonetheless resonant in familial and communal ties. The lack of concepts has been a stumbling block for a more refined account of how this power remains potent as the nation building process solidifies. This is jarring enough for Wazir Jahan Karim to conclude that "Western themes of feminism cannot envisage a situation

where male and female relations are managed in a way as flexible and fluid as they are in Southeast Asia." (Karim 1995, p. 26). [33] Films would materialize this invisible and informal power into image to be a part of contemporary mass imagination.

But films would also do more. Understood allegorically, where films are infused with negotiations of temporal contests, films would show how Malay women's cultural power remains an active force of history making. But this is not a matter of a third-world film showcasing history-making out in the open. For the temporal sensibility Malay women personify has the effect of disrupting masculinity by orienting its future. What we find time and time again throughout Malay films is displaced men turning to Malay women to find their place in history. Kassim Selamat desires a home that Sabariah could only get from her mother; Zack desired to work in ways that Azura effortlessly could; Badul wanted material success after envying Malay women's more efficient adjustment

[33] For Anthony Reid Feminism resonated more among the Southeast Asian elites, where property and treating women as such was a more central concern: "a discourse of female liberation as a western import seemed plausible in relation to the royal courts with their particular needs to control female sexuality" (Reid, 2014, p. 149). But Reid also remarks that while "they were indeed the polygamous" they were just the "controlled exception to the general Southeast Asian norm of monogamy moderated by relatively easy divorce" (ibid). For example, modernization could not change the fact that the household – the sphere long thought to be where men led and defined the terms of labour and financial management - remained resistant to masculine violence. Reid (2014) noted how various colonial reports long puzzled over why wife beating was not a norm. All in all "colonialism has always been largely a men's affair" (Locher-Scholten & Niehof, 1992,p . 3).

to modernization; Tookoo wanted his father's attention, which went to his evil stepmother; Haris would want whatever Izah wanted, even if it meant living away from the city where success is promised.

This would amount to a constant deflation of the phallic nature of modernity. For nationalism's temporal emptying is incarnated via rationality, industry, force and other phallic qualities needed for conquest. Thus masculinity would be understood as "the progressive agent of national modernity (forward thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity" (McClintock, 1993, p. 66).[34] 'Masculine' and 'feminine' would be more entrenched from here on in terms of 'men's superiority over 'women' via fixed roles and expectations, differentiating an order of bodies and desires not for difference sake but such that progress could be organised. Malay films, however, would often see feminine time positioned in ways that curtail this nation-building trajectory, precisely as men would be shown to be left outside the broader temporality that unfolds with Malay modernization and thus short circuiting its expansion.

Political Unconscious

Through the frequency with which the question of home is raised in Malay films, we are able to locate the "informality" of Malay women's cultural

[34] Reid observes how Southeast Asian nationalists, taking inspiration from the West, wanted to see women subservient. He points Jose Rizal as a case in point: "He wrote home to tell his sisters to emulate German women (not French), who, he said "are home-loving, and they study cooking with as much diligence as they do music and drawing'" (Reid, 2014, 156).

privilege as something that still resonates in current attempts to negotiate modernity, even though it may not be presented via a crystalized set of concepts or institutionalized positions of power. Jamesonian allegory offers a more incisive way to appreciate the critical politics therein. Allegory understands history to be moved by a political unconscious. This refers to the historical sensibility distinct to a given context where narratives are formed out of its particular relationship to the Real of history. By this, time does not unfold as if an endless linear progression but rather grapples with various unresolved anxieties unique to its encounter with history, namely the point at which time becomes a constant feature of its thinking. Thus when Jameson says "allegory happens when you know you cannot represent something but you also cannot not do it," he is not referring to certain inherent natural qualities of a culture but the temporal struggles unique to a given setting out of which its present is understood (Jameson, 2007, p. 196). The constant measures to visualise Malay women's power that Malay cinema historically refashions speak to an impasse the masculinization of the national-state project cannot overcome and must struggle with constantly.

My positioning of Malay films allows us to see the political potential in the mixed of temporality it presents. The market forces and state apparatus of Malay modernity may dictate a certain vision of development with men at the helm though we can be sure that Malay films demand history to be imagined differently. As we shall see, the significance of women for historical thinking persists as a compelling theme in Malay cinema even well into the 20th century when the masculinization of the nation has been thoroughly institutionalized. There is no individual agent or social movement pushing this agenda. It is rather

woven into the Symbolic mediated by history in ways that find articulation in popular culture. It is commonplace and taken for granted and thus much work needs to be done as to how the temporality offered is embodied in different facets of Malay and Southeast Asian history. But one crucial fact remains. Its origins and trajectory mean that history has not been masculinized and this is a resource to unthink the Maleness of the Malay present. We shall begin with one way in which the Malay 'home's gender politics is often depicted: through the mother.

CHAPTER 2: LOST AT HOME: *IBU MERTUAKU* AND THE MATRIFOCAL INTERRUPTION OF MODERN MASCULINITY

Overview

This chapter addresses a common theme in Malay films, namely the tension between a persistent Malay matrifocality and a modernising Malay masculinity. I turn to the film *Ibu Mertuaku* (My Mother-in-law; 1962) to describe this tension, as it portrays a homeless musician, Kassim Selamat, torn between two houses, each led by a pair of mothers and daughters. I read the film's sensitivity to different types of households, revealed as Kassim navigates them, as depicting an anxious encounter with a matrifocal/feminine modernity. This is articulated through the persistence of the Malay mother/woman's longstanding cultural power as it is articulated through the significance of 'home' for the Malay context. This discovery reveals a fundamental antagonism in Malay modernity's gender politics, as my subsequent chapters will demonstrate.

This chapter is divided into three parts. Part 1 offers context by summarising the film's legacy with particular emphasis on its matrifocal presumptions. Part 2 proceeds to map the more specific ways *Ibu Mertuaku* portrays matrifocal authority via its distinct articulation of space and movement. The uniqueness of the Malay circumstance will be emphasised through a comparison with claims made about the 'matricidal' home of the bourgeois domestic sphere, which historically functions upon the suppression of women. Part 3 focuses on how Kassim Selamat's homelessness navigates Malay modernity's spatial anxieties. He embodies an extimate standpoint, one where the demarcation between 'inside' and 'outside', so crucial for the model ideal

home to cohere, cannot hold. His struggle to settle indicates a structural impasse to masculinise space, the implication here being that matrifocality is by no means a historical relic but an active focal point of history making.

Part 1: Ibu Mertuaku

Legacy

Ibu Mertuaku centres upon a conflict between Kassim Selamat, a musician of a bourgeoning pop culture who becomes blind, played by P. Ramlee, and his mother-in-law Nyonya Mansur, the villain the title refers to, played by Mak Dara. She reluctantly approves of his marriage to her daughter Sabariah (played by Sarimah), only to devise a series of lies that eventually lead to the couple's breakup. Kassim becomes depressed as a result. Unable to work, he becomes homeless. He is later found stranded and taken care of by Mami and Chombi, another mother-daughter pair, who nurse him back to health and a comeback career as a musician under the moniker Osman Jailani. He eventually stumbles into an offer of free eye surgery to restore his sight and is able to see again, only to be exposed to all the lies that led to his senseless suffering. Contrary to what he was told Sabariah did not die during childbirth and had in actuality moved on to marry someone else. In what has become an iconic moment in the history of Malay cinema, Kassim eventually blinds himself, preferring to altogether *un-see* the painful reality he confronts and cannot accept. His friends and foes can only witness this act in shock as the film concludes with him limping away bloodied into the stormy night's darkness. There are no winners here, to be sure. Even Nyonya Mansur the cruel mother-in-law is tearful and repentant. But the film places Kassim's fate front and centre. *Ibu Mertuaku* begins as a romantic comedy

featuring a young man with a bright future's discovery of modern romance and ends with him heartbroken and twice blinded.

This storyline, which sees a promising radio heartthrob emasculated, has amounted to one of the country's most popular films. It has regularly aired on national television for over 50 years now. Its memorable scenes are still referenced or re-enacted in skits and talent shows, be they as trope or tribute. All of the film's five songs have become standards of the Malay songbook. The dialogue, be it from its more comic or dramatic quips, is referenced even in everyday chatter or humour, usually in casual discussions regarding marriage or the difficulty of relationships in general. That it stars *P. Ramlee* also makes the film especially iconic. He remains, by a huge margin, the most recalled and celebrated pop artist in Malaysian history. His music and films are replayed on a frequent basis on private and public TV stations throughout the year. He was also very prolific. He acted in a total of sixty-six films in his twenty-four-year career, most of which he directed and scored. He is, today, the entertainer for all occasions. One of his most legendary songs, for example, is 1960's *'Getaran Jiwa'* (The Soul Vibrates), which could be encountered in renditions as varied as an alarm clock ringtone, elevator muzak or a full symphony tribute by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. It was even performed at the 26th ASEAN Summit in 2015, included by Prime Minister Najib Razak alongside other patriotic songs, to showcase the uniqueness of Malaysia's arts to the diplomats and heads of state from across Southeast Asia in attendance. Indeed, nowhere perhaps is the mark of Ramlee's relevance more evident than the increasing institutionalisation of his legacy. The street named after him is located amidst prime real estate just two hundred meters away from the Petronas Towers,

which up to 2004 was the tallest building in the world. In October 2016, the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Culture decreed that the National Academy of the Arts (ASWARA) would be renamed Universiti P. Ramlee. This announcement was made by none other than the P. Ramlee Chair at the university's Centre of Postgraduate Studies himself, Dr. Baharudin Ahmad.[35]

But while the attention around *Ibu Mertuaku's* legacy has largely fallen on P. Ramlee and Kassim Selamat, what is less discussed is how the film situates him in relation to mothering. Nyonya Mansur is the obvious marker of maternal presence, while Sabariah too eventually becomes a mother in her own right. In contrast to Mansur's villainy and Sabariah's indecision, there are Mami and Chombi, the 'benign' mother-daughter pair who take Kassim into the comfort of their home at the lowest point of his homelessness. Mami, then, is the film's 'good' mother. Chombi, in turn, becomes Kassim's close and sympathetic friend, extending the tenderness and care Mami ensured. The centrality of mothering in *Ibu Mertuaku* is accentuated further by the fact that the film does not feature a father figure. Indeed, the only father biologically speaking is Kassim, who is shown in various emasculated states that move the film's melodrama. Other than that, we see neither Kassim, nor the film's two other 'main' men for that matter, fathering in the significant sense of commanding the household and its values. Kassim's decline was worsened when he found out that he had been deceived the entire time. He went blind grieving his lover whom he thought had died. The film would gradually reveal this to be a lie as Kassim would eventually find out that she had married someone else. The gender politics in *Ibu Mertuaku* confirm not

only the maternal character of the household but Kassim's experience of modernity.

The broader setting of this experience is particularly significant for our purposes, given how it was formed amidst a transnational historical flow. For one Ramlee's immense local popularity was a result of an active marketing campaign by Shaw Brothers, the Hong-Kong linked film producers and distributors. At the same time, his rise was also actively endorsed by prominent Malay nationalists. They demanded more Malay involvement in the bourgeoning entertainment industry and saw Ramlee as an icon for this agenda. In addition to the fact that all this took place in Singapore, which would secede from Malaysia in 1965 to become its own country, it is also noteworthy that the Malay film industry began with directors from Indian cinema. The first Malay language film, *Laila Majnun* (1933), which is a story set in the Middle East, was produced by the Bombay Chemical Company. Thus the question of mothering was posed amidst a broader negotiation with modernity itself. *Ibu Mertuaku* makes this particularly obvious in how it is sensitive to the global nature of its setting. As I shall soon explain, the film would constitute an amalgamation of various markers of an emergent modernity to be witnessed on screen. Thus Joel Kahn reminds us that: "Ramlee's name would not have been a product only of one man's free imagination, or unmediated responses to the cultural demands of nationalists," rather, it is "a cultural phenomenon constructed explicitly by and for the developing public of a modern culture industry" (J. S. Kahn, 2001, p. 102). Mothering would be an integral part of this construction, that is to say a part of how the film makes sense of its temporal location, rather than some relic of the

past, as we shall see. But before getting into details, we shall begin with a key term that would organise this sensibility, namely matrifocality.

Matrifocality

How a film that places 'man' in relation to mothering could become a classic could be better understood via a consideration of matrifocality: "This term has been used to describe kinship systems in which the role of the mother is culturally and structurally central, thereby granting mothers and consequently women—who due to their familial place and roles would be poised to eventually become mothers—social and economic influence" (Rodenburg, 2013, p. 128).[36] In addition to Southeast Asia, the English and Spanish speaking Carribbean and Kerala are also regions that are known to have significant matrifocal communities.

For our purposes we should note how this has not often sat well with modernization. For one the idea that the mother should be privileged over and above the father runs contrary to certain governing ideals of paternal authority. In other words, the fact that matrifocal households see women embodying moral

[36] I have settled for this definition seeing that it appears to be the most recent. The term itself seems to have fallen out of favour given increased preference for 'women-headed household' instead. My analysis, however, retains this term for its emphasis on the connection between maternal power in the household, the family and culture more broadly. Raymond Smith's definition understands the term "to convey that it is women in their role as mothers who come to be the focus of relationships, rather than head of households as such" (Smith, 1996, p. 43). Similarly, Nancy Tanner defines matrifocality as how women have economic and political power within the kin group (1974, p. 132).

influence means that "its very nature openly challenges the Western normality of the nuclear family" (Brooks, 2010, p. 736). But this has less to do with the mother's 'femininity' than the fact that matrifocal households often see continuity between her domestic power and her cultural esteem. The house, to evoke my argument from chapter one, has not been privatized and culturally isolated. Thus matrifocality is "characteristic of a cultural cosmology that radically differs from the exaltation of the nuclear family as the most central building block of a society" (Brooks, 2010, p. 735).[37]

The continuity between home and culture is especially germane to Malay matrifocality in particular, as it is rooted to the bilateral and, thus, relatively egalitarian relationship between men and women secured under *Adat*, the set of traditional Malay customs that sees women accorded a significant degree of cultural reverence.[38] Wazir Jahan Karim's (1992) influential study highlights the endurance of *Adat* despite Islam's deepening influence into the Malay context. She concludes that, while Islam went on to shape communal identity and institutional laws, *Adat* nonetheless retained its modern presence informally in the family. Karim's observation is all the more remarkable given how *Adat* also has a long history of antagonism against Islam. In fact the Malay context stands

[37] It is notable that Adat has also been deployed in the Islam-Colonial tensions. Maila Stivens's (1996) account of Adat practices during the late 19th century documented how the British authorities of Negeri Sembilan evoked *Adat* laws to ensure that Minang women would be granted personal land titles. But this was a strategic move to disenfranchise Malay men whom they suspected would be more prone to rebellion.

out, when compared to other matrifocal communities, for having the only modern war that was fought in defense of a matriarchy. The Minangkabau Padri War in West Sumatera, which lasted from 1803-1807, saw Arab inspired Muslim reformists clash with hardliners of *Adat Pepatih* over the extent to which Islam should be accommodated into a matriarchal system and vice versa.[39] This saw matriarchs lined up and publicly executed in a violent clash that eventually saw the Adat regime seek military help from the Dutch East Indies, a decision that began the Minang subjugation into the fold of European imperialism. It is also telling that one of the most influential preachers of Malay-Indonesian Islam is the late and Minang-born Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, who followed his father's reformist footsteps and became an ardent critic of Adat traditions, claiming that they are excessive in according women power.

Thus *Adat* and consequently Malay matrifocality survives within an uneven arrangement. Insofar as the family is an unquestionable institution in capitalism and Islam, Malay women are bound to its expectations and taboos. They would be hard pressed to acquire social significance outside the kinship ties that bind them, that is to say, as 'individuals.' But insofar as the same institution has cultural value, with its Adat-linked durability proven and thus respected over time and modernisation, women can assume symbolic authority in the different spheres of influence on offer, be it as mother, daughter, sister or wife, and consequently 'woman'. This, furthermore, avails women to a certain set of demands they can make upon men and society more broadly. Thus to say that

[39] See Jeffrey Hadler (2013) for an account of how *Adat* remains relevant and live force in Minang culture despite various claims to the contrary.

the matrifocal family is not a private institution is not to simply say that mothers are also well respected in the public. Rather, women are secured certain positions of cultural authority from which they can participate in broader matters of community building and politics that includes making effective demands upon men. Thus Matrifocal power remains a crucial aspect of the contests that shape Malay modernity. Indeed as I shall show it constitutes a significant set of social positions in the national-developmental imaginary especially where the household is central.

For example, while Malay women are still expected to bear the brunt of domestic chores, this has not fully exempted Malay men. Noor Laily Abu Bakar and Rita Raj Hashim (1984) find that Malay men do more household chores as compared to Chinese or Indian men. This converges with broader observations by Ong (1990) and Hirschman (2016), indicating that women are customarily consulted on domestic spending, since it is common for them to conduct small-scale farming or trading on behalf of the family.[40] This translates to frequent co-operation between husbands and wives when it comes to managing the family unit. We can better appreciate the significance of this setup by considering that it is not at all unusual, even today, for any given Malay home to host two or three generations, wherein children, their parents and grandparents (including in-

[40] Hirschman's (2016) conclusion remains conservative, considering how a significant portion of women's earnings is undocumented as they are regarded as part of the informal economy. In any case, he remarks that the informal-formal economy distinction, in respect to Malay women's work, 'Is almost impossible to observe in rural households where women not only raise chickens, maintain gardens, engage in small scale trading, and work seasonally in rice production, but also take primary responsibility for household maintenance' (Hirschman, 2016, p. 40).

laws) live together under one roof. A demographic study by Morgan and Rindfuss (1983) shows that elderly Malay parents tend to live with their daughters, thereby regenerating Malay women's abiding hold over the domiciliary. But, once again, what is important to note here is that we should be careful not to conflate the domestic or the household with the private. Hirschman, in his extensive 2016 study of all extant reports on the subject, indicates that the intergenerational female presence in significant family spaces points to motherhood's social power. He explains that Malay women's sustained "participation in economic activities and family patterns…valued descent from both the paternal and maternal sides. Proximity to the natal family by most married women was another important resource that created a more equal status of men and women" (Hirschman, 2016, p. 47). This extends the conclusion of a similarly extensive 1991 regional study on maternity in the Asian context by S. Allen and Hawkins, which confirms the maternal gatekeeping that tends to be presumed in this context: mothers "support or discourage fathers' efforts to care for the family in terms of three dimensions: mothers' reluctance to relinquish responsibility over family matters, external validation of a mothering identity, and differentiated conceptions of family roles" (Ho, 2015, p. 43).

We shall find different articulations of this in the chapters to come. Understanding *Ibu Mertuaku*'s iconic status as a classic, however, requires that we see how the equation of mothering with cultural authority has informed a distinct subgenre of films around strong maternal figures. The most obvious example would be the highly profitable *Anak Mami* series: The show began as a

popular television comedy before expanding demand led to films.[41] Each story centres around a different mother, positioned as head of household, and the antics around her dogged demands. *Mami Jarum* (Teo, 2002) features the arrogant and status-conscious divorcee Fatimah and her attempts to prevent her daughters from falling in love with lower-class men. The sequel *Mami Jarum Junior* (Teo, 2003) pits her against her rival Mami Jora, due to a feud that begins out of a rumour. *Nana Tanjung* (Naj Productions, 2006) centres on widower Nana and her three unwed daughters, with the twist that the end sees her married instead. Most recently, there was *Anak Mami Nasi Kandaq* (Abdul Latieff, 2016), where Mami Khalsom, the antagonist, appears as the successful food seller that threatens her neighbour Mamu Nizam's business. The comedies play with this motif in histrionics and exaggerated shenanigans, but an essential trait is maintained throughout: Mothers' power is not necessarily represented in terms of wisdom or the higher virtues of patience or compassion. Rather, we know mothers for their ability, quite simply, to dictate to others. Mothers often press for their way, disregarding pleasantries or, for that matter, any concern for likability.[42] The most recent testament to this is *PASKAL: The Movie* (Keoh, 2018). The plot sees the hard-bodied member of an elite division of the Malaysian navy

[41] The Anak Mami series comprise of a total of seven films: *Anak Mami The Movie* (2002), *Mami Jarum* (2002b), *Mami Jarum Junior* (2003), *Anak Mami Kembali* (2005), *Nana Tanjung* (2006), *Nana Tanjung 2* (2007) and *Anak Mami Nasi Kandaq* (2016).

[42] The mother in *Antara Dua Hati* (1989) steals her daughter Ina's boyfriend. Much worse, she does so after promising to no longer love any other man after her husband's death. Her brother defends their mother's decision by resigning to it as a fact of love.

named Arman (codenamed *Jerung* or 'Shark') who is torn between his loyalty to the state and to his mother who disapproves of his action-hero line of work. Indeed the film is resolved when she finally consents to her son's choice. The film puts this scene in the very end after he had saved the country thereby situating the mother's authority above that of the state.

To this we could also add lesser-known films that explore relationship and family dynamics around strong maternal figures. There are variations of the Malay mother's role as the judge of her children's love life in the melodramas *Dia Ibuku* (She is My Mother) (Sarimah, 1981), *Suara Kekasih* (A Lover's Voice) (Ida, 1986) and before them *Bisikan Cinta* (Whisper of Love) (Ismail, 1995). She has also been rendered as the evil stepmother. *Putus Harapan* (Disappointed Hope) (Shaw, 1953) tells the story of a stepmother who resents her newly adopted son. *Lela Manja* (Shaw, 1960) features Dang Suri, who philanders and abuses her stepchildren when their father goes away for work. Building on this to follow a classic fairy tale trope are evil stepmothers with magical powers. *Pembalasan* (Revenge) (Malay Film Productions, 1950) tells the story of one who cursed her son to turn him into a monkey. In *Panca Delima* (Shaw, 1957) the mother hexes her son, also a prince, turning him into a snake at night. We have also seen a mother figure as a leader of a criminal gang in the form of Mama Bosan in the comedy *Mat Gelap* (The Mysterious One) (Zarul, 1990). The same theme is taken in another comedy *Bini-biniku Gangster* (My Wives are Gangsters) (Teo, 2011) where Manja, the lead male character's wife, moonlights as a gangster.

Key for my inquiry is how the mother-son dynamic has frequently featured as the setting for such emoting. Whether it is the neglectful son of *Ibu* (Mother) (Shaw, 1953) or the son refusing the mother's preference for a life

partner in *Merana* (Suffering) (Shaw, 1954) or the treacherous son of *Si Tanggang* (1961) who is turned to stone after disowning his poor mother after becoming rich, the relationship with his mother is often a point of emotional breakdown for a son's identity. All three films were made, curiously, at an uncertain juncture of Malay modernisation, as Malaysia, as a nation proper, had not yet been formed. One could also include *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup* (Shaw, 1959) as an example as the mother kills herself by surrendering to a haunted cave after discovering that her two children have eaten the hard roe she desperately craved. The focus was not on the son per se as the lesson was also for her daughter, but the crucial scene that sees her consumed alive by the cave also focuses on the son's cries at length. I shall return to a contemporary rendition of this mother-son trope in Chapter 5, where I look at the hugely popular *Ombak Rindu* (2011). This film also sees a son struggling and suffering, in typical melodramatic flourish, to transcend his mother's demands.

Where *Ibu Mertuaku* stands out in this history of examples is how it frames the mother-son tension as a question of time. As we shall see *Ibu Mertuaku* situates mothering where the separation of the public and private spheres, or that of civil society and the family, are still being negotiated. Jane M. Gaines argues that melodrama is characteristically "obsessed with trying to reconcile positions that are flat out irreconcilable" and can therefore "productively utilize the breach between temporal modes to pathos-producing ends" (Gaines, 2017, 330). Similarly the pathos performed in *Ibu Mertuaku* will show this inability to separate the two spheres in ways that situate the maternal as a contending source of cultural authority.

Mother-Power

With this background in mind we are more able to understand how *Ibu Mertuaku* portrays matrifocality as an active cultural force to be reckoned with. We encounter it immediately through the power Nyonya Mansur wields throughout most of the film. It is her refusal of Kassim and Sabariah's romance that moves *Ibu Mertuaku's* plot towards its tragic conclusion. Her position of cultural authority is articulated, among other ways, in the classic line: *"Pantang datuk nenek aku ahli muzik, anak tak mengenang jasa" (*"My ancestors prohibit musicians! You ungrateful child!")(Ramlee, 1962a). The demand is for Sabariah to marry someone with a more financially secure profession to maintain the family wealth within her social class. This leads to her lies and intrigues which eventually see Sabariah leaving Kassim to end up with Ismadi—the rare Malay doctor at the time, who incidentally can also operate on eyes.

My argument requires that we first bypass readings of *Ibu Mertuaku* as a film about historical tension, where Nyonya Mansur's concern over lineage is regarded as a traditional preoccupation. Thus Tim Barnard (2009) locates *Ibu Mertuaku* within a cinematic subgenre that explores the contradictions encountered in the formation of a Malay nation whereby "the explicit break with tradition and the past—which is the essence of modernity—is often treated in these films as a binary battle between past and present" (Barnard, 2009, p. 434). This is why Kassim suffered and goes blind. Even Adil Johan (2015), who disagrees with Barnard and asserts that P. Ramlee's music in *Ibu Mertuaku* represents a celebration of modern cosmopolitanism, holds that "modernity was contested and regarded with suspicion" in the film (Adil, 2015, p. 175). *Ibu Mertuaku* portrays a popular culture that embraces modernisation despite "an

overall anxiety towards the ills of modernity" which is "present in the film's story" (Adil, 2015, p. 181). This means that Kassim and Nyonya Mansur's class tension is also a generational one, where the former's way of life and place in society threatens the latter's more traditional ways.

But where acknowledgments of Mansur's power are accurate for tacitly noting the persistence of the matrifocal (though they do not use the term matrifocal as such), they all too often slides into distinctions between past and present. This is limiting in a few respects. For one, it relies too much on the oft-quoted line above. It is clear throughout the film that Kassim Selamat, while poorer than Nyonya Mansur, actually has cultural capital, having performed on radio for two years before he meets Sabariah. Thus, he is not socially disenfranchised per se but only in relation to Nyonya Mansur's power as the gatekeeper who blocks his pursuit of love. This, as we shall see, will be expressed in literal terms, via her control of who moves in and out of the house. His actual state of poverty, moreover, occurs after losing Sabariah and is, thus, a statement about heartbreak more than social stratification.

In line with the longerstanding matrifocal context I described, I note how the spatial tension *Ibu Mertuaku* portrays is fundamentally related to the unevenness of modernization. The film would depict this tension by placing Kassim's suffering via various states of homelessness, to be contrasted against the matrifocal 'home' where his identity is both unsettled and questioned and, thus, decided. It is through this tension that 'home' acquires significance beyond a straightforward domestic space, to become the space where history in the final instance is determined.

This is seen in how Nyonya Mansur controls decisions relating to the household, which turn out to have wider significance, as they impact lineage and inheritance. Mansur sabotages Sabariah and Kassim's relationship at a crucial point when they are expecting a son. His heartbreak as a result eventually sees him evicted, wandering alone in the wilderness to be left to the mercy of strangers. Nyonya Mansur's schemes are exposed in the end but Sabariah, rather than fighting for their relationship, eventually relents to her mother's wishes, choosing kin and wealth over love—and consequently cultural authority—thereby separating Kassim from his son forever. Thus, the film does not simply show women controlling decisions related to the home, they express a power at the expense of marginalising men's domestic position. As we shall see, one of the ways in which this is expressed is by restricting and regulating Kassim's access in and out of the house. Mansur is the obstacle in Kassim and Sabariah's relationship in a literal sense.



*Figure 2.*1*. Nyonya Mansur asserts her authority over Kassim Selamat by denying access to her home.*

But the film does not limit the matrifocal home to that of Nyonya Mansur and Sabariah. As mentioned before, the 'bad' house she runs is contrasted with the 'good' one run by another mother-daughter pair, Mami and Chombi. Where Nyonya Mansur is the cruel mother figure, Mami is the understanding one, sheltering Kassim while listening to his woes and soothing him with words of wisdom. Where Sabariah is the enigmatic ex-wife, Chombi is the ever-dedicated companion. But showing a good house against a bad one does not change the fact that both are run by women. They are not different types of homes so much as different attitudes towards Kassim's homelessness. The fact that both houses, despite their different designs, are of considerable means should be another argument against accounts of *Ibu Mertuaku* as a film about class tensions. Mami and Chombi's household is only benign in regards to their role as the 'kinder women' to Kassim. Otherwise, it also reinforces existing hierarchies as we see them frequently ordering their (mostly male) workers around. Mami and Chombi's house, despite its benevolence, merely highlights Kassim's homelessness further. In the end, he returns to it in the very state in which they found him: blind and helpless. His tragedy is compounded by how he never actually sees the very home that sheltered him. Indeed, he was at the 'good' home under Mami and Chombi's mercy as they guided him while he fumbled to feel his way through the sizable house's many doors and turns.

At this point, I should note how my reading of the film rejects the usual approach that renders Western popular culture or emergent media as the 'foreign element' in the film. What *Ibu Mertuaku* shows, in fact, is a clash of uneven temporalities. The matrifocal home is the modern surprise, experienced through Kassim's eyes as threatening and confusing. The historical implication to

this experience is that the matrifocal is not a defensive remnant of the 'past', or an insecure scramble to protect tradition. Rather, *Ibu Mertuaku* positions it as an active force of culture making that pervades the taken-for-granted expansion of the modern public sphere to eventually surface and dictate the terms of Malay modernity itself. The film expresses this in two ways. Firstly, the 'power' at home is shown in the question of access, as in who gets to determine the terms of entry and exit. Secondly, there is also the question of movement inside the house. The film is quite consistent in showing that movement across domestic space is most enjoyed and expressed by women rather than men. Combine this with the generally formidable sizes of the matrifocal homes and the picture of the matrifocal domestic space we end up with is one of cultural authority.

Part 2: Ibu Mertuaku's Domestic Politics

Before specifying the nature of this authority further, I should first address the enduring and, some might say, troubling, association of domestic space with women or the maternal. The idea that the Malay home is fundamentally 'feminine' is evident in various studies and this would echo similar patterns where certain spaces at home would be ordered accordingly for women, such as cooking, washing and other homemaking tasks (Carsten, 1995; Kerlogue, 2013; Seo, 2015). To the extent that many aspects of the Malay matrifocal domestic space somewhat mirror the gender bias and trappings of the bourgeois, middle-class home, this should confirm the often-encountered reminder that there is nothing about matrifocality that is necessarily feminist. To the extent, however, that Malay development is uneven, there are significant

divergences between the cultural claims that matrifocal space offers that Western bourgeois homes do not. This presents openings for a distinct kind of progressive politics. But to see this we have to start from taking on the basic problem, namely how the liberal Western bourgeois household marginalises mothers.

The Matricidal Home

The story of modern mothering can be told, in many ways, as one where women are bound to specific spaces and pressures to ensure their reproductive capacities. Foucault (2008) notes how the early-modern ideal of the dedicated mother served a crucial biopolitical role as a producer of good and hardworking citizens: "We know that the number of hours a mother spends with her child, even when it is still in the cradle, will be very important for the formation of an abilities machine, or for the formation of a human capital, and that the child will be much more adaptive if in fact its parents or its mother spend more rather than less time with him or her" (Foucault, 2008, p. 229). Matters have worsened in the twenty-first century as women are now seen in a cycle of work outside the family. Linda McDowell notes how neo-liberalism has only intensified caregiving pressures, where mothers are also expected to have an identity beyond the home: "The good mother now is a mother who enters the labour market to raise her income and skill levels for the benefit of her children" (McDowell, 2012, p. 55). This has the effect of embedding capital even deeper into the domestic space, as hired help, who are also typically women and mothers in their own right, fill in for the biological mother's absence from the household to find work

(which is also evident in the current Malay context). As Petra Bueskens puts it, "To enter the public sphere—free as it is from domestic interruption and particularist ethics—requires that somebody else is taking care of the embodied, emotional, domestic and particularist-ethical domain. Since the early modern separation of spheres, this "'somebody else' has been a woman—or more specifically a wife and mother—structurally separated from the economy, politics and society" (Bueskens, 2018, p. 3).

This is accompanied by a distinct spatial imagination whereby the home is transcended for a broader place in the development of nation and culture. One 'moves out' to fulfil one's potential because home is the place of stasis in comparison to the dynamism of capitalism's media, markets and cities. The taken-for-granted conflation of the domestic with the private, in contrast to the association of the public with the political and, thus, 'change' more broadly, also reinforces the established presumption of the domestic space as a temporary confine. What underlines these presumptions, or what is in effect reinforced upon their very instantiation, is their negation of the gendered nature of mothering work required to sustain the home in the first place, work that continues to be taken on by women. Grasping the amount of work that is required to sustain the domestic reproduction of the modern ego would reveal, in fact, that the home, far from a sphere exempt from politics, has only become more saturated by capital: "This commodity relation transforms the home into a site of financially recompensed interactions, rather than a locus in which all the social relationships and interactions were assumed to be based on ties of love and affection and largely performed outside a cash nexus" (McDowell, 2012, p. 55).

Thus, for Alison Stone, mothering and modernity are necessarily at odds: "One must break away from the mother and the maternal care-givers on whom one depends in infancy and childhood to become a full participant in the spiritual, political or cultural values of one's community" (2013, p. 1). Mothering, placed within the broader institutional arrangement of Western modernity, is not to be understood as performed by any particular person but a crucial moment in subjective reproduction. It is crucial to note the violence of this arrangement. The mother is not just the liminal point that prepares the modern subject's adaptation to the dominant symbolic structure. A person's successful transition into a self-governing, autonomous subject depends on forcefully denying the dependency once experienced with the mother. It is only upon this separation that he is able to uphold the ideal of a rational, autonomous self. Mothering, then, whether instantiated in particular individuals or certain roles, is denigrated by *self*-centred ideals of personhood that modernity espouses: "These ingrained assumptions make it relatively difficult for us to recognise mothers as subjects, and they make it relatively difficult for mothers to regard themselves as subjects or to exercise their capacities for subjectivity" (Stone, 2013, p. 1). The different and ever-proliferating presence of mothering in a single home not only echoes Freidrich Engels's point of the bourgeois household as an institutional extension of capital, but also how the expansion of capitalism merely alienates mothering further: "If she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties" (Engels, 2010, p. 104). Alison Stone concludes that "Western

Civilisation has effectively understood becoming a self to require a form of matricide" hence the title of this subsection (2013, p. 37).

The increased social alienation of mothering, due to its place in the broader expansion of capitalist reproduction, stands in contrast to oneiric notions of home as a site of stability, which as many point out is the source of the bourgeois house's patriarchal imprints. For Jean Baudrillard, the longing for stillness and stasis, whereby home is longed for in terms of a peaceful shelter, is already the presumption at work in modern housing, hence his conclusion that "The typical bourgeois interior is patriarchal" (2012, p. 210). Baudrillard observes how peaceful dwelling in effect means, "The emphasis is on unifunctionality, immovability, imposing presence and hierarchical labelling" Ibid). Thus, he surveys the arrangement of objects and furniture therein to find "a tendency to accumulate, to fill and close off the space" where consumerism and domestic discipline come together to ensure that the human relationships therein remain restricted while acquiescent to paternal authority (Ibid). Thus, rather than space, what the bourgeois home practices is morality, whereby 'home' is experienced as a domain of discipline and subjugation and a confine whereby the family retains its character as a unit: 'They are ranged about an axis which ensures a regular chronology of actions; thanks to this permanent symbolisation, the family is always present to itself'" (Ibid). The inhabitants are "captive to the moral dimension which is their job [as the objects typically placed in domestic space] to signify" (Baudrillard, 2012, p. 211). Sealed from social relations and contradictions, the modern home is "a closed transcendence," sustaining bourgeois values through deadening objects that limit free movement (Ibid). Baudrillard does not mention mothering but the implication is quite

evident: The moral pressures of mothering are also spatial ones that ensure her mobility and surroundings are limited to address male insecurities.

The Matrifocal Home

This picture of the matricidal modern home—where men reign over women through a marginalising ideal and arrangement of space—should be kept in mind as we now approach the different sense of the domestic *Ibu Mertuaku* presumes. There is, to be sure, a gendered dimension as mothers are featured mostly in and around domestic space. This stands in contrast to Kassim's public persona, given his access to media and the public sphere. But a closer look at *Ibu Mertuaku's* houses show a key feature that runs contrary to the notion of home as a feminine confine. This is most obvious in how Nyonya Mansur, Sabariah, Mami and Chombi exercise their homely presence via movement.[43]

[43] The comparison between the matricidal and matrifocal models of the domestic sphere could be aided by considering history. As Manderson (1998) noted, the Malayan colonial regime, in step with the British Empire's broader global mission, was instrumental in imposing the idea that reproduction should primarily be about children, thereby eclipsing the mother's significance in the process. The child from thereon began to be idealised with added political and moral significance. The mother, in turn, would be eclipsed by the greater importance accorded to childcare. It is in that circumstance, amidst the birth of the modern nation-state and the bourgeoisie's state and financial power that the mother is talked about in puritanical terms. Mothering now began to be viewed as something to be cleansed to ensure the baby's utmost security and safety. This means that the mother would also have to be disciplined, since the newly accorded priority over the child can only proceed through her dedication. Thus, the modern mother has it that maternity would be work, defined primarily via "the labour of nurture" (Jolly, 1998, p. 1). The British in Malaya would establish the institutions and

Indeed, it is through their movement that we are able to see their homes' commanding presence: their many rooms and bedrooms, stairs, beds, furniture and wide windows. Meanwhile, Kassim Selamat's house—which he shares with his bandmates and in any case is only shown briefly since he is homeless for most of the film—stands out for being spartan and much smaller in comparison, with little to no possessions beyond the basics. A more evident hierarchy can be seen in the way in which elevation is deployed in the composition of the shots. The women are most often depicted at a higher level, while the men, Kassim especially, would be frequently seen on the floor. We can understand this as a statement of place by contextualising it with how levels are regarded in the standard conception of the Malay house. It is typically 'raised' on stilts because the "structural opposition of 'nature/culture' that homes are meant to mark has further developed into the dichotomy of "the dirty earthen floor" versus "the clean elevated floor" (Seo, 2015, p. 462). Customarily, this sees the domestic space "raised more than a meter above the ground, the house avoids damage from dampness and flood, and the space underneath is used for storage or for breeding livestock" (Seo, 2015, p. 463). Today, this break between the dirty

corresponding practices required to implement such policies. They built clinics, conducted trainings and campaigns—on breastfeeding, maternal hygiene and infant health—in expressly modern terms, framing those practices as part of their new science. But time and time again local records indicate reluctance on the part of Malays in particular to join this transition. Malays, after all, have already established a system and network of maternal care through community *bidans* who would advise and oversee treatment as it pertains to birthing and the recovery thereafter. The pervading sense was that the colonial midwives—largely indifferent and at best uninformed about this custom—focused on child rearing to the detriment of local concerns over the mother's well-being in the process.

below and the clean above persists via the common custom that expects the dweller or guest to take off his or her shoe before entering the home. This is also why the feet are still usually regarded as an offensive part of the body to show to or point at someone.

We do not see many customary houses in *Ibu Mertuaku*, but the division between the favoured 'up' and the frowned-upon 'below' would be expressed clearly along gendered lines that situate feminine domestic power as the actual modern space. It is most apparent later in the film when Kassim is living on the earthen floor as he rents the dark and bare bottom space of a stilt house. This is after his relationship with Sabariah has ended and we see him dejected, heartbroken and poor, as he cannot afford a proper home. He is found on the floor again later when he collapses at Mami and Chombi's gate where he is mistaken for a drunk.[44] The ground marks his downward spiral to poverty and desperation, debasing the leading man of modernity. The idea of the ground as antithetical to 'civilisation' is also hinted at earlier on when we see Kassim at the house he shares with his band mates. Two of his friends are seen crouching on the floor playing checkers while one of them is making monkey noises. This is obviously meant to be funny, but it is arguable that this apish use of the body and

[44] Little work has been done about the exact cultural assumptions underpinning this film although Kassim's suspension and dependency between two houses harks back to a common *Minang* (located in Sumatra, the island of Ramlee's ethnic origin) practice where husbands tend to move into the wife's natal household. This is also often understood to mark his acknowledgment of her power: "Anthropologists working on Negeri Sembilan [the stronghold of *Minang* culture in Peninsula Malaysia] . . . exhibit some concern for an in-marrying . . . man's predicament as a resident of his wife's localised descent group" (Stivens, 1996, p. 231).

screeching for a full ten seconds is far more likely to fit a different cultural logic, that is to say, if it was not already understandable as something acceptable to be laughed at. Note that this ape scene is placed immediately beside two men practicing the drums and clarinet, respectively, indicating that the equation between men and modernity is uneven. Where some are 'at home' in Western modernity in their familiarity with popular musical instruments, some are still close to 'apes' as it were. Indeed, a comparison of the different behaviours in the matriarchal home and the men's should reveal the former to be more indicative of a 'finished' modernity and authority.



Figure 2.2. The monkey noise is made by the man on the left, though note that the man on the right is sitting in the house drain.



Figure 2.3. Mami orders her driver to take the car situated by the stairs. She is also speaking from an elevated level positioned above him, attesting to the common move the film makes in depicting women of authority at a higher position than men.

The lowness of the men's place in the house stands in contrast to the size and gravitas of the matriarchs'. The stairs play a crucial role here. Mansur and Sabariah's first scene together inside the house is by their bungalow stairwell. Mami and Chombi's home are of a more customary design but its stilt-structure and spaciousness stand out. Chombi too is framed beside a stairwell not just to associate her with the house but also to mark the house's grandeur. The film's constant focus on the matriarchal homes' stairs has the effect of elevating the status of their masters, a key gesture that once again attests to the presumption that to be raised into the home is also a departure from the dirt below. The stairs starkly contrast with the film's masculine spaces by allowing the women to express movement and command.

This power play is demonstrated in the film's key marriage scene. Kassim and Sabariah are about to be forced into marriage by Nyonya Mansur. We see the living room where family is gathered to witness the ceremony. The camera pans to show everyone worried but in anticipation of what will happen next, indicating the shame that the couple feels being displayed before their community. We then see Nyonya Mansur going down the stairs before taking Kassim by the hand and forcing him to sit on the floor by pushing him down so that the ceremony can proceed. Mansur's seniority is shown as the scene's sole speaker. She dictates what will happen and when. Key here is the top-bottom dynamic where her power is depicted via her position, standing above the cross-legged and embarrassed Kassim. Her commanding stance contrasts to that of the religious authorities' who are also sitting on the floor next to Kassim, passively awaiting her instructions. I should also add that this entire process, where she decides to drag Kassim to marry Sabariah is also announced at the stairwell. In contrast, Kassim Selamat is only seen taking the stairs on his own three times in the entire film, each to reveal his blindness. The first time, we see him descending to the basement, at the point where he is impoverished. This proves to be the last straw for Sabariah as she leaves him there eventually, reduced to poverty to mark the decline that eventually leads him to cry his way to blindness.[45] The second time he takes the stairs is towards the end of the film

[45] The crying Malay man is a frequent trope in Malay media. *Hang Tuah* (1959) sees the exemplary royal warrior the movie is named after crying in regret for murdering his brother Hang Jebat out of loyalty to his king. In *Sri Mersing* (1961), Damaq cries after he is exiled from his village due to slander. In *Menanti Hari Esok* (1977), screen legend Jins Shamsudin cries as he walks down the streets of the new KL, seeing the moral decay capitalism brings along with it.

when he heads upstairs to the bedroom to blind himself. The third and final time, we see him on his way down and out from Nyonya's house, resigned to the fate of his alienation from the domestic.



Figure 2.4. Nyonya Mansur announces her plan at the stairs, where Salbiah, the house help, greets her. Sabariah too is seen running up and down this portion of the stairs as it is linked to the rooms. Men are not shown in any way expressing that type of mobility.



*Figure 2.*5. *Nyonya Mansur forces Kassim into marriage with Sabariah by pushing him down to the floor. This after making the long walk from upstairs down to the living room.*

The gender hierarchy that operates throughout *Ibu Mertuaku*'s depiction of domestic space actually echoes how the Malay home has been historically understood. This, indeed, is where the Malay context's association of the feminine with the home is unique, namely in how it is presumed at the expense of minimising men's domestic access. For example, Janet Carsten's study of the Malay house in Langkawi concurs with Fiona Kerlogue's (2013) account of the Jambi-Malay house in how they are each organised around a centre called the mother of the house. In the Jambi case, this is called the "*induk Rumah*" (Kerlogue, 2013, p. 53). In the Langkawi case, the same point of authority is called the "*ibu Rumah"* (Carsten, 1995, p. 110). Both translate to mean 'mother of the house.' The *ibu rumah* is a woman representing feminine power and the space where the house's energy is centred. This is ensured from the very beginning, at the point when the house is built. The *ibu rumah* "must hold the

central pillar of the house, *tiang seri*, when it is erected. This central post is the abode of the house spirit, *semangat rumah,* or *manya rumah,* which is also believed to be female" (Carsten, 1995, p. 111). The *induk rumah* bears cultural significance as it is where births occur and burial rituals are prepared and arranged. Indeed, the home here serves a social function: "The site of assimilation of friends and repulsion of enemies, and the closer one moves to the centre, the closer one is to its female core" (Kerlogue, 2013, p. 65). Indeed, women dominate the household so much so that "'the verandah is really the only section of the building that is associated with men" (Sparkes, 2013, p. 8). Men's relationship to women is, more often than not, like that of temporary residents.

Malay men's 'exclusion' from the house should not indicate a public-private division. To be sure, the traditional setting sees men occupy roles of public power, making administrative decisions in the village but this is not total, given women's control of the domestic sphere and its broader cultural relevance. James Siegel's observation of the matrifocal features of Achenese society shows that masculine and feminine power, while not harmonised, do not necessarily connote conflict: "Although men tried to create a role as husbands and, especially, as fathers, women thought of them as essentially superfluous" (Siegel, 2000, p. 55). Nor is men's presence in the home necessarily an imposition of power. Janet Carsten notes how the association of the Malay home with feminine qualities does not mean that women are socially isolated. Rather, the home becomes the focal point of female bonding and social commentary: "Their conversation is neither dull nor subdued. In the absence of men, it is likely to be particularly full of lively gossip and jokes spiced with sexual allusions. Laughter is frequent. Conversations are often bawdy. Nor does it necessarily change in

character in the presence of men in the household. Subjects of local interests, feasts, rotating credit societies, marriages and disputes are all discussed in a lively and opinionated manner" (Carsten, 1995, p. 112).



Figure 2.6. Both images reveal Sabariah and Chombi each positioned before their respective house stairs before they proceed to approach Kassim. Their agency is often spatial, with the commanding size of the homes they control in the backdrop of their personas.

The senses of home—the grandeur of the maternal and the limitations of the modern man—are consonant with the way in which feminine cultural power is presumed in the film. Nyonya Mansur is a single mother but the film does little to nothing with this detail, as it continuously emphasises her authority

throughout. That Sabariah chooses to be with her mother in the end suggests that she too is on her way towards a similar social position. In contrast to their power to segregate or cut off, Mami and Chombi express their authority in presence and proximity towards Kassim. It is in their wisdom, set in the shelter they provide, that Kassim is finally able to heal and gain a new lease of life, however briefly. Indeed, the absence of a father figure to tend to Kassim's confusion is a detail that only further underscores the apparent and taken-for-granted nature of maternal power, especially for a film that consciously portrays Malaysia's arrival into modernity.[46]



Figure 2.7. Kassim Selamat realises that the home that sheltered him has been toying with him the entire time.

[46] Moreover, for all that domesticity is linked with labour, at no point are Nyonya Mansur, Sabariah, Mami or Chombi shown doing any work. In comparison, Kassim is the only one among the characters who is seen toiling.

Part 3: Displaced at Home

I have already explained that the film depicts Kassim's homelessness—his inability to provide a home for Sabariah or find one for himself—through his blindness. This has the effect of stressing his displacement from the domestic in two interconnected ways. First, his inability to see means that he is lost even when inside a house. The end sees a bloodied and blinded Kassim trying to clutch Nyonya Mansur's house walls as he fumbles searching for the exit, with his hands outstretched as if a zombie, tripping and then touching the floor to find his way back up again to walk. This is not the first time, however, that Kassim's blindness is frightening. We see a hint of his ghastly state in an earlier scene at Mami and Chombi's house. It is 3:28 a.m. when Chombi and Mami are suddenly woken up by the sound of broken glass. They both walk to where they hear it, slowly in soft steps to highlight the silence of the night with the sound of the ticking clock audible in the background. It is when they turn to Kassim's room, in a transition cued by suspenseful trumpet sounds, that they see him crouching on the floor desperately trying to find pieces of the fallen object. The contrast of how men and women use the house space too is quite clear in this scene. Chombi's slow and suspenseful walk to Kassim's room is framed by the huge house corridors, only to be contrasted by his struggle to feel the space of his small room. By now, the statement is clear. Women command the home and the one man shown to attempt his way through it is disturbingly lost. That this is performed through him touching and feeling the domestic space underscores his estrangement from it.



Figure 2.8. Kassim feeling the walls of his house as he looks for the exit, blind and bloodied.



Figure 2.9. Kassim searches for the thing he knocked down. He eagerly touches the floor in ways reminiscent to how he feels his way out of Sabariah and Nyonya Mansur's house later in the film after he blinds himself a second time.

His anxiety emerges in how he remains blind even after he can see. The inability to 'see' 'home' is stressed—indeed, it becomes even more frightening—*after* his vision is surgically restored. In a key scene, we are at Sabariah and Dr. Ismadi's house where he is conducting Kassim's eye test.[47] He passes it, reciting every letter of the alphabet correctly, indicating that his vision is functioning well. This is contradicted, however, immediately after. Sabariah enters the room to serve Kassim and Dr. Ismadi coffee. She nervously sits directly in front of Kassim (and again the film does not explain why she is doing this) though he neither responds nor reacts, despite his newly affirmed and regained eyesight. Sabariah and Ismadi's puzzled expressions add to the suspense. They are both left anxious in their proximity with him, as they turn to one another incredulous that Kassim simply refuses to see that the wife he thought was long dead is standing right before him.

[47] This begins in the scene where the gauze around Kassim's eyes is removed and he can finally see again. Kassim appears relieved and happy but he cannot register that Sabariah is right in front of him. Instead, Kassim makes a remark about her resemblance to 'his late' wife, only for Dr. Ismadi to nervously brush it aside as a mere coincidence. The film stresses the importance of this moment with suspenseful music and horrid looks in the room, as they turn to each other fearing what might happen once Kassim puts two and two together to see the lies he was told. Here, it is worth pointing out the dynamic that is revealed in Kassim's state of blindness. Firstly, Kassim is both the object and subject of vision. He sees but is, at the same time, also the moment's focal point. Secondly and more crucially, this contradiction marks the beginning of a crack in the scopic field. From here, everyone around Kassim extends his narrative, playing along with his observations as if they were true. This has the effect of extending anticipation of Kassim's realisation of the fact that Sabariah is still alive and that he was being duped the entire time.

It gets worse: their help then enters the room, carrying Tajuddin in her arms while asking Sabariah if it is okay for her to take Tajuddin to the beach. Kassim remarks how Tajuddin reminds him of his own son. He then asks if he can see the boy after he returns to the beach. Ismadi is taken aback by the request. He freezes and moves next to Sabariah—who also shares Ismadi's trepidation—to hold her shoulder before saying yes. Ismadi, Sabariah and Tajuddin are clearly demarcating the line between Sabariah's new life on one hand and Kassim's newfound vision on the other, to insist, as tacitly as they can in that moment, on the boundary between them, displacing Kassim at the same time. The leading man cannot be at home.

While this is clearly an indication of Kassim's domestic displacement, it is also a statement of temporality. Kassim, in being removed from his son, is also left out of the future. Indeed, what is striking about Kassim's second blinding and his eventual choice of Mami and Chombi over Sabariah and Nyonya Mansur, is how it also implies that he has renounced his status as a father. In the end, Tajuddin becomes a mere prop to move Kassim's quest to find out the truth, although when the truth is fully revealed, the son bears little relevance for the subsequent turn of events. He is not seen again after the brief appearance above and is mentioned again and for the last time right before Kassim blinds himself, when he wishes that his son will not end up like him, presumably naïve and emasculated.



Figure 10. Kassim remains in denial despite the truth being plain for him to see. Note the eye test chart located on the wall behind Ismadi.

Intimate Alterity

The anxiety marked by Kassim's blindness can be explored in terms of the extimate. This portmanteau combines the words *exterior* and *intimate* to describe the inversion of established boundaries between inside and outside. This inversion is best understood as a paradox that leaves the subject in a "non-place," where notions of 'inside' and 'outside' no longer makes sense (Dolar, 1991, p. 20). Thus, it wasn't enough to simply show that Kassim is blind. The film also ensures that his blindness means that he is also spatially dislocated. Sabariah is the focal point of the tension, as she transitions from being most intimately cherished to appearing beyond recognition. But this also sees Kassim in the paradoxical position of being inside and yet excluded. He is shown grasping the floors and walls in blindness. But the reality is he cannot see 'home'

even after his sight is restored. He is at the heart of Sabariah's household yet the odd one out, given her established future with Ismadi, which Kassim failed to register despite its obviousness before him. Charles Shepherdson (2008) coins "intimate alterity" and "interior exclusion" to capture precisely the locational paradox the extimate ushers. But *Ibu Mertuaku* accentuates how the anxious torsion of space is concurrently experienced as a breakdown of the scopic field.

Before getting to the theoretical implications of linking spatial with visual breakdown, it is key to note how *Ibu Mertuaku* uses this link in reference to history. Earlier, I explained how Kassim first became blind upon learning of Sabariah's death during childbirth after leaving for Singapore for better healthcare. It is noteworthy that she had to leave in the first place because Kassim was poor, a point the film makes through highlighting his inability to secure a home for her. They start out their marriage living in a fancy suite and dining at expensive restaurants. The funds dry out rapidly and the couple has to settle for a more moderate hotel room. It is still spacious but a far cry from the plush and polished hotel where they stayed previously. The adjustment is particularly difficult as Kassim and Sabariah enter their new room disappointed by its newspaper-pasted walls, as they constantly look up and around them as if to properly register their rapid decline. As their lavish and indulgent lifestyle continues to drain their finances, they eventually resort to renting a 'basement' (or the bottom part of the stilted Malay house, more accurately speaking). The 'low' position here is demeaning and becomes the pregnant Sabariah's last straw before writing to her mother requesting to be taken home. Key is how her reason for leaving recounts the different spaces they inhabited before reaching rock bottom: "From the hotel, we moved to a room. From a room, we shift to a

hollow," says Sabariah, in reference to Kassim's inability to sustain himself financially.



Figure 2.11. Sabariah experiences a drastic decline in living standards, having been raised in a bungalow to end up renting the bottom space of a house.

The couple's spatial decline, however, is compounded by reminders of Kassim's struggle to find work. Sabariah does not want him to continue as a musician, as she is keen to get back on good terms with her mother. With little choice left, Kassim opts for construction. He agrees to the wishes of his wife and mother in law, only to find himself in deeper difficulty. This leads us to the film's clearest statement about the Malay man's relationship to capitalism. We see Kassim at the construction site, toiling in the hot sun amidst massive machinery. We then see him overwhelmed looking up to the magnitude and volume of the

infrastructure and process—the industrial noise that surrounds him is a far cry from the refined music he once played—before finding a place to sit on a metal pipe on the ground. Where his inability to secure a dwelling for himself and Sabariah also signals his inability to settle in the new era, his diminished appearance before an emergent modern infrastructure remind us of the long road ahead that awaits his passage into modernity. His stint in construction, in any case, does not last. Depressed by the news of Sabariah's death, Kassim cries for two years to the point of neglecting his hygiene, health and rent. Eventually, he is evicted from the basement hollow and begins his journey into homelessness that is worsened by his inability to see.

That Kassim's struggle to settle into a home is depicted by a breakdown in his scopic field could be explored further by considering how it marks a symbolic disorder. Vision, rather than any straightforward representation of the world for the mind, is historically constructed.[48] It is governed by a broader set of socio-symbolic codes that determine what counts as visible. The imaginary, in turn, fixes the subject's self-image as to allow for a place in this construction:

[48] The film's similarities with Freud's *Uncanny* (2003) are hard to ignore. The essay also tackled the modern recognition of sight's power to reveal and deceive. Sadeq Rahimi observes that, by the time Freud wrote 'The Uncanny', there was already a 'well-developed tradition of writing and pondering' about 'motifs of vision and the specular" (Rahimi, 2013, p. 457). Mladen Dolar points out that the centrality accorded to vision is uniquely modern, insofar as modernity is an age of lack that demands more certainty: "In premodern societies the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and the untouchable. It was assigned to a religiously and socially sanctioned place in the symbolic from which the structure of power, sovereignty and the hierarchy of values emanated" (Dolar, 1991, p. 7).

"Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, that cultural construct, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience" (Bryson, 1988, pp. 91–92). But the Lacanian account stresses that discourse is not unitary, as it is always grappling with a gap that cannot be symbolised. Structure, then, is neither singular nor fixed but is rather "a necessary condition that does not stop being written" (Soler, 2016, p. 65). This is what makes the lack in subjectivity. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, "Complete symbolisation would have realised a structure without a subject, a structure that would no longer be symbolic. The key to this paradox is that symbolisation is as such, in its very notion, incomplete, non-all, failed. It is a structure of its own failure" (Žižek, 2017, p. 17). Similarly Kassim's vision was restored only to experience the strange and anxious nature of the household. Where he first courted Sabariah as the object of his desire, he in turn became the object of their deception. He discovered her after all through a visual encounter where love was confirmed upon seeing. The gender politics here shows how his understanding of the world could no longer cohere, having lost his vision and then restored only to confront lie after lie. His identity is overcome by a tensed encounter with "a point of non-integration or malfunction" of the symbolic order (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 12). Each revelation has him "'run over' by a signifier that is shown to come from another discourse" (Harari, 2013, p. 14).

Incommensurabilities

The uncertainty in Kassim's blindness and vision indicates an inability to integrate into the structure, as he repeatedly fails to see the reality of the

household. This furthermore positions him as a frequent victim to women's control of the home. But the film actually signals a more fundamental layer of non-integration by indicating that Kassim's failure to navigate the domestic is also an indication that the gender of Malay modernity has yet to be determined. The film would render this by setting Kassim's anxiety as a matter of incompatibility of spaces. This is presumed upon how his exclusion from the household is fundamentally based on his 'lowly' profession as a musician. But we notice that what is depicted, as a matter of incompatible values is in effect a statement about incommensurable times. The divergent temporalities of Malay modernity cannot be harmonised into a coherent symbolic order. We are introduced to Kassim Selamat, in fact, as a product of an emergent *modern* public sphere. Kassim Selamat is in the recording studio, singing *Jangan Tinggal Daku* (Don't Leave Me Dear; one of the classic songs from the film) where he is framed singing into the microphone, clutching a saxophone as the camera moves across the studio to reveal various modern musical instruments. The performance begins with the DJ presenting the song on Radio Malaya, thereby situating Kassim at the heart of a new media and the formation of a bourgeoning sphere of popular culture. The depiction of 'opposite sexes' is obvious here, as the film shows every person in the recording studio to be a man as it is broadcasted to Sabariah's house, which as I explained earlier is only occupied by women. The scenes alternate from Kassim's studio to the house and then back again to highlight forbidden love linked only through modern apparatuses although it is clear that the two worlds are obviously sexually differentiated.

Kassim's place in modernity would be mapped again later as Osman Jailani, when he acquires a new lease on life as a musician. His comeback is

depicted via a montage that alternates between scenes of trains speeding across the national terrain and the map of the country, indicating his reach throughout the cities of 'Tanah Melayu' (Penang, Taiping, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban, Melaka, Muar and eventually Singapore). Where the film began linking masculinity with a bourgeoning media, it would later on extend this by showing its mobility across the newly formed nation state that was Malaya. His singing and dancing during this phase stands in contrast to the sorry state in which we see him earlier, where he is literally groping in the dark, trying to survive Mami and Chombi's house. Kassim is most at home, then, as a public figure, easing his way through his performances in ways that contrast with his homelessness. This leads us to a crucial implication. The enigma was not so much that he was blind, but rather *where* his blindness became a problem: the home as the 'inside'—the disturbance from 'within'—that excluded him, the agent whose modernity put him front and centre 'outside' in the emergent public sphere.

Thus, his extimate anxieties in the domestic do not simply signal the leading man of modernity's inability to navigate historically established matrifocal terrain. It also sheds critical light on the value of the modernity being constructed and consequently the gender of those authoring history. This takes us to a crucial feature of symbolic breakdown, namely, how it reveals the fundamental antagonisms of gender structuring all others. As such, "It never simply exists between conflicting parties; it is the very structuring principle of this conflict, and of the elements involved in it" (Zupančič, 2017, p. 41). What we ultimately find is matrifocality as a parallel modernity to that of an emergent mainstream modernity, which the film personifies through a male-led media industry. This circumstance is embedded in the region's unique history of

mother-power. However this co-existence is not harmonious but is underlined by tensions and frictions. *Ibu Mertuaku* is a domestic melodrama with all its characteristic tropes of forbidden love and excess emotions. But it is an allegory of how incommensurate spaces come to terms with one another, as the public under construction is entangled with an established domestic sphere. If the uncanny marks "the intrusion of another spatiality and temporality from the ones supporting consciousness" (Tomšič, 2016, p. 98), its deployment in *Ibu Mertuaku* allows us to see the uneven gender regime of Malay development. The household remains a domain that checks the emergent modern masculinity and the spaces that accommodate it. Malaysian development will alter gender relations to see the greater political ascendance of men, and films will trace this in distinct ways without compromising the Malay woman's command of temporality. To see this we shall move to the 1980s, this time to discuss Malay fatherhood.

CHAPTER 3: IDENTIFICATORY BARGAINS: *AZURA* AND THE MAKING OF MODERN MALAY MASCULINITY

Overview

The battle lines drawn around 'home' as the base of culture leads to the question of identification. In general, this refers to the ability to acknowledge similarity amidst difference, a 'me' and an 'other', indicating the workings of a fundamental structure that determines the terms of recognition. This situates the subject within a broader set of codes and frames of reference in which his identity can be fixed. But the matrifocal hold according women and mothers greater cultural leverage indicates that men are not the sole authors of this process. As Diana Fuss puts it, identification is "the entry of history and culture into the subject, a subject that must bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world" (Fuss, 1995, p. 3). If much of Malay modernization is underpinned by the matrifocal, and by extension feminine cultural influence, this chapter questions the extent to which the Malay regime of identification is masculine, in other words, the extent to which becoming a modern Malay man is dependent on being primarily like its male drivers and leaders. Here I point out the workings of identification bargains. This sees a masculinity constructed out of competing histories in the making, that is to say the unevenness in Malay modernity's concurrent matrifocal and masculine elements.

To say that identification is bargained is to say that the link between becoming masculine and becoming like other *men* is undetermined. Indeed this chapter contends that the uneven nature of the Malay gender regime indicates that Malay men must also, to a considerable extent, model themselves after

women's cultural power in order to become a modern subject. A Lacanian approach here is useful: identification is not a matter of one person relating to another. Rather the duality between them is mediated by a third entity, namely the symbolic order. Whether one becomes masculine depends on the extent to which one can identify with the father, which for Lacan is the figure who instantiates the symbolic third at an interpersonal level. The Malay case would complicate this by showing how the father's power is very limited when it comes to subject formation as masculinization requires some reckoning with the feminine influence over the Malay context. The identificatory bargains of Malay modernisation allow us to trace the ways in which the paternal quality of a masculine Malay modernity in the making is limited and why.

To demonstrate this I shall turn to *Azura* (1984), the hit rock film that tells the love story between Zack, a young man torn between the demand of his father to inherit the family business, and Azura, the woman who teaches him about the virtues of work. She would turn out to be the inspiration for Zack to embrace the modern work regime: He learns diligence and responsibility and leaves his rebel rocker past because of what she demonstrates to him. My analysis focuses on the unstated tension that runs throughout this transition. On the one hand, Azura and Datuk Putih, Zack's father, actually share a common goal, which is to reform Zack. And yet the film portrays them, in many ways, to be at odds. As I shall show soon, this differentiation is in line with the film's preoccupation with ensuring that Zack is the boy and Azura is the girl. But it is a preoccupation that merely indicates his identification with her. To be a capitalist, like his father, Zack has to first be 'a girl' like Azura, that is to say hardworking.

Beyond the immediate effect Azura has on Zack the film also leads to a crucial point for my project, namely that Malay women orient the future.

The fact that identification is a form of *becoming* someone else speaks to its temporal workings. But the stakes are higher in how the future is in fact why the question of work has been so contentious for Malay modernization. For a long time, Malay men's potential to adapt to the modern world has been doubted, due to claims that they are lazy. The colonial origins of this assumption were widely documented by Syed Hussein Alatas (2013), who showed how Malay indolence was a preoccupation for a foreign bureaucracy that was intent on dominating and implanting capital in the region. But concerns over laziness also constituted a key theme in nationalist discourse, which demanded Malays be competitive, productive and industrious to catch up with the global economy. Meanwhile, all indications reveal Malay women to be adjusting far more smoothly to the new work regime, to anxious effects. Aihwa Ong's (2010) study of the moral panic around the masses of women working in the emerging industrial zones of Malaysian capitalism indicates fears that Malay modernization is fundamentally feminine, that consequently the real drivers of progress are actually Malay women.

Thus the identification required to adjust to a modern work regime allows me to trace the contests to determine the gender of the Malay future. My argument is divided into three parts. Part 1 summarizes *Azura* and its key themes. In Part 2, I will focus on the film's 'playground scene', where I describe how the film assumes and depicts the identification bargain described above. In particular, this will show how a woman fulfils the paternal function. Part 3 will

explore the theoretical implications therein by engaging with the Lacanian account of the father.

Part 1: Rebels of Uneven Development

Azura's legacy

Azura is neither the only nor the first film to problematize work. The Labu-Labi comedy duology *Labu dan Labi* (1962) and *Nasib si Labu dan Labi* (1962) articulate the injustice of inequality through showing two butlers making fun of their stingy boss. Indeed, work is often mocked for entailing pretentiousness and has made some of Malaysian cinema's most comedic moments. In *Do Re Mi* (1966), Mi, played by Ibrahim Din, goes for a job interview totally unprepared, as he was ignorant of what a lawyer or a CV is, or even what the process is meant to be about. Key is how the scene is set in such a way that he enters the lavish interview room that is depicted as foreign to the more commonplace settings he is familiar with. The joke is in how he gets through the interview by basically mimicking his interviewer to the point where the interviewer becomes convinced that Mi is actually the boss. Work is also portrayed as punishment. Echoing Kassim Selamat's fate in *Ibu Mertuaku* (My Mother-in-Law; 1962), *Kacha Permata* (Glass Pearl; 1996) sees Hamzah, the son of an aristocrat, reduced to hard labour at a construction site after his family disowns him for choosing to marry a cabaret singer. At times, the point is made through the refusal to work. The comedy *Sikit Punya Gila* (A Little Crazy; 1982) sees Hamid and Dharma (two men from the village) migrate to the city with dreams of being wealthy. They get into trouble soon after their arrival in Kuala Lumpur as they prefer to steal and gamble rather than look for work. The

comedy ends with a lesson about the importance of honest living though the shortcuts the two main characters take attest to the difficulty of working in order to fully participate in the national developmental agenda at the time. The line of thought that is extended through this example is concerned neither with the difficulty of work, nor with whether the job is moral or immoral. Rather it raises the question of whether work should be necessary at all. In this regard it extends critiques of work similar to those that have pervaded Malay cinema.

But *Azura* is unique in how it would place the question of work amidst an emergent popular culture. For example, *Rozana Cinta '87* (1987) features a love triangle that sees Din, a t-shirt seller, aspire to sing for a rock band. He falls in love with Rozani, only to find himself amidst a potential lesbian affair, as she is, unbeknownst to her, being wooed by her best friend Nomi at the same time. The film features a famous scene that sees Din yell at a civil servant for being inefficient, mocking him for not fulfilling the government's demand for productivity, with the scene set next to a *'Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah'* ('Clean, Efficient and Honest') poster, the official work ethic slogan the government promoted to encourage Malays to become more productive. Later *Mat Som* (1990) situates Rock similarly against the demands of the New Economic Policy. The ending sees Mat Som, the lead character, taking his soon-to-be girlfriend Wan Faridah to a rock concert, after affirming, against his father's more conventional wishes, his desire to travel the world before submitting to the conventional demands of marriage and stability. Similarly, the lead character from the tribute movie *Rock!* (2005) faced the split between his 1990s rock ambitions and the pressure to settle into the world of nine-to-five employment. To be sure, not all of these films can be seen as outrightly against work. Some

would end by affirming the importance of a good work ethic. But this does nonetheless place work under scrutiny, indicating some recognition of a new demand.

Azura would also pioneer the link between motorbikes and masculinity. *Sembilu* (1994) *Sembilu 2* (1995) and *Bara* (1999) star music icon Awie in the prime of his solo career, having established himself as the lead singer for Wings, one of Malaysia's biggest rock bands. In comparison to *Azura*, all three films offer far less in terms of social commentary, but Awie's motorbike trip on the open highway clearly harks back to the precedent set by *Azura* (note the matching helmets, white t-shirts and jeans in figure 12). The clearest resemblance is in the opening credits of *Sembilu*, where we see Awie ride with the female lead Era, played by beauty queen Erra Fazira at the peak of her career. This followed an earlier flashback scene of Awie and Era cycling home together from school. The juxtaposition of past and present not only marks the endurance of childhood romance but also social mobility, as Awie was also an established singer by then. *Sembilu 2* and *Bara* do not have the same scene of lovers riding together, but they show Awie on a motorbike for an extended period of time towards the end, to establish his rock image.

Azura, however, would underscore the rebel aura in more real terms. The film became notorious after the shocking news of lead actor Jamal Abdillah's arrest for narcotics at Sarawak airport during the shooting of the film. This began a longer-running stream of chatter and gossip around Jamal Abdillah's character. His career took off as the 1978 winner of Bintang RTM, a popular talent contest that launched the careers of other screen legends such as Sudirman (of Chapter 5) A.R. Badul (of Chapter 4), and Ramlah Ram. Thus,

Jamal's rocker-performer scene at a crucial part of *Azura* was imbued with a rebel element that ties the plot of the film with the broader pop-cultural mood of the time. And it worked: *Azura* became the first film of the Malaysian studio era that earned RM 2 million revenue at the box office, cementing its lasting place in Malay popular memory. This was a major achievement for a nascent film industry that was only beginning to establish itself.[49] *Azura* was remade with updated themes in 2012 (paintball became the 'scene' rather than motorbikes) though it was a commercial failure, as comparisons with the original were inevitable.





Figure 3.12. The scene of Azura and Zack (below) riding out in the highway and in love is very similar to the scene of Awie and Era (above) doing the same in 1993.

Uneven *Azura*

Azura would bring these themes together and ground them amidst a developmental context. First, it situates this search for work via the question of home. Much like what we just saw in *Ibu Mertuaku*, homelessness becomes a way in which the film stages the uneven terrains of a rapidly modernizing Peninsula. Azura lives with her aunt before being kicked out for returning home late one night. Zack is also kicked out by his father after refusing to study and take over the family business. Being homeless means that they have to survive in 'the real world'. They rent small rooms and sleep on the streets as they struggle to survive. Rock music plays in the background throughout, coupling their outcast status with a new sound in their struggle to meet the demands of an equally new world. It is in this state of homelessness that the motorbike—the ostentatious and pricey Yamaha RD/ Katana 250—stands out. Zack's refusal to work and go to school is shown through how he would rather spend his time gallivanting around town on his expensive motorcycle. This brings us to the second way in which *Azura* is instructive. The problem of work also signals how the commodity

occupies an incommensurate place amidst uneven development. On the one hand Zack's attitude towards his motorbike echoes what Claudia Springer (2007) writes of the rebel's significance in sustaining capital, where one consumes as a way to protest, thereby reserving the discontents of the age a place in the market. This means using motifs "that appeal to our desire not to participate in the process, to rebel against the pressure to be a consuming drone, but ironically it is necessary to buy the advertised product in order to resist successfully" (Springer, 2007). On the other hand the film also makes it clear that Zack has not earned the motorbike. The conclusion sees it discarded, when Zack opts for hard work rather than undeserved enjoyment. The same would happen to his biker-gang friends. They too would abandon their motorbikes once they learned about the value of work and good citizenship.

Thus while the motorbike constitutes a great deal of the rebel motif in *Azura*, it is only evoked to show the unevenness of enjoyment, that is to say, the tension between the capitalist ethos of acquisition on one hand and its demand for hard work on the other. In other words, the film appears to explore an ambivalent attitude towards consumption. The prevalent social climate is one that does not know what quite to do with objects of the marketplace, that is to say, the outlook that assumes that we should only fully identify with an object as 'ours' once we have truly earned it. This may be the norm where work and productivity are already a taken for granted expectations. But insofar as the status of a consumer object remains a question, the notion of 'deservedness' too is tenuous. The motorbike's proximity with Zack's body makes this ambivalence all the more obvious especially as his incorporation into capitalism was marked by his change in attitude towards the motorbike. In the end he discards it in his

embrace of the ethos of hard work, indicating how he must now 'lack' in order to fully function in a modern economy by which one begins to find meaning in labour.

The motorbike's historically ambiguous position is made more obvious in the film's cruising scenes where we find Zack riding through Malaysia's highways with Azura. The film would display the vast landscapes around him but this is also a reference to the changing terrain of Malaysian development. The construction of highways was very much a debated topic from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, as they mark a crucial geographical project needed for Malaysian modernization. This would also form new relations as otherwise unconnected areas were bridged to incorporate more rural areas for industry and to facilitate growth. Zack's masculinity is placed amidst this historical transition as the film shows him riding on the new wide, open roads with Azura holding on to him from behind. The rebel angst is encapsulated in the uneven position rock music occupies: With his refusal to work already established, his iconic-rider status shows him exploring new terrain as an outsider. He is 'advanced' due to his acquisition of goods, signalling his incorporation into a commodity economy. But the highway he rides has only recently connected the Malaysian hinterland into capitalism. This indicates a world that is not yet in step with his more established position as a consumer in capitalism. Zack is neither here nor there. He is a part of the new commodity culture in ways that the rest of the country is not. His embrace of work would finally put some balance in his uneven position in capitalism.

It is also important to note how this otherwise banal distinction between acquiring and earning that the motorbike provokes goes to the heart of the

psychoanalytic notion of the object, which forms its value precisely through prohibition. 'Civilization,' ensures that enjoyment be sacrificed in recognition of the law, that is to say, the recognition that the broader social order makes particular demands that the subject must abide by. It is in this recognition of prohibition in fact that desire is formed wherein one's identity begins to be organised around an interplay of lack and fulfilment. Indeed the film would highlight Zack's recognition of 'civilization' by precisely showing his discovery of authority in Azura, as we shall soon see.

Part 2: Modernity and the Father

It is noteworthy that the film's iconic highway scene eventually takes Zack and Azura to his father Datuk Putih's enormous house, which we see for the first time. This functions to establish the contrast between his displacement and the house, especially given its wide garden and huge and luxurious living rooms. The *Datuk* in his father's name (an honorary title equivalent to a British duke) is also a crucial detail here, given that those who could lay claim to this title were few and far between in 1984, and what's more, fewer still in commerce. The tension is established as the restless rock rebel contends with the embodiment of the wealthy and successful Malay man. The father insists that he change his ways and start to go to school to think about his future and learn about the value of work. Zack protests. He exclaims that he is not a doll to be controlled ("*Saya bukan anak patung ayah, itu tak boleh, ini tak boleh."*) that he is the owner of his

life (*"Kehidupan saya, hak saya."*.) and that he should decide what is good for him (*"Segala keputusan di tangan saya."*) (Deddy, 1984).[50]

The masculine nature of this problem is indirectly emphasised through the comparison of Zack with Azura. She is the crucial role model that ensures he eventually sees the value of work. This is the transition that moves the plot: Azura doesn't just teach Zack about the meaning of love, she also shows him how to look for work, slowly helping him transition out of his youthful and extravagant lifestyle to real-life responsibilities. During one of their earliest encounters, she is seen in her aunt's restaurant, standing out in bright red, waitressing table to table, taking orders and looking visibly overwhelmed. The camera turns to Zack who observes her diligence (an important scene that I will discuss later). When they marry, Zack is careless with their spending, preferring to dine in fancy restaurants and go shopping. When his father cuts off Zack's allowance, it is Azura who urges him to get a job.[51] She is the frugal one, always aware of the need to earn a living. Indeed, it is through learning the virtues of work that Zack becomes an exemplary citizen.

This transition is underscored with a sensitivity to gender difference at each turn. Azura, for one, is visibly shorter and smaller than Zack, a detail that stands out in moments when we see him standing beside her with his big motorbikes. This contrast is stated early in the film. Zack, struck by the love he feels upon his first encounter with Azura, goes to her school to search for her,

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[51] They marry and enjoy life, taking vacations and eating at fancy restaurants, that is, until they realise that their savings are depleting fast. This harks back to the same dilemma Kassim Selamat and Sabariah face in *Ibu Mertuaku*, as explained in Chapter 1.

wearing his black leather jacket and thus standing out amidst the other students who are wearing white. This also establishes a crucial understated detail in the film, namely that Azura is still a teenager, no older than seventeen when she and Zack date, get married and she soon gets pregnant. The difference between Zack the bad *boy* and Azura the good *girl* is stressed in even more dramatic terms later, when Azura falls victim to slander that she was allegedly raped and impregnated by Zack's jealous bike gang members who then shamed her as 'impure'.

The Playground Scene

Azura's significance is acknowledged in a scene at the end of the film. She is situated amidst another gender binary although this time opposite the father in the film. Datuk Putih, seeing that his estranged son has turned a new leaf, wants him to continue his studies overseas. But he knows he is unable to *pujuk* (convince) him and asks Azura to do it instead. This means that she and Zack will have to compromise their hard-earned happiness and be apart for three years while he gets his degree. This is reiterated to be a concern about the future. Their time apart has a long-term gain and Datuk Putih assures that he will support her and her child in Zack's absence. Azura does not take this request lightly, depressed by the thought of having to be away from Zack for a long time. It merely takes the film deeper into melodramatic twists before Zack agrees to his father's demand and the film ends on a happy note. But what is curious is how the rationale that leads to the conclusion is staged. It occurs at a playground and

we see Azura in a white *baju kurung* (a customary Malay dress).[52] Meanwhile, Datuk Putih, in suit and tie, speaks to Azura while sitting on a swing moving back and forth in a striking gesture that sees him suspend his seniority to acknowledge her youth. We briefly see Azura showing a quick, wry smile, noting Putih's change in posture.

The most apparent message is that the father seeks the help of the woman to help the man. The more crucial implication here is how Azura is presumed to be Zack's exemplar. His father is not his role model. She is. The way this is composed is telling. Datuk Putih is always the taller of the two, but he is diminished as he sits on the swing, revealing Azura to be the taller person between them, indicating her privileged position in the urgency to motivate Zack. This is emphasised twice as we turn from the swing to her looking at Datuk Putih. He then steps off the swing and walks towards Azura to place them on the same level. The eventful way in which this otherwise very brief conversation is composed could be explained by its necessity for the plot. Datuk Putih, seeing how much Azura means for Zack, needs her help. But the sociological implication here is curious. On the face of it, we see a father desperate to see his son 'advance'. But a consideration of the film's context reveals how Azura the teenage mother could only be Zack's role model because she had already adjusted to modernity. Datuk Putih needs her to tell Zack what to do.

[52] This is a meeting of two 'whites'. Azura in her white *baju kurung* meets Datuk Putih (*putih* is the Bahasa Malaysia word for *white*). He also appears to be wearing a white suit.



Figure 3.13. Azura and Datuk Putih at the playground discussing Zack's future, which depends on her persuading him to study again.



Figure 3.14. Azura and Datuk Putih placed at the same level after he made his request. Before this, he is often shown as the tallest between them.

This is a significant departure from commonplace presumptions about the father's role in sustaining a male social order, which informs many accounts of modern masculinity. Patriarchy, literally the rule of fathers, is reproduced upon established and valued masculine images, instantiated upon particular expressions of power (aggression and violence but also religious wisdom or corporate success, for example), and how they are realised and exercised by men and the influence they wield over society. Fatherhood is a crucial site for the realisation of this process, owing to men's expected hold over the family which the film, too, presumes. The scene, however, articulates a short-circuiting of that process, where the baton is now passed—and one might add ceremonially too, given how the scene is set—from the father to the young woman. This stands in contrast to the standard account of man and woman's position vis-à-vis culture. The modern, some would say universal, account where women "represent the nonsocial—or the confusion of biological and social—and men who unambiguously represent society" is not at work in this scene (Chodorow, 1978, p. 81). This dilemma exposes a particular historical conundrum: On one hand, Zack's manly identity is understood and performed as the opposite of Azura's. On the other hand, he also has to be like her in order to advance. What then does it mean for Zack to be a 'man'? Who does he identify with, or turn to, in order to be the masculine agent of Malay modernisation? Put more simply: who actually has the power to shape Zack's future?

Identification crossroads

We could extend our exploration of the dilemma in the following terms: The playground scene is also about two possibilities of family. Going overseas means family would be dictated in Datuk Putih's terms. Staying behind means the family would be shaped by Azura. This raises the question of who is the actual 'father' in this scene. The psychoanalytic notion of the 'father' is useful here. Structurally speaking, 'father' does not refer to any 'actual' father. Rather, it is a symbolic place of authority "through which social law and cultural norms are conveyed into the life of the subject" (D Hook, 2017, p. 120). The law here can be understood in two senses: as the law of the symbolic, or a "language order," but also one that "superimposes the reign of culture over that of nature" (Lacan, 2006b, p. 229). Thus, the identification with an actual father is identification with what governs discourse, "a focal point through which cultural norms, symbolic ideals and social proscriptions are condensed and relayed" (D Hook, 2017, p. 121).

On the other hand, Lacan also stresses that the father is just a metaphor, 'the effect of a pure signifier" (Lacan, 2001, p. 152). His authority is not premised on anything 'real' but is a mere structural necessity, the point at which something is instantiated to plug the void that would otherwise destabilise discourse, a general "compass of culturally and socially viable principles" (Vanheule, 2011, p. 61). I point out a key implication here, namely, that the association of fatherhood or paternal authority with masculinity is coincidental. As Elizabeth Rudinesco puts it, the "symbolic function of the father can be assumed as much by a woman as by a man, and in a homosexual couple, by one or the other partner" (Badiou & Roudinesco, 2014, p. 25). Darian Leader explains

the symbolic nature of the father by emphasising that he need not be embodied in any particular person at all: "It could be a professional endeavour, a lifestyle, an activity: what mattered was less what it was than what it did" (Leader, 2011, p. 63). It suffices as a "particular and historically located set of symbolic co-ordinates" (D Hook, 2017, p. 127). The father is the locus of desirable traits: "Any such set of features presupposes a gaze, a symbolic standpoint which sets the parameters of what counts as attractive, successful, praiseworthy, etc." (D Hook, 2017, p. 127).

The fact that the 'father' is a largely plastic standpoint, a structural requirement that conceals the thinness of the law, allows us to acknowledge Azura's symbolic authority. Her diligence and honesty are what Zack needs to be incorporated into the broader national-developmental agenda. This is experienced more concretely via two forms of identifications: imaginary and symbolic identification, or the ideal ego on one hand and the ego-ideal on the other. Imaginary identification refers to 'beloved' images of one's 'self' that are often deduced from others who are taken as 'semblances': "These are the grandiose or idealised, indeed, narcissistically gratifying, images of ourselves—or our group—that we hold dear: our preferred self-images" (D Hook, 2017, p. 127). It functions visually, as it is located "in the inter-subjective dialectic of seeing others as one's self and one's self as others plays out" (D Hook, 2017, p. 127). It functions 'horizontally' via seeing 'the same' among difference, equalising what would otherwise be different. This process, however, is governed by a more fundamental logic. This is where symbolic identification is crucial for constructing identity by determining the values by which the subject is able to find his place. In practice, it is what the subject 'looks up' to, indicating

"a relationship with values and ideals of a higher level than that of the ego itself" (D Hook, 2017, p. 127). In the case of Zack, it is important to note that he does not identify with Azura by wanting to be a mother and wearing a dress etc. Rather, symbolic identification reflects desired meaningfulness: "The historical location, societal ideals and ideological values that importantly delimit and condition the field of imaginary identifications" (D Hook, 2017, p. 129). Symbolic identification then has a structuring function, legitimising the features that are noteworthy of recognising as *one's own*: "In the absence of any symbolic co-ordinates, no imaginary identity is possible" (D Hook, 2017, p. 131).

There is an obvious link that can be drawn between this formulation and the playground scene. Datuk Putih's expectations for Zack to stop being a rocker and become a responsible businessman is premised precisely upon imaginary identification, for Zack to be 'just like him' one day despite the culture and age gaps between them. This process, furthermore, is enabled by the ordering of values that allow their differences to be overcome by certain signifiers such as 'family', 'hard work' and 'fatherhood'. Furthermore, Datuk Putih makes his demand to Azura upon his seniority, honorary title and wealth, all of which are desirable, masculine qualities pushed by national discourse at the time ('*Datuk*' also translates to grandfather in Bahasa Malaysia). Insofar as the film does conclude by reinforcing these values, it attests to a masculine discursive order, one that merely confirms the normative power of the patriarch. We should note that being a businessman was the hegemonic demand of the era, especially as Malaysia was geared towards constructing a Malay capitalism. The future aspired for by Malay nationalism was not yet secure and succession was paramount. Azura, after all, acknowledges Datuk Putih's authority, given that she

does in the end agree that Zack should pursue his studies. In her parting words, she stresses that she is ready to sacrifice their relationship to make his father happy.

Part 2: Uneven Identification

But the playground scene suggests something else, namely that Datuk Putih is out of options, that he does not wield total symbolic authority. This is where we are able to specify Azura's unique place. She articulates the demand from a place beyond the father or what is at times called in Lacanian discourse as the third-term. Key is how this beyond works as a "quilting point" that ensures that the subject's 'identity' in discourse coheres (Lacan, 1997, p. 268). This third-term is the symbolic anchor that makes the father a father in the first place. The beyond takes us from the father as a conduit for social influence to the external presence that gives the world of symbols its coherence and its order: it is the 'something outside the obvious remit of the father to make the function of the father work' (Derek Hook, 2016, p. 114). Thus the playground scene does not simply show how the cultural capital Datuk Putih wields due to his manhood is 'worthless' when it matters most, that is, in motivating his only heir. His appeal to Azura also shows how male authority has reached a limit. He has to appeal to her in order to fulfil her obligation as a 'father'. The Malay woman is recognised as wielding the power of persuasion, which in effect is the power to confirm Zack's entry into modernity.

This brings us closer to the limits of the Lacanian framework. Its inherent patriarchy shows itself in how even the 'beyond' or the third is called the Name-

of-the-Father. Myth and religion has played this role as it allows the father, or power more broadly, to appeal to a higher force or logic to justify his actions and decisions. As Leader notes, "Anything could count as a Name-of-the-Father as long as it worked to introduce limits and to bind together the registers of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real" (2011, p. 63). *Azura* presents us with a tempting move to claim that the Malay feminine / matrifocality plays this role over the father. But the playground scene presents us with some insight to rethink this relationship between the father and the beyond that anchors his symbolic power. The spatial dynamic in *Azura* is telling. She is an outsider of the family and he turns to her for help. This is indicative of a horizontal rather than a vertical arrangement. To see the significance of this arrangement we shall have to contextualise Lacan further.

Father-Power

The reason why 'the father' is such a loose standpoint (its can be occupied by different people and relies on a metaphysical third term) has to do with 'his' tenuous position in modernity. Lacan (2002) spoke of the "decline of the paternal imago" or the paternal imaginary in reference to how the symbolic order is increasingly becoming fragile. As Paul Verhaeghe (2000) and Rob Weatherill (2017) argue, this speaks to the broader decline of authority in the Western context wherein 'the law' that is required to stabilise culture—and consequently the ego—is no longer securely structured. The decline of the paternal imaginary, to be sure, is not one from omnipotence to powerlessness. The psychoanalytic father was never truly powerful in the first place. Rather, the

'paternal imago' has declined in terms of its role in showing how agency requires the concealment of lack. Thus the father has declined insofar as power is now without its symbolic support. The supposed 'truth' that legitimises power's aura, and the guises, myths and rituals it comes with are no longer believable or taken in earnest. [53]Insofar as the ego's mastery is a fundamentally fictive construct, power requires that its nothingness be veiled by symbolic codes. Power has to be constantly justified, validated and protected because it has nothing at its core. 'The emperor has no clothes' or 'nothing is sacred' are common sayings that capture this insight. But modernity is such that even the symbols that disguise the lack no longer have their power, rendering all claims to authority questionable and doubtful.

It is this thinness that enables the father's symbolic role to be occupied by non-fathers. But we could go further and ask how this could have happened to the modern-Western father at all. To answer this we should consider the history presumed in the Lacanian account of fathering. For Lacan the Western father is a recent and unique historical incident in how he embodies both the super–ego *and* the ego-ideal: "The Imago of the father concentrates in itself the function of

[53] Parodies of people in power are one commonplace example of this. In more political and serious terms the popular demand for so-called 'relatable personalities' to be in power (i.e. Boris Johnson, Donald Trump or Rodrigo Duterte) is emblematic of how leaders are now more expected to be without pretensions. They are appealing because their ascendance has required less symbolic structuring. #MeToo, although obviously of a different context from electoral politics, also speaks to this assumption. The esteem given to the power of social media to directly destroy the reputations of those in power similarly speaks to an era that disregards the aura of formality and officialdom.

repression and sublimation. But this in turn is socially determined by the existence of the paternalistic family" (Lacan, 2002, 50). In other words, the modern father is unique in how he is expected to be both prohibitor and exemplar. In contrast, Lacan holds that in matriarchal societies these roles are distributed to others (according to his anthropology it is given to maternal uncles.) There are two points that are relevant to our inquiry here. Firstly, the fragility of modern symbolic order has less to do with masculinity per se than the nuclear family's model of singular authority where the father becomes the sole focal point of power. Secondly this was a historical transformation that was tied to the scientific revolution and the rise of capital: "This revolution took place in the fifteenth century and this, along with the economic revolution, is the source of bourgeois society and of the psychology of modern man alike" (Lacan, 2002, 52).

Key here is how capitalism ushered the "contraction" of more elaborate forms of kinship that would be more evident in premodern families (Lacan, 2002, V). The contraction occurred when family became primarily centred upon the marriage of two individuals rather than kinship or blood ties. A key transformation occurred when the father had to concurrently assume the role of both super-ego and ego-ideal which was once distributed among different parental adults in a family. In other words Lacan indicates that the modern father meets a breaking point where it is unable to embody obligations that were once widely distributed. He also adds a key detail here. The economic factors that constricted what were once social duties into a single father also constricted kinship into a nuclear unit. The emergence of the modern father in other words was a part of the broader set of historical developments that saw "the institution

of the family take the decisive step towards its modern structure, namely the secret revolution that made marriage, and not the family, the predominant social fact" (Ibid). In other words, Lacan links the unsustainable father of the constricted nuclear family to the unsustainable expansion of capital itself.

Datuk Putih's recourse to Azura easily maps on to this as he openly admits failing to demonstrate the manly virtues Zack ought to embody. He requires help and thus realizes that he alone is not able to modernize Zack. Where he is the super-ego, Azura is the ego-ideal. This much is clear. The playground scene, in other words, indicates how the structuring components within the modern family —where the ego-ideal and superego are questions in the first place—are still being bargained. Similarly, the film's sensitivity to uneven development also allows us to say that the particular components and roles of the modernizing Malay family are also being negotiated. Here *Azura* adds another crucial detail: the father's tenuousness is situated differently. Where the Western father's decline was a part of the rise of the modern, capitalist and secular power-structure, the Malay father's decline recognises the rise of the woman. She stands in where the father's power is shown to be limited in regards to the future. Here we arrive at the film's instructive account of how the Malay regime of gender identification is uneven. The modern Malay family form is still being negotiated because identification with the woman is what is needed to transition to modernity. Here *Azura* is also significant for how she fulfils the ego-ideal's temporal function, namely to orient the future. Derek Hook describes symbolic identification as a crucial type of "compass for what the subject wants, for what they might become in the future" (D Hook, 2017, p. 133).

This indeed is where the Malay gender regime significantly departs from that of the West. In the latter, the weakness of the father, or the absence of a symbolic quilting point for identification, amounts to a crisis precisely because the subject is unable to imagine a future as a result. And the subject is unable to do so given how the family unit has become bound to one symbolic focal point in the father, having sidelined all other sources of identification. The Malay context on the other hand sees the future directed by the woman where the man is shown to be deficient. Before proceeding further into the implications of this, we should first acknowledge that it is not a presumption limited to *Azura*. The binary way in which gender and power is depicted—Zack placed between the young woman of Malaysia's future and the old man of Malaysia's past—risks coming across as crude, but it is one moment in a long series of similar moments in Malay cinema where men are shown to have trouble adjusting to modernisation while women are always already driving the future. The beyond where Azura is placed may have mythical overtones, especially given how the film emphasises her *suci* (purity) and the ceremonial way her meeting with Datuk Putih is staged in the film. But it is not without precedent or empirical ground. *Ibu Mertuaku* similarly shows women to be more anchored compared to the vicissitudes men experience due to the transition towards capitalism.

As an example, consider a memorable scene in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (Worn-out Bachelors become Artistes) (Malay Films Productions, 1962). Ramlee, the lead character played by P. Ramlee, is about to leave his rented communal home in search of a job when he walks past Salmah, his crush, who is on her way back from her nursing job (indicating a more established position in a *modern* work force.) He looks obviously smitten but also caught off guard with her small

talk. She asks him what kind of work he is looking for, and he says 'playing' in an obviously joking tone. When he is on his way out she asks him if he has any money for transport. He says no and she hands him cash. He dilly-dallies to show reluctance and shyness before eventually taking the money anyway. The prop is crucial here, as Ramlee receives paper money. So much of the comedy around *Bujang Lapok*'s poverty shows the male characters struggling with coins.



Figure 3.15. Salmah offers Ramlee money so he can go on his job hunt, which he takes in comedic reluctance.

The same assumption is extended, in fact enlarged, in the remake of *Azura* in 2012. Azura (played by megastar Neelofa Mohd. Noor) is recognised for her academic excellence and is offered a job as an architect at a successful firm in Singapore, while Zack is still working at a petrol station. She does not want to hurt Zack's ego and hides this news of her success from him until he finds out, becomes angry and falls into deep depression. This was not the first moment of his emasculation, however. They first met at a paintball court where Azura worked before. He was complaining about the supposedly poor service there, raising his voice and making a scene at which point Azura slaps him to stunned

silence, which the film shows in slow motion. He falls on the table uttering a loud 'argh.' He stood up shocked at what had just taken place and it is at this point that their eyes lock and Zack's facial expression visibly turns from anger to awe at her,clearly physical, power.

The key scene between Datuk Putih (now a Tan Sri, an upgraded title from Datuk), played by Afdlin Shauki, is rendered differently. Tan Sri Putih is less conciliatory in tone and posture, perhaps in step with the increasing patriarchy of the time, but his demand is noteworthy: he urges Azura and Zack to get a divorce because he does not want Zack to follow her overseas. Tan Sri insists that he should finish his studies before taking on the responsibilities of a husband. Putih in fact iterates in no uncertain terms that Zack's 'mentality' is not ready for life (*"Mental dia masih tidak bersedia lagi untuk menerima cabaran hidup susah."*) despite Azura insisting that she can change Zack. Putih claims instead that Zack cannot be changed and that everyone would be better off if they part ways, adding that Islam does not prohibit divorce when it is for the greater good. Azura runs away heartbroken but Putih, seeing how much this leaves Zack hurt and depressed, decides to use his wealth to bring them back together. The film does not resolve the question of his future and closes with Zack and Azura embracing one another, promising to never part, with Azura apologetic for leaving him. But the ending is clear and consistent in showing how much farther she has advanced, as we see that she is working at the Louvre by that point. The film says nothing of what work Zack does, as in the job he has, in the end.

It is also worth noting how the remake further emphasises Zack's emasculation by contrasting him with his more successful and more

commanding elder sister Wanda, played by Nini Marlini. She runs their father's company (which makes Zack jealous and insecure), speaks English most of the time and bosses around a dumb, silent and tall white butler called Eddie. She is significant for making Zack, who is always still and silent around her, her trainee at her skyscraper office, where we see her effortlessly and confidently boss him around. This too is a situation Zack is forced into, as she is enraged and embarrassed to find him working at a petrol station.[54] Now that Azura too is socially mobile, it is clear that the real-life demands of work and competition leave Zack neither here nor there, as the only cultural 'authority' he can claim over Azura is his status as her husband. We should step back from these cinematic examples to see how they echo persisting anxieties regarding not only men's ability to catch up with the demands of modernity but also how women are appearing to be always doing much better. In 2013, former Prime Minister Najib Razak declared that 3 out of 4 students enrolled in universities were women (Online Desk, 2013). The trend also showed a general increase in women in the sciences, a key domain in the Malay developmental agenda. A 2015 report by Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau states that Malaysia is on the way to becoming a regional beacon of hope regarding women's attempts to achieve parity in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine) professions. The report notes that up to 2014, 31.6% of graduate engineers were women. Areas where women were highly represented were in medicine (46.7%),

[54] The remake updates the context to explain the deaths of Azura's parents as a result of a stampede during their Umrah in Mecca and now situates Azura further ahead of Zack than the original film.

dentistry (63.5%), veterinary medicine (41.4%) and pharmacy (72.9 %)' (Kigotho, 2015). At UKM (*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* or the Malaysian National University) alone, the gender ratio of undergraduate enrolment in 2011 was 70:30 (C. Kapoor & Au, 2011). The same trend could be found at UPM (*Universiti Pertanian Malaysia* or the Malaysian Agricultural University), another Malay-majority institution, with a ratio of 67:33. This was the continuation of a trend that began in 1990, when UPM could claim, without any gender quota, that half of its graduates were women (Jala, 2013).

The examples from classic films, which should offer a consistent picture of Malay women's relative advantage in modernisation, echoes Maila Stivens's conclusion that "Malay women are the producers of contemporary urban culture and middle classness" (Stivens, 2002, p. 109). She turns to how modern lifestyle is depicted in Malay magazines to show that while Malay women are subject to patriarchal pressures to embody Islamic and traditional virtues, they are nonetheless engaging the broader structural transformations of the time, such as consumerism and pursuing higher education. Women are thus "deployed as metaphors for often conflicting aspects of modernity in popular, religious and official discourse" (Stivens, 2002, p. 93). We can extend Stivens's observation from seventeen years ago to indicate that the conflict is no longer metaphorical but also informs policy, with men wrestling with the anxious suspicions that they are no longer the leading drivers of modernity. For example, former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi inaccurately believes that "while the current situation indicates that female students are brighter, smarter and more hardworking, it does not bode well for our society in the future. This is because traditionally, men have always been seen as leaders and breadwinners for the family"

("Gender imbalance in universities very worrying, says Pak Lah," 2014).[55] Meanwhile, we find more men in headlines of more worrying kinds, as drug addicts, criminals and diabetics. Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Muhammad expressed his worry in blunter terms: "Women make up 70% of the students while men are a mere 30%. What has happened? Is Malaysia lacking in males? No, the Malay men appear to feel proud to be Mat Rempit. They do not feel ashamed when they fail in their examinations" (Lee, 2014).[56] The mention of *mat rempit* is noteworthy because it not only harks back to Zack's motorbike identity, but given the working- and lower-class demographic that comprise *Rempit* memberships also completes the Malay motorbike's fictional and real-life presence as a key prop for Malay masculine insecurities. But even liberals are worried. Serdang Member of Parliament Ong Kian Ming of the secular Democratic Action Party believes the "extreme disparity" raises the question of the potential careers of the "missing boys and potential negative impacts on crime and other social indicators" (S. Sim, 2016). What is most worrying is how this anxiety is emerging well after the New Economic Policy (1979-1991). While

[55] This claim about tradition is inaccurate, given how it runs contrary to the consensus around women's substantial influence in the household as detailed in my introduction. In any case, it should be noted that I do not turn to these statistics to conclude that Malay women are doing well in absolute terms. Their advantageous position in education and the work force does not necessarily translate to consistent *long-term* material advancement and social mobility. It is quite often that one encounters anecdotes about women having to leave their work in order to take care of the household.

[56] This would make for a productive engagement with existing literature on the relationship between gender, labour and migration, as was recently compiled in Amirth & Shahraoui (2018).

the middle class was by then robust and a commercial culture was established, the vision of seeing a Malay-male-dominated economy, indeed modernity, was still in doubt.

Uneven phallus

The fact that the playground scene resonates with the broader gender tensions underlying Malaysian modernization presents us with a valuable opportunity to pose a question about the phallus, which is how the paternal function structures lack. Insofar Datuk Putih clearly wields ultimate symbolic authority he can be said to occupy the paramount phallic position. In the end, it is to his approval that both Zack and Azura turn. But the playground scene also indicates that his phallic authority is an uneven one. For it also sees the phallus briefly transferred, or refracted, to her. The temporal resonance here is unmistakable as she clearly orients the future.

The phallus signifies the lack in the Other. It offers an answer to "what does the Other want from me?" The phallus fixes a solution for this question, by indicating "that towards which we must take up a position of attempting to have something like or attempting to be,", whether it is a thing, person or trait (Derek Hook, 2006, p. 78). The phallus offers something more than a straightforward account of social construction, whereby external forces shape 'internal' thoughts and identities. The phallus, "As an anchoring-point of Symbolic constitution," indicates that there is something in the symbolic order—something to being a part of society—that is 'worth it', that it works and has something identifiable for 'me' and is therefore not merely a random amalgamation of symbols and objects

(Derek Hook, 2006, p. 78). The phallus plays a crucial role here as a symbol of exchange, where the sexes are situated amidst an interplay of having and being the phallus, which is expected, purportedly, to solve the lack, that is to say, the void in the absence of symbolic support. This not only indicates the possibility that his lack can be resolved, it also suggests that the symbolic order is purposeful for what it can promise.

Two points are key here. First, what are identified with are not the individual traits or characteristics the persons or genders represent but rather their status as signifiers in the symbolic order. It is less about who "they really are" but rather what they symbolise. Second, and once again speaking to Azura's symbolic authority, it indicates that there is 'something' beyond lack that could be had. The subject is thereby positioned in discourse through an expectation of a gain (fame, power, love, happiness etc.). I will be discussing the phallus in more detail in Chapter 4, but for now it is crucial to note the phallus's "sociological function" (Lacan, 2014, p. 89). By structuring lack, the phallus (and in the case of the film, Azura herself) does not simply indicate the possession of 'admirable virtues', it demonstrates how to desire, that is to say, how to handle lack given that there is 'something out there' that could fulfil it. Key is the taken-for-granted masculine sex of the phallus. Psychoanalysis, in its account of a fundamentally male social order, designates the father as the bearer of the phallus for how he takes the mother's attention away from the child. The child stops being the focal point of her desire as she turns to 'something else' which is thought to be in the father's possession. The child would therefore turn to the father to know 'what to do' and thereby acquire and become the *mother's* object of desire. What is taken for granted in this dynamic is that "the (symbolic) phallus is thus what the

woman desires in order to find a place in the symbolic, where she is and can be understood solely as the partner of a male" (Lewis, 2008, p. 63). The dynamic displayed in *Azura*, crystallised in the playground scene, renders the standard, that is to say 'Western,' orientation of the phallus differently. It shows the 'phallus' to be located beyond the father and in the direction of the young Malay woman. Thus we see the man desiring the woman to find a place in the symbolic.

The loving gaze of work

Azura does this in an earlier scene where she and Zack are searching for work, where she becomes the Other's gaze.[57] This gaze is what the subject seeks to map its relation to the discourse. As Henry Krips describes, the Other "is the externally projected position from which the subject looks for an answer to the question of his or her own desire" (Krips, 1999, p. 8). With this in mind, Derek Hook explains imaginary and symbolic identification in terms of the following question: "What is the lovable image it attempts to embody; and in terms of what symbolic values, or, for whose gaze—for what Other—is this image being enacted?" (D Hook, 2017, p. 131).[58] *Azura* renders this in literal terms, by having

[57] Do note that the gaze in this instance is not to be understood as Lacan's well-known formulation of The Gaze, as in the gaze of the Real, in seminar XI. The gaze can be instantiated from imaginary, symbolic or Real standpoints. In line with the objective of the chapter, my use of the gaze in this instance draws from Derek Hook's (2017) account of the gaze of the Other as an object of symbolic identification: "A given set of features is never in and of itself lovable, desirable; any such set of features presupposes a gaze, a symbolic standpoint which sets the parameters of what counts as attractive, successful, praiseworthy, etc." (D Hook, 2017, p. 125).

[58] In this instance Hook is referring to the imaginary, rather than the Real gaze.

Zack's sight fixed to her where he discovers the value of work. Seeing was established as crucial point of identification from the beginning, when Zack stalks her as she was busy and hurriedly waiting tables at her aunt's busy restaurant. He sits at a nearby table to admire her hard work and then turns to continue observing her when she walks past him unnoticed. Work would eventually feature looking again although this time Azura would return Zack's look. This is later in the film when Zack is finally cut off from his allowance and they have run out of their savings. We see them standing amidst the city bustle, framed in the middle of a wall, where Azura says, with a serious tone, that they need to start looking for work (by this point, we also notice how much of their conversations are about work).

Zack turns to her, briefly pauses as if to think, and then agrees. They've headed off in different directions to look for jobs when he passes by a big red motorbike and slows down to look at it before walking away again, indicating a departure from his biker past for a new life. To appreciate this, we should consider the scene that preceded this decision. We see them at a candlelit dinner in a fancy restaurant. Zack is enjoying the moment, saying that it would be great if they could dine like this every night. Azura reminds him, however, that they cannot go on living like this. The bill comes and Azura asks him if he still has money, to which he says yes. He is taken aback by the bottom line and then goes off to see the manager to pay for the meal by giving away his watch, indicating that he has reached a low point financially. The scene where they turn to one another, locking eyes, marks a pivotal departure from Zack's biker past as the spoilt son of a millionaire, to finding his independence as a responsible, hard-working citizen with the help of Azura.



Figure 16. Two uses of Zack's look. First, to Azura, where he agrees to work and, second, to the glaring red motorbike before heading off to his job search.

What follows reveals Azura to be in the lead. Zack's first try does not turn out well. He asks for work at an office and has to be told that he is unqualified. He does not have a CV and only has a letter to indicate he dropped out of secondary school. Zack, in fact, is stunned to know that he needs a degree to get a job and storms out of the office upset, exclaiming that if he had really wanted to pursue his studies he wouldn't be looking for work in the first place. Azura is rejected upon her first try but gets lucky the second time. But more than just showing her getting a job, the film also assumes her more seamless place in modernity by showing how she has 'studied overseas', as we learn that Azura had spent a part

of her childhood in Japan where she picked up the language. We see this when she applies for work at a boutique and is denied. On her way out, she bumps into a pair of Japanese customers who do not know the local language. She converses with them in fluent Japanese, catching the eye of the storeowner looking on from nearby. Impressed, she hires Azura. That the language is Japanese, as opposed to any other, is a curious reference to Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's Look East policy that he initiated in 1981. This appealed to the need for an Asian modernity, where tradition is not compromised, as opposed to mimicking Western materialistic notions of development. In any case, Azura is excited to announce the good news. The other detail to note is how she was given an advance of ten ringgit with which she buys them both dinner.



Figure 17*. Zack looking shocked to find out he needs a degree to get a job.*

Later, they walk past a nearby petrol station that is closing and decide to stay the night on the floor there before Zack is woken up by his friend Amir who coincidentally works at the station. Zack is glad to meet him and explains his predicament. Amir urges him to find work at the station on condition that Zack lies and tells the manager that he is a mechanic. This is a milestone for Zack as it

sets him on course to discover the value of work and an identity beyond his motorbike rebel one. What is key to spot here is how he appears hesitant to lie at first but turns to Azura for assurance, to which she smiles in approval. By now, the pattern between them is established, with Azura the leader of their 'family' by virtue of her ability to galvanise Zack to work. But more than that, she marks the nodal point for the 'desire of the Other.' She is no longer just an exemplar but the Other for whom his entry into nation building is enacted.

This brings us to another crucial although understated difference. Datuk Putih's authority is marked by his command of a big bungalow, which also attests to his wealth and status. But his orders to Zack to change are not enough. Azura, meanwhile, is homeless but this leads to a crucial narrative function: it becomes the pretext to demonstrate her historical significance as she is the one taking Zack through the new spaces of capitalism, which the film depicts by showing how their search for work takes them to shopping malls, restaurants, petrol stations and construction sites. The divergent temporalities here are worth noting. Datuk Putih occupies the formal place of success and power. But Azura is the one who inhabits the emergent modernity as she is instrumental in showing Zack what to do and how to adapt to the new work regime. Jacqueline Rose describes how the ego-ideal enables the subject to "introject" what it sees and receives from the symbolic order to make it recognisable to him or herself (J. Rose, 2005, p. 177). For Zack, the point of introjection is located at Azura's gaze. This leads us to a very important point of contention. On one hand it positions a woman as a significant resource of becoming modern and manly. Psychoanalysis, however, terms this 'paternal identification' because it takes the symbolic order

to be fundamentally patriarchal. What then are we to make of the symbolic order of Malay modernization?

The father is not the master

Consider how Darian Leader describes the Name-of-the-Father as "not a single point but a process" (2011, p. 63). While "process" may be descriptively accurate we are now in the position to ask why it should be *fundamentally* masculine or male. It is telling of a certain impasse that psychoanalytic theory—despite insistences that the "father" is just a figure of speech and is actually a symbolic position that can be occupied by women—has not managed to think beyond a strict masculine dominated binary. Slavoj Žižek's treatment of the matter is symptomatic of this. In his argument about 'woman' as one of the Names-of-the-Father, he refers to the Lady of Courtly Love as analogous to the mythical, primordial father: she too is a "capricious Master who wants it all" to the point where the man becomes a passive object for her (Žižek, 1995, p. 24). Like the primordial father of *Totem and Taboo*, the Lady is a projection of a masculine fantasy. She is needed "to fill out the vicious cycle of the symbolic order, the void of its origins" (Žižek, 1995, p. 24).

This chapter shows how the Malay context questions the primacy of the symbolic Father showing how woman disrupts the traditional Western symbolic order in her function as an alternate quilting point. Thus the modern Malay regime of identification is uneven because the paternal function is intertwined with that of the woman's longer-standing cultural influence. Thus woman does not simply appear as another semblant for the man. To be woman is not simply a matter of embodying her image. Rather it is to acknowledge her temporal

advantage in modernization. Thus the Malay woman interrupts the father as a disruptive temporal register: Azura orients the future while showing the father to be obviously insufficient. The Malay Woman does not simply replace the man to become the Name-of-the-Father. She is another temporality that contends with the name and the time he is meant to mark. In the next chapter we look at how this troubles phallic sexuality.

CHAPTER 4: THE PHALLUS IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION: COMEDY AND THE UNEVEN PHALLUS OF MALAY MODERNITY

Introduction

In this chapter, I look at the body more specifically, by way of how modernisation leads to anxieties over the masculine form, that is to say the question of what a modern Malay man should look like. My focus will be the host of popular comedies that proliferated in the 1980s and 1990 about Malay men masquerading as different personas. These were often slapstick parodies of male authority and success articulated through exaggerated physical gestures or clothing styles. This search for form, furthermore, always occurs amidst an acute awareness of context. The protagonists are more often than not migrants from the village to the city or working class. This embeds anxieties around 'proper Malay manliness' into uneven development where the bodily changes occur along broader cultural adjustments to the new spaces and temporalities that blend together due to modernization. Malay masculinity's constant changes, in other words, speak to the equally rapid and intense historical transition taking place.

My analysis pays attention to how the fluidity of masculine embodiment at the time translates to uncertainties over the power the penis is supposed to signify. It is here that I sketch the contradictions of an uneven phallus. This sees its power exerted in expectedly dominant, masculine ways only to be immediately undermined. There is, moreover, a spatial conundrum. The inability for the phallus to 'hold' its place points to how the rural-urban divide of modernity leads to an unsettled masculinity, one that is without any ground or

sense of 'home'. As Mari Ruti puts it, "Bodily organs themselves have no meaning; it's the collective mythologies that cultures impose on them that do" (Ruti, 2018, p. xiv). But the search for masculine form, expressed through bodily changes that are pronounced to comic effect, indicates a profound difficulty to establish a dominant Malay masculine mythology. It is amidst this struggle that the penis's phallic status is made fun of. Its unevenness, which is often a tacit preoccupation of the comedies I will be referring to, indicates how it is disjointed from the symbolic order, how its meaning cannot be fixed. Put in Lacanian terms, the Malay phallus cannot be veiled: Its power cannot be represented or mythologised.[59] Instead, it is revealed as what Alenka Zupančič calls "a spectral object," one whose presence was anticipated but turns out to be unsettling due to its lack of "symbolic support" (Zupančič , 2008, p. 60).

I should be clear from the onset that my argument in no way presumes that Malay masculine hegemony is any less violent than patriarchal authority can be elsewhere. Identifying Malay phallic anxieties adds to Malay masculinity's range of contradictions, which my bigger project has been gradually tracing out. I shall describe the context to show how Malay cinema has addressed anxious masculine embodiment with particular focus on *Hantu Siang* (A.R. Badul, 1986), a comedy by Badul that I take to capture the anxiety in great sociological detail. That it is also unapologetic about its masculine sexuality makes the anxiety more obvious and thus easier to point out. But given the notion of a dislocated phallus is central to my project, I shall begin by detailing the phallus with emphases on

[59] I hope for it to be clear from this paragraph that Lacan is not in any way referring to the Malay-Muslim veil.

two registers of its elusiveness: firstly, in the wholeness it tempts but does not deliver and, secondly, in its tenuous connection with the penis.

Part 1: Uneven Bodies

The phallus

The phallus plays the crucial role of according the male body a privileged place in an androcentric social order. It renders masculinity 'powerful' not simply because of 'manly' roles and traits but for signifying a potent body. This explains the high esteem ascribed to behaving phallic—to be strong, commanding or assertive—or even thinking in phallic terms of breaking, exploring and inventing. But what it does to signify masculinity speaks to its more fundamental role of demarcating difference. Indeed, it is in relation to the phallus that one secures a place in the symbolic structure, namely by assuming a standpoint as masculine or feminine, desirable or undesirable. The penis stands out in the vast realm of phallic objects as the focal point of its embodiment, instantiating its supremacy in the flesh. Thus, while the penis is not the phallus the two have been closely linked in the construction of masculine power.[60]

The aggressiveness presumed in phallic thinking is linked to how the phallus is a necessary signifier for an imaginary gestalt, whereby an otherwise fragmented body coalesces into a sense of wholeness and identity. It constitutes "certain imaginary elements that play a crystallising role, in particular all the

[60] Jane Gallop summarises it as follows: Where the penis is the organ, the 'phallus' is 'a power to generate meaning . . . To have a phallus would mean to be at the centre of discourse' (1988, p. 126).

material of the body's parts, its members, the subject's reference to their domination, the image of a whole" (Lacan, 2017, p. 214). That this wholeness is conceivable, however, does not mean that it is realisable. Indeed, Lacan is clear that it is only viable in fantasy. In actuality, the phallus does not exist: "The phallus is not a form. It doesn't have the form of an object" (Lacan, 2017, p. 352). It merely plays a "mediating function' that links the imaginary to the symbolic by concealing the real" (Lacan, 2014, p. 259).

The phallus, then, "is more significant in human experience through its possibility of being a fallen object than through its presence" (Lacan, 2014, p. 168). Crucial for our purpose is how Lacan links the risk and aggressiveness entailed in obtaining this "fallen object," and the wholeness it purportedly assures, to spatial conquest. He speaks of "the anxiety" in "the relation between the spatial dimension and a subjective tension" where "the ego's supposed 'instinct of self-preservation' willingly gives way before the temptation to dominate space" in order to feel whole (Lacan, 2006a, p. 100). We would be more able to grasp the sensibility this forms by recalling my introductory chapter where I described how nationalism too emerged upon a certain dynamic of destruction and reconstruction where the state and its powers are envisioned and justified upon the necessity to form a 'new' territorial entity. Sumathi Ramaswamy links hegemonic masculinity with phallic thinking when she described nationalism's "somatic formation," that is to say its reliance on bodily imageries whereby the phallic violence of taking and breaking was crucial to legitimise nation-state violence (Ramaswamy, 1998, p. 90). The same outlook was exported to a global scale via colonial modernity: "The coloniser thinks and expresses himself through his phallus. It is through the phallus that the coloniser

is able to link up with the surrounding world . . . To colonise is, then to, accomplish a sort of sparky clean act of coitus with the characteristic feature of making pleasure and horror coincide" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 175).[61]

Developmental slapstick

This link between corporeal and spatial control is a good segue for my inquiry into an uneven phallus, namely for how it allows us to approach the trend of Malaysian comedies in the 1980s that point to an entirely contrary phenomena. Malay men would be set amidst the thick of modernisation, portrayed with unsettled bodies amidst divergent times. The setting takes us to a survey of a vast city landscape—aerial shots establishing its skylines and crowded concrete terrains are common—as the men are shown navigating Kuala Lumpur as a new and unfamiliar space to discover. The comedies would bring the body to the fore in slapstick ways. But approached with its sociological presumptions in mind, the humour on show also has the effect of pointing out a struggle to embody the new age. The men, who are usually either poor, working class or rural, inhabit displaced masculinities as they struggle to 'fit in' with the demands of the time. Modernity has made it hard for them to master an imaginary wholeness.

[61] Heidi Nast looks at the privileging of phallic identity in the age of machinery and technology as crucial for white supremacy when European industrialisation eventually led to a scramble for empire across the globe: "Both bodily and national particularities of the machine-phallus stabilised the racialised and patriarchal political economies of capitalist societies and modern nation-states, as well as imperial social and psychical formations" (Nast, 2015, p. 766).

Take, for example, *Bujang Lapok Kembali Daa* (Aziz, 1986), which features a pair of elderly friends (Aziz, who is blind, and Sudin) who have a go at becoming street musicians after failing at being door-to-door salesmen. After finding that the busker scene is already crowded, which the film shows through having Sudin walk through the loud and crowded KL streets, they decide to try breakdancing.[62] The scene places Sudin and Aziz each at the centre of the frame, trying their best to mimic what they think breakdancing looks like. The humour is not just in their failure to properly do the dance but also their age in contrast to the far younger crowd who are laughing at them. When Sudin spots the film's villain nearby he decides to dash away though not without first accidentally pressing the wrong button on the cassette player at which point Hindi and Dangdut music comes on and we see Aziz adjusting his moves accordingly. History is also signalled through how Sudin and Aziz are established legends from the *Bujang Lapok* franchise of the 1950s. Thus, the scene also captures their failure to adapt to the more trendy sounds of the 1980s. The classic comedy *Awang Spanar* (Z. Lokman, 1989) is another case in point. It tells the story of mechanics Awang (played by legendary actor Mr. Os) and Salleh's discovery of Kuala Lumpur. First, they're pitted against traffic, as we see them either nervously trying to cross the street, dodging and eventually running into cars. This highlights their vulnerability before narrower and precarious terrain but

[62] *Bas Konduktor* (1986) has a longer and 'proper' breakdancing scene that is also set in the middle of the city. It goes on for the duration of an entire song but with a comedic ending when the lead dancer hits a chair and is injured while doing one of the moves, indicating that the copy isn't as convincing.

the film also turns it into an opportunity to make a very telling joke. Overwhelmed by the traffic, Awang pretends to be blind so that Salleh walks him across the street safely.[63] Later, they decide to walk as if crippled to signal oncoming traffic to slow down. The ableism works against them as it only reveals their diminished presence amidst a very overwhelming setting. Salleh we should note is cautiously clutching a huge watermelon the entire time, fearing it could easily fall and break amidst their first experience of urban traffic. This indicates their acute recognition of their vulnerability at a new and alien space. This makes up the film's opening sequence as we see the city mapped through their struggle against uncertain terrain. Later that night, we see their first-ever experience at a nightclub wearing denim jackets in contrast to the dirty and faded T-shirts they wore just before. Like other slapstick comedies, the film ridicules the men's broken English to highlight the new 'advanced' world they

[63] The comedic link between blindness and modernity here echoes the introductory scene in *Bujang Lapok Kembali Daa* (1986). The humorous opening theme begins after Aziz suffers a car crash that permanently blinds him. The scene makes sure this is obvious by the unmistakably bloody wound that surrounds his eyes. The funny tune plays throughout his eye surgery and stay at the hospital. Needless to say these examples show how blindness can take a far less morose tone than the one argued for in Barnard's (2005) paper, which I referenced in Chapter 1. Indeed humour, rather than melodrama, might be a more productive avenue to theorise blindness and Malay modernity. This makes it less about being overwhelmed by modernity than it is an attempt to negotiate competing temporalities of a destabilised symbolic order. Blindness here becomes a way of thinking, rather than just paralysis or an effect of historical defeat. The comedic beginning in *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962) is also often forgotten as the film is often primarily analysed as a tragedy.

are in, having arrived from Terengganu.[64] English after all is the language of modernity, indicating Malaysia's link to the broader global economy. The facial and bodily contortions that express their playful attempts to master the new pronunciations present the foreign signifiers not just as words to learn but as new demands made upon the body amidst a new temporal rhythm.

Badul in context

Badul stands out in this trend of slapstick humour for overtly linking it to class tensions, where an expanding hierarchy was regarded as a crucial part of the infrastructural changes modernisation forced.[65] Thus, the city is not simply overwhelming for its pace and size, it is also where a new inequality intensifies. Therefore Badul's films often feature "the ordinary person from the lower class"

[64] *Ragam Pemandu* (1989) is another case in point. It sees Hamid the chauffeur, played by legendary comic Hamid Gurkha, who struggles to adapt to the more Western registers of his boss's upper-class context. He even struggles to pronounce the word *assignment* (admitting this to be due to his village origins) and his boss's American business partner's name, as the film uses closeups to emphasize the contortions of his face that happen every time he tries to utter the name 'Ben'. The film also spoke to a common comedic trend at the time by casting two dwarves as its main villains. Their physiques highlight ironies: subordinates look down to someone they're supposed to look up to, who are small despite occupying a big space and so forth.

[65] Badul also came to prominence recently for challenging the accuracy of Astro's Sarimah's biopic. Additionally, his links to the 'Golden Age' allows us to read Badul's overt class consciousness in line with that of the *Bujang Lapok* films, which told the antics of three jobless men of the Malay underclass around the Independence Era. All this is to say that the discourse around Badul's legacy is connected to the most foundational trendsetters of Malay filmic culture, especially the genre of class-critical comedies established therein.

("Mechanics, factory workers, *jagong* [corn] sellers, bus drivers, squatters) mocking the wealthy") (G. C. Khoo, 2006, p. 175). The body plays a crucial role here as the mockery often takes the form of parodying the mannerisms of the *nouveau riche*. *Si Badul* (1978) sees Badul, a car washer, and his friends mock a rich man's walk, mimicking a posture and manner that portrays them as awkward and alien to how 'other' 'normal' Malays walk. The scene sees a discussion between him and his friends who are planning to con their boss by having Badul pretend to be a prospective business partner. But it is also framed as a matter of sociological curiosity as the way the men muse over what rich people are 'really like' in ways that assume that they're a different 'species' than ordinary people, as it were. This seemingly feeble joke speaks to the largely accepted consensus then (and to an extent even now) that the façade presented by the *nouveau riche* is fake. The film takes on the open secret that the newly wealthy never work hard but get ahead through cronyism via government contracts and family connections. Badul performs, and makes fun of, this hypocrisy through exaggerating the stereotypical characteristics of the *nouveau riche* while miming their pomp to highlight the thinness of their ostentations and show that anyone could pretend and easily be like 'them' with very little effort or seriousness.

There is a spatial element to his parodies that is worth pointing out. A later scene from the film finds Badul in a luxury car where he struggles to exit because he is unable to figure out how it works (the joke being that he is in an altogether different object than an ordinary car). His friend opens the door from the outside and Badul stumbles out in typical slapstick fashion. On one hand, this reveals him to be out of context, as it shows a body that cannot adapt where it

matters most. On the other, it shows that wealthy spaces are not enclosed. They are not out of reach even from the poor they aim to ward off. *Hantu Siang* (1986) sees Badul maximise this approach where he plays a jobless conman wooing various women by disguising himself as an archetypally successful Malay man. Nina falls for the 'Raja Badri' version of Badul. Zahrin falls for 'Raja Budiman' the pilot (appending 'Raja' to these names allows Badul to claim royal lineage). Zarina falls for 'Syed Badrul al-Badrum' (this would in turn allow Badul to claim elite Arab pedigree).

Before getting into the film in more detail, we should note the context to Badul's gags, namely the inequality caused by the New Economic Policy. While conceived in 1971 in the interest of national unity, the policy was in effect geared towards the creation of a Malay corporate class. But this was in many ways a drastic aspiration, for the Malay world at the time was neither industrial nor capitalist. Malays comprised, in fact, the majority illiterate, rural poor and malnourished.[66] Thus, an entirely new world needed to be built. The UMNO-led,

[66] By Independence, 'The majority of the Malays who concentrated in agriculture where per capita product was the lowest, were poor; of all poor households, about 75 per cent were Malays' (Abdul Khalid, 2014, p. 4). This remained the pattern even until the 1970s: 'For example, in 1970, in manufacturing, Malays owned less than 4 per cent of the total number of businesses establishments compared with 79.6 per cent owned by non-Malays' (Abdul Khalid, 2014, p. 5). Malays are also few in universities: 'In 1968, Malay students at the University of Malaya—the only university in the country then—were outnumbered by Chinese students in the faculties of agriculture, art, engineering and science, and there were even more Indian students than Malays in the latter two categories' (Abdul Khalid, 2014, p. 6). In 1968, there were only 69 Malay science, 4 engineering and 12 medical graduates (Abdul Khalid, 2014, p. 6).

Malay-nationalist government, newly emboldened after a show of force during the May 13 massacres, set out to construct the contemporary Malay world as we now know it. Factories were built to create a new manufacturing industry to attract foreign investors and offer employment opportunities. Universities were established to educate a competitive workforce for a modern economy. New neighbourhoods were needed to house the millions of Malays now galvanised to participate in the emergence of a more prosperous world, to leave their villages for newly constructed townships that were to shape the modernity to come. This explains how comedies would often link the class politics to spatial ones where urbanisation created a tension between the new modernity to come and the 'old world', as it were. For example, *Tuan Badul* (Jamil, 1979) has a scene that sees village residents mount an attack against developers who were about to take their land. It is noteworthy that Badul is among the capitalists who are hiding from the villagers, as this time he plays the rich man (also to similarly exaggerated, parodic effects) who falls in love with a poor girl. As a similar example, we could also add the hugely popular TV3 sitcom *Pi Mai Pi Mai Tang Tu*.[67] First airing in 1985, it featured the residents of *Kampung Seri Wangi* who join forces to protest the construction of a waste treatment plant near their village.[68]

[67] Its most popular character was Budin. Imuda (2009; the actor who played Budin) describes his character as follows: 'Budin is just a kampung boy, the archetypal stereotype of a jobless young man who likes to *kacau orang* (disturb people), have a good time hanging around his buddies and who makes pocket money selling empty bottles and old newspapers. Some said Budin went against the 'business' image of the new Malays and suggested Budin should get a proper job but that would be against his character. All these are just for laughs and people shouldn't take the

These cultural products must be understood against the backdrop of a broader call, directed by the state and its apparatuses, to win an inter-ethnic race with the Chinese. What was at stake was the security of identity itself: Malays endured fears of being the poorest yet most populous ethnicity. While controlling Malaysia's political institutions, Malays nonetheless felt a disadvantage when viewing themselves in comparison to the Chinese community, who were smaller in numbers yet, in aggregate, more economically dominant. A financially thriving Malay community then could correct this imbalance: the inter-communal playing field, as the idea had it, would be levelled. This ideal, however, required the bargain of maintaining intra-ethnic Malay inequality. In other words, the embedding of capitalism into the Malay circumstance, while producing certain measurable gains in advancement was not designed to empower all Malays. It just further exacerbated already-existing inequalities. Some twenty-seven years after the New Economic Policy (the state-driven project to construct Bumiputera and Malay entrepreneurs) reiterated the glaring fact that the eradication of poverty was never thought to be geared towards equality, Mahathir stated: "The NEP, it must be iterated, was not concerned with making all the Bumiputeras earn equally, or share equally, the wealth distributed amongst them . . . The intention of the NEP was to create in the Bumiputera community the same division of labour and rewards as was found in the non-Bumiputera communities particularly the Chinese . . . The equitableness was not to be between individuals but between communities"

play-acting so seriously!' Its final episode aired in 2004. A live musical version was produced in 2006.

[68] *Wangi* means fragrant. The ironic pun stresses their difficult situation.

(Mohamad, 1998, p. 33). National unity, in other words, did not entail economic empowerment for all. What was done in the name of Malayness merely divided the community in more intense ways.

Maila Stivens observes the gendered dimension of this circumstance to point out how the demand for a new Malay capitalism meant the demand for a new entrepreneurial and productive "hypermasculine form" of men to embody it (Stivens, 2002, p. 107). Badul's comedies would acknowledge this demand while showing this form to be more divisive than unifying. In *Penyamun Tarbus* (1983), the three lead characters are unemployed due to the changing demands of the industry. Working class and aged, their skills are no longer suited for a modern job market that values formal education. The wealthier characters, meanwhile, live in lavish bungalow-style houses. *Tuan Badul* (Jamil, 1979) opens with a conversation about the policies the government is pushing to produce new Malay businessmen. *Guru Badul* (A.R. Badul, 1988) opens with a roadside altercation between Badul, who rides a motorbike, and Tuan Lamin in his Volvo. The scene shows Tuan Lamin aiming his walking stick against Badul following the latter's verbal jab likening 'Lamin' phonetically to *Lanun* (meaning *pirate* in Bahasa Malaysia). This harks back to a crucial incident in 1972, when the Sultan of Johor (who once proudly claimed his lineage among the region's historical Bugis pirates) stopped a car for overtaking him on a highway to have the driver bludgeoned to death. Note that the film was released a year after news broke out that the Sultan of Johor was implicated in another murder, when he killed his twenty-two-year-old caddy.

Thus, his parody's critical purchase was not simply that he unmasked the New Malay masquerade but that he did so from the margins, given his

perspective as a migrant worker who could not reap the benefits of the wealth being churned out by the new system. Badul's masquerades have the effect of highlighting how the masculinity of his time was divided. On the surface, we find the poor village slacker navigating his way through the new Malay world by pretending to be what he is not. But the films also reveal competing visions of masculinity, as Malay men were divided along class lines where one side benefits from the new system while others trail behind. It will help us to trace the anxiety of the process, as Badul's constantly morphing masculinity is less a statement about the fluidity of gender than it is an acknowledgement of how the developmental ideal seeks, but fails to provide, closure for the masculine form. Badul's comedy, building on popular trends of the time that were already questioning Malay masculinity, sees the manifold expectations of Malay masculinity questioned. It recognises how modernisation threw masculinity into disorder. Indeed, Badul's disguises acquire their comic effect upon the more fundamental assumption that Malay masculinity itself was disturbed, that capitalist modernity was making it difficult to solidify a Malay masculine imaginary.

Hantu Siang

Hantu Siang stands out in this trend for its overt phallic politics. This takes us to the more unpalatable aspect of Badul's comedy, namely how he ties

anxieties about 'proper masculinity' to unbridled sexual conquest.[69] Badul's sex appeal was very much tied to this masquerade as each persona he faked represented the desirable masculinity of the Malay capitalism that was just emerging. He is eventually found out, but the women persist and still want him—indeed they fight over him—even after he is revealed to be an imposter and a broke nobody. But the uneven circumstance in which this happens would lead to a different dynamic. The women's relentless demands on him would amount to a curious turn in the subject-object relations, as it reveals them to be ultimately in control of the phallus, the very object he used to assert his masculinity in the first place. In the end Badul feels suffocated, renounces his fake capitalist life and leaves the women behind, unsurprisingly, in sexist disregard. But that this occurs amidst parodies of the new hierarchy of Malay men also indicates how he was pursuing sex with the women in much insecurity. Thus, while the film is unapologetic about using women for sex, it is consistent in showing how Badul's misogyny constantly leads his masculinity to failure.

His disguises do not appear very convincing, for one, so much so that Badul has to often coerce his victims into sex. The wealth he pretends to have is contradicted, moreover, by how he often persuades women to lend him money, buy him gold and jewellery or let him use their car. The film's unmistakable misogyny then is belied by how it also inadvertently reveals a failure to embody the demands of modernity. This is established early on in the film when Badul's

[69] Badul's sexual prowess is a common trope in his films: In *Si Badul* (1978), regular sex with his newly wedded wealthy wife leads him to miss work. In *Guru Badul* (1988), we see Nora transformed after sex. She is portrayed as cheerier and bubblier.

modus operandi is shown. He 'picks up' Nina in the middle of the street to offer her a lift home. We see him stepping out of a BMW (which he borrows) wearing a collared shirt, corporate shoes, tie and fancy watch, posing as a business owner who also happens to be a former pilot, a high-paying profession in the 1980s that also links him to the neo-liberal globalisation that was just expanding. Their drive home takes us across Kuala Lumpur's new busy highways to its residential areas until the car runs out of petrol. He walks to the nearby station to fill up where he suddenly stumbles into Sharifah, another woman that he is cheating on and whom he also owes RM 5,000. Startled, and fearing he might be found out, he runs back to the car (with comedic music in the background) to tell Nina that he suddenly needs to rush to his friend Budin due to an emergency. They take a taxi there where we see Badul's actual living conditions. We see his small and dishevelled house (which he pretends is not his) where his sidekick Budin is waiting (while Nina waits in the taxi) at which point Badul asks him for some money so that he can take Nina out. The contrast is stressed as we see Badul in his new clothes standing next to Budin in his sarong and singlet. They're both near a thin metal clothesline—where what appears to be a sock or underwear is hanging—with an old wooden ladder in the background. This quick turn of events early on in the film reveals how Badul's pretensions are quickly unmasked to show a temporal discrepancy between the masculine body and the modern world in the making.



Figure 4.18.. Badul (left) asking Budin for money at the poor and dilapidated house.

Part 2: Uneven Phallus

Scrambling for the phallus

While Badul's sexual conquest expresses an overt phallic drive, the story unfolds to reveal an uneven phallus in two ways. Firstly its power is paradoxical: On one hand, we see phallic power exerted via a callous disregard for the opposite sex. On the other hand, this power emerges only to be quickly diminished against the overbearing presence of what it could not anticipate. The subject position it begins with, in other words, quickly morphs into an object. But this also marks a temporal incommensurability, where the divergent times produced by Malay modernization, namely between the urban and rural are shown to leave the modernizing Malay man—he who is to embody the national

developmental agenda—without an identity. We shall see this via a comparison between two scenes in the film where the phallus is deployed. In the first, we find Badul at City Hotel, sitting on the floor in between two beds while smoking. He looks to both sides while smiling contented. The sexual connotation here is clear as this occurs right after Badul has married Zahrin and Nina (whom he has impregnated) at the same time, after which both women bicker over where he should spend the night. He stands in between them with each pulling him to her side, each insisting that he follows her home. This points to an impending *malam pertama* (first night) when the marriage would be consummated. Badul is perturbed and quickly offers a solution. The women continue to bicker as the film cuts to City Hotel and the hotel room where we first see smoke before the camera descends to reveal Badul in between the empty beds. In other words, he still assumes the middle position though now instead of two women pulling him in their respective directions, we only see two empty beds. The film allocates some time to this scene, mostly showing him admiring the cigar and smiling to himself. Given the conservative convention of Malaysian cinema, sex cannot be portrayed too explicitly (hence the women were not in the room and the beds are neat and made) but the insinuation here is clear. His observation of the situation constantly turns to the erect cigar in his hand, signalling a smug contentment of the rural slacker's penis's capacity to sexually take on two women at the same time at City Hotel.



*Figure 4.*19*. Badul in between two beds after marrying two women at the same time admiring a cigar while looking content. But this scene, situated right after a forced marriage, clearly shows that his lifestyle is no longer sustainable.*

While this moment undeniably displays typical phallic smugness, it should be contextualised with an earlier scene where the phallus is also pointed out. This time, Zahrin is in her luxury car with her friends where she confesses that she knows Badul is a conman and that she is merely playing along with his shenanigans. What keeps her coming back for more is his sexual prowess (she eventually gets pregnant). She says she knows that Badul is neither a Syed nor a Raja, but she is still unable to stop herself. A friend of hers jokingly asks if he has used '*ilmu'* (Malay for 'black magic') to hex her into lusting over him endlessly, which Zahrin quickly denies. As she says that she yearns for his passion every night, she caresses the car's gear handle, in an obvious allusion to his penis. She then reverses the car towards the exit, preparing to leave her house. She grabs the gear handle again to say 'that is his *ilmu*'—jokingly saying that sex is his black magic—before aggressively pushing the gear handle to speed away. This is followed immediately by a quick scene of a bird in a cage, which sustains the allusion to the male member across two objects. The camera zooms back to take

us to Nina's garden. The cage is an apt metaphor for what happens next, as it reveals the bind Badul is now in. Zahrin enters the scene to stage a confrontation with Nina. They bicker over being Badul's rightful partner before Zahrin leaves while warning Nina to back off. It is noteworthy that the dispute is couched in terms of who owns Badul. Zahrin repeatedly says that he is hers.

There is an obvious sexism in depicting two women fighting over a liar and a cheat. But note that this is only happening because Badul's disguises are falling apart. It is here, in how the two scenes allude to the penis's contrasting fates, that we encounter the uneven phallus: It gets away with conquest while failing at the same time. It is diminished where and when it is also erect. The phallus is exerted and imposed with the intention of masculine domination but ultimately to differing effects, where Badul is brought to confront the many ways he is not in control of the situation. Subject then becomes object: The very 'tool' used to manipulate women for a sense of triumph leads him to constraints beyond his anticipation. Indeed, the bickering over whom Badul belongs to foreshadows the film's conclusion, given that Badul ends up broke, jailed and exposed as a conman but still desired by the women he is tired of. Grasping this contradiction—the uneven phallus's concurrent power and limitation—requires that we turn to how the film comically approaches the way the phallus is something to be used by one and then taken over by another. Indeed, that an object can be detached, and that its seemingly fixed meaning could be undone, constitutes a crucial aspect of the Lacanian account of comedy as anxiety.



Figure 4.20. Nina emphasising that she just wants Badul for sex, despite her knowing that he's a conman.

Anxious and detachable

We can begin with the standard account of how the phallus signifies both power and lack. For one, the masculine-feminine binary it enacts clearly "has the function of signifying everything that pertains intimately or indifferently to the sexual dimension" (Nasio, 1992, p. 31). The phallus, whether in the hands of Badul or Zahrin, marks the acknowledgement of two different sexes: "The symbolic phallus holds meaning in place, hence it helps to secure imaginary identifications" (Dean, 2000, p. 84). But that it is ultimately a signifier means that its association with masculinity is also tenuous and always already manipulated. Slavoj Žižek points out the dildo as an example of how a "phallus is far too serious a thing for its use to be left to stupid creatures like men" (Žižek, 1996, p. 110). In a similar vein, Mari Ruti speaks of the portable phallus, "One that I can pick up when the situation calls for it" (Ruti, 2018, p. xx). Judith Butler built on

similar observations to explore an "unexpected consequence of the Lacanian scheme" (Butler, 1993, p. 75). The phallus's portability and detachability means that "being and having can be confounded, [upsetting] the logic of non-contradiction that serves the either-or of normative heterosexual exchange" (Butler, 1993, p. 88). This implies that the phallus could be "reprivileged" and "recirculated" among women "to break the signifying chain in which it conventionally operates" (Butler, 1993, p. 88). Lacan himself acknowledged phallic substitutability in his agreement with Ernest Jones: "Why privilege this damned phallus that we find here under our feet at every moment, this inconsistent object, moreover, whereas other things are just as interesting?" (Lacan, 2017, p. 296).

Hantu Siang clearly attests to this portability as its comedy shows the phallus, and the authority it is supposed to embody, reclaimed and redirected by another beholder: What Badul used as a tool for conquest, Zahrin turns into a tool for pleasure. But more than this, the comic effect sees the phallus unfastened from the penis to anxious effects as it also unmasks Badul for what he really is. Thus, the phallus is not just detached, its power is also nullified: we see him unable to keep up his masquerades of successful Malay men. But this also indicates a structure that has not secured a place for a virile and misogynist masculinity to begin with.

To understand the anxiety this evokes, we should note how laughter is directed precisely to what is revealed due to the nullification, where *something else* is found once the dominant meaning surrounding the object is dismantled. The saying 'the emperor has no clothes' captures the unsettling 'nothingness' that comedy points out. For the humour exposes the truth that is left unsaid,

thereby revealing the emperor's power and wisdom to be nothing more than shored up pretensions. Comedy unseats the given meaning around the object at hand—in this case, the phallus—by taking us to what cannot or should not be said of it. This is the gist behind Alenka Zupančič's description of comedy as being about "the irreducible materiality of nothing" (Zupančič, 2008, p. 59). Its 'truth' is material in the discomfort of its excesses, in "succeeding too much, 'more than intended'" in plainly conveying what is *there* (Zupančič, 2008, p. 70). The Lacanian approach to phallic detachability speaks to how its meaning is very hard to pin down (Zupančič, 2008, p. 62).

But comedy has it that this is less to do with an endless play of meaning than it is about there being too much meaning. Anxiety is the overbearing presence of more than what one could handle. By this, detachability is less about voluntaristic self-fashioning than it is about opening the lid over other claims that have to be repressed in order for the pretensions of power or desirability to be taken seriously. This, indeed, is the transgressive value of laughter: It embraces the danger of uttering or pointing out anything or everything that can be said of something whenever and wherever. Given that there cannot be an endless play of signification without a limit, humour takes us to where the limit could be confronted but with some defence.

Urban excess

As Badul's disguises unravel, so too does his rural identity become harder to conceal. This indeed is where we see how the uneven phallus is shaped by Malay modernity's divergent temporalities. Badul is jailed for cheque fraud,

which marks the end of his exploits and leads him to leave the city altogether. It is at this point that we are introduced to Nani, his first and original wife from the village, when she comes to the police station to bail him out. The three other 'urban' women (two of whom, Zahrin and Nina, are pregnant at this point) react in anger and frustration, aggressively tugging Badul to demand some explanation for his sudden decision. Badul can no longer take it anymore and screams at everyone to shut up. The immediate implication is disturbing: Badul leaves a trail of sad, angry and impregnated women behind as he goes back home to his village. But this posture of phallic triumph also indicates that Badul has failed in his endeavour to 'make it' in the city. Thus, while the film ends on a sexist note—with Badul smiling alongside Nani and their daughter framed closely together sitting in the last row of an empty bus, shot at a low-angle to evoke empathy towards his decision—it is also very much a concession. Nina is positioned as the 'proper' and passive Malay woman under Badul's spell. But that she emerges 'out of nowhere'—when Badul can no longer handle the demanding, assertive and loud modern city women he toys with—also signals his emasculation upon the demands of history. Badul is still desired but no longer on his own terms.

To understand this as a statement of uneven development, we should note how "urban and rural, KL and kampung operate similarly as metaphorical signifiers in a discourse of values" (Thompson, 2007, p. 12). Officially, urbanization was conceived held as the necessary material condition needed to convert Malays into subjects of a modernized economy. Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the Prime Minister who oversaw and engineered the transition, puts it as follows: "The fact of urbanization alone involves a process of physical and psychological uprooting of the Malays from the traditional rural society.

There can be no doubt that with this uprooting, old values and ways of life must give way to the new" (Mohamad, 1970, 113). So incentives such as scholarships and business loans were offered to encourage Malays to migrate to new urban centers. Many were also transferred to fill positions in the civil service and government-linked corporations in an actively expanding Kuala Lumpur in addition to newly built towns. All this occurred paralel with the already dominant social mood that saw city life as symbolic for a prosperous future. According to Louis Duflot (2012) from the 1960s to 2000 Malays went from comprising a mere 17% of the urban population to 44% . The promise was progress and this all took place in newly built urban centers designed to mark the wave.

It is important for our discussion to see how these values take on a gendered form, especially when it comes to crossing over those two signifiers. Indeed, migrating from the village to the city in search of opportunities is very much regarded as a rite of passage. Eric Thompson's ethnographic study of urban migrants indicates how this was regarded as their coming-of-age experience, "To transform themselves from dependent children into responsible adults. Men aspire to the status of *abang*, a term used not only for eldest son or older brother but also for husband" (Thompson, 2003, p. 425). Badul himself acknowledged this as much, where in the rare sober moment of reflection in the film, he laments how he has failed to do what he had set out to, which was to find work and support his mother back home. He then blames Kuala Lumpur's new, materialistic values for leading him astray. Note that his return had to also be gendered—through the sudden conjuring of a wife from the village—allowed his masculinity to be salvaged despite his failure. While he leaves broke, indebted

and disgraced, he can say that he at least 'still' had his manhood, in the form of a quiet wife whose only role in her brief appearance in the film is to bail him out and agree with whatever he says. His masculine authority is also marked by having a child in the scene, indicating that he does not leave the city 'empty' but as a father in the arms of a loving family.

But even this ending assumes a limit to his power, for the workings of a Malay-female dominated structure could be sensed in how he was still dependent on his quiet wife. She willingly bailed him out but only because she was more financially able than him. This resonates with similar links drawn between women and financial power in *Ibu Mertuaku* and *Azura.* Once again Malay films are making us confront the presupposition of an uneven gender regime where masculinity and femininity are not positioned as binaries so much as two antagonistic, yet considerably autonomous, quilting points that cut through, and thereby trouble masculinity at the same time. My final chapter will address rural Malay femininity in more detail. For now it is worth noting how Badul's turn towards the rural wife confirms a longstanding theme in the film, namely that women are expressing a different temporality than that of the modernizing Malay man.

The opening credits' survey of Kuala Lumpur's skyscrapers is followed with an exchange about feminism between two women, both with the urban privileged look. One of them exclaims, to the other's agreement, that "*perempuan sekarang sudah maju kedepan*" ("Women have now advanced"). They are quickly mocked and thus begins Badul's exploits. Indeed, like the City Hotel scene, Badul often stages his exploits as spatial ones to show how the poor village slacker can get away with his sexual conquest in the very confines of the new bourgeois

comfort zones. This much is presumed in the film's sex scenes, which all culminate in the bedroom of a bungalow he is taking care of for a friend who is away on business. The film sees him take women there by getting them to 'tango' with him as he slowly, through the dance steps, takes them across the hallway until they end up upstairs to do the deed. This also reveals the house's lush interiors, which in itself is a cultural statement, seeing that bungalows mark an arrival to New Malay status. On one hand, this is a significant achievement for the lazy slacker village boy who supposedly gives up on work. On the other hand, the humour deployed anticipates an inevitable failure. Recall that Badul wooed the women by pretending to be a successful Malay. Recall, too, that the women eventually see through his disguises. One scene sees him pushing Nina for sex, going as far as promising her the house if they did the deed. Thus, it isn't just that the disguises are bound to fail. Rather, they fail even in the 'right' setting, which further underscores his alienation from development. It is in this way that the contradictions of the uneven phallus—patriarchal but impotent, subject but object—are placed at the heart of uneven development: *Hantu Siang's* comedy unmoors the phallus from its dominant meaning. It loses the mystique around which it became desirable in the first place. Where the phallus is symbolised as the object of desire, which ostensibly resolves or addresses one's lacking state, *Hantu Siang's* humour casts the desire in a different light: desired by women but still diminished by the city and consequently the developmental imaginary.

Part 3: Where is the veil?

Symbolising the phallus

The inability to present a proper 'look' for the phallus is a problem of social codes or, as I explained earlier, what Lacan calls 'veiling'. By 'veil' he means the phallus's dependency on a broader cultural edifice for its power and myths, existing "only through the mediation of the other and the Symbolic order" (Grosz, 1994, p. 321). Lacan explains this by noting the curious attention the penis has received in this formulation. On one hand, it is graspable "in sexual intercourse as real," given "its turgidity" as "the image of vital flow as it is transmitted in the generation," that is to say procreation (Lacan, 2006b, p. 581). But at the same time, he also asserts that that the penis's 'real' link to the phallus is only attained "once veiled" (Lacan, 2006b, p. 581). In other words the penis's link with the phallus then 'makes sense' only given certain symbolic presuppositions. It emerges through evoking or signalling gestures and objects that are already privileged by the structures surrounding it. The phallus then is simultaneously material and immaterial: "While the phallus can be said to draw its symbolic power from the visibility of the penis, phallic power derives precisely from the phallus's inaccessibility to representation" (Schor, 1995, p. 112). For this reason, the phallus is "both everywhere—disseminated through the proliferation of phallomorphic imagery and privilege—and nowhere, its specificity hidden from view" (Stephens, 2007, p. 87).[70] Such is the phallus's

[70] This is not just a statement about the penis. The phallic mother also functions similarly through being veiled: 'I think it's more correct to say that he identifies with the phallus as hidden

power that its elusiveness compels further mystification. Mbembe (2001) points out that the phallus entails, indeed requires, "spectacle" for that very reason (p. 13). In itself, stripped of its symbolic pretensions, there is little to look at. The bare penis is a case in point: As Ruti (2018) puts it, "The penis only carries its power when it remains veiled, covered over: staring at its fleshy pathos without the mediation of clothing or other attention-grabbing props instantly dispels any illusory power it might have" (p. xiii).

We are tempted to think, given this ending, that the rural and its values of simplicity, modesty, innocence and so forth provides the veil—that is to say, the symbolic value—that stands in for where Malay masculinity is emasculated by the city. Here 'rural' stands for the privileged signifier to make up for Badul's failure in the emergent urban world. But the fact that this fantasy emerges against the ideals of progress and success in the city indicates a more crucial point, namely that the phallus is unsettled, neither here nor there. More importantly it is neither here nor there because it is cut across two differing temporalities, that is to say, two experiences of history. Indeed, the rural-urban divide does not simply indicate a lag but a constant negotiation of what history should mean. Eric Thompson points out how the village is less of a proper location than it is a setting where the unevenness of modernity is negotiated: *Kampung* imagery is typically rendered as "simultaneously nostalgic and derogatory" for marking "other narratives of the histories and social lives" that do not fit the national drive to modernise (Thompson, 2004, p. 2373). Therefore,

under the mother's clothing' (Lacan, 2017, p. 168). Whether as mother or father, Lacan has it that all power, that is to say source of prohibition, requires some symbolic veil.

we should understand Badul's return to the village not merely as the imaginary construction of an alternate space but one that attempts to link the city to the periphery, signalling the presence of a world that is other to the modern. Linking it to my inquiry, we can say that the phallus' veil—its symbolic structure— is still under construction. Thus, the phallus is uneven—neither here nor there—because the notions of 'here' and 'there'—and their corresponding masculine veils—are still being determined. Thus, even if the Malay phallus has a place, it would be a displaced one.



Figure 4.21. Awang seemingly pleased with his body in a woman's bathing suit.

The phallus displaced

The temporal advantage that Malay women repeatedly embody in the films of this era can be seen through another perspective, namely the frequency with which emasculation is demonstrated through cross-dressing. This sees the

modernizing Malay man—who is migrating from the village or figuring out his value in the urban job market—don women's dress in ways that question his masculinity. To see this we can start by returning to *Awang Spanar* (Z. Lokman, 1989). Awang and Salleh's masculinity becomes the centre of the film's attention when they accidentally take a woman's suitcase, which leaves them with little choice but to wear women's clothes. The humour at this point centres on the wonder and fascination around the new form Awang's body takes when he puts on a woman's bathing suit. We see it covering much of his body while his skinny-muscular shoulders and forearms stand out in their manliness. Later that night, we see Awang in a nightgown, where wonder turns to temptation as Salleh finds himself aroused upon seeing a now even-more-feminised Awang sleeping next to him. This gag focuses on the new identity his scrawny legs acquire as they are eroticised as 'womanly'. Flirtation soon leads to all-out harassment, performed to porn-like music in the background, as Awang keeps insisting to Salleh that he just wants to sleep. Salleh assures him that it's no big deal, since it's only between the two of them and no one else would see or know. This marks a significant turn for a film about male bonding. It is at this point that the film deems it necessary to remind the audience that the old rules of sexual difference still apply, as Salleh gleefully points to his crotch to signal that he is still assuming the 'masculine' position in this masquerade. But this only points out the anxieties that demand that the phallus is pointed out in the first place.



Figure 4.22. Salleh (right) aroused by Awang, who takes on a feminine appeal after wearing a nightgown.

There are also notable cases where the cross dressing is compounded by being diminished before a more commanding woman. The award-winning comedy *Mekanik* (Syed Kechik, 1983) sees the protagonist, the working class Shamyl, sneaking into the men's room to come out dressed as a woman. He is in the women's section of a department store with Nina when he spots Rina, another girl he is dating, shopping. Fearing being caught cheating, he stoops low to avoid being seen while slowly taking various clothes from the rack to sneak into the toilet where he elaborately puts on an entire feminine persona to disguise himself and blend with the women's department. The scene spends some time watching him adjust his bra (which we see him perturbed by) before adjusting his headscarf, laced top, handbag and necklace to complete the transition. During his rushed struggle to adjust to the new clothes in a bathroom

stall someone listening from the outside is confused with what is happening. Once Shamyl comes out, the camera quickly turns to the man's surprised, aroused and distracted member (veiled behind his zipper) to confirm that Shamyl has passed as a desirable Malay woman. He walks out and immediately stumbles into Rina, only to quickly turn back into the men's room, with the joke built on the very close call. Like in *Awang Spanar*, *Mekanik* also places the meaning of sexual difference on the side of the man's body although, again, not without allowing for moments when masculinity can be questioned, however much men may be shown to be in power.[71]

The rather lengthy time this scene takes is all the more curious, given that the film actually revolves around money from a nearby robbery that ends up in Shamyl's taxi. In effect, the film enacts a trope of the time by featuring a working-class Malay man figuring out his place in modernisation while contending with women's cultural power. He silently tiptoes home on his way back from the disco one night when he stumbles into his worried mother. She calls out his unusually contemporary style of dress and the lipstick kiss mark on his face. Shamyl responds by agreeing with her and saying, in Bahasa Malaysia, that he is 'confused'. She replies that she does not understand what this English word means, indicating the generational gap between them. This confusion refers to how he is torn between Rina, the Malay prospective girlfriend and Nina, the white girl. However, this is less a question of which woman to choose than it is an attempt to make sense of his emasculation before them. Rina embarrasses

[71] The film begins, in fact, by showing Shamyl as a 'typical man' as he dreams of women in bikinis by swimming pools before being woken up by his mother.

him on their first date when she thoroughly defeats him in bowling. Nina is an assertive white woman who, to his discomfort, drags him bra shopping. *Awang Spanar* too is curious in this regard for having Detektif Lydia (the woman Salleh and Awang accidentally switch suitcases with) save the day, notably through a fight scene with the film's villain who is also a cross dresser whose gag revolves around how his feminine dress conceals his masculine authority.

It goes without saying that cross-dressing is featured in films where women's progress under modernisation is signalled in more obvious ways. *Kepala Angin* (Azmil,1987) opens with the photographer Fandi's injured penis as the centre of attention. It is hurt during a 'boys versus girls' football match, which sees him rolling on the ground clutching his crotch while being looked down on by the players from the opposing (female) team. In addition to the usual markers of a modernising Malaysia, the film is consistent in placing women in emergent spaces. The doctor who treats his injury is a woman and while this adds to the ironic humour of his broken member, which is referenced throughout the film, we also see women occupying new corporate offices. The film's general plot is also telling, as Fandi marries Lydia and leaves his job to be a stay-at-home husband. The reason is she is rapidly climbing the ranks at her workplace, where she gets a raise. The anxious phallus is referenced when Fandi is in the midst of dusting the living room when the doorbell suddenly rings. He opens the door to find a saleswoman selling polishing liquid. He insists that he is busy, but she takes him to the sofa to make him sit and hear her presentation (while he covers his crotch with a cushion in anxiety). She takes out the bottle of polish to explain its benefits and we see Fandi aroused. The allusion here is that he can identify the phallic shape of the bottle, which she confidently grips during

her sales pitch. The comedy is further compounded at his expense as he is wearing his cleaning apron with gestures that appear to indicate that he is losing control. This extends the range of his phallic precarity across an impressive span of modernising geography: into the domestic sphere of an emergent bourgeoisie, after being crushed in broad daylight at the football field.[72]

[72] My reading of this scene does not negate the film's conservative ending, where Fandi eventually travels the globe as a successful photographer while his wife, who has experienced the working world, waits for him while pregnant while holding on to three kids. Like *Hantu Siang* (1986), *Kepala Angin* is very much a part of the wave of Malay films that takes the cultural power of Malay women seriously, despite affirming men in positions of power. This in any case should speak to the line of thinking throughout my project, namely that the Malay gender regime is uneven. In that we see overt expressions of power from both men and women as they negotiate their place in modernity. But this contest could only take place upon Malay women's historically established power.



Figure 23*. Fandi nervous at the sight of the saleswoman presenting a very suggestive, phallic-shaped bottle of polish.*

Uneven Phallus

That the phallus is pointed out amidst emerging spaces of Malay modernisation (the hotel bedroom, living room, car and mall) reminds us of the crucial point that its veil needs to be constructed. This takes us to Doreen Massey's (1994) fundamental insight that the notion of abstract space itself is phallic, for demarcating a nature / culture divide that corresponds to a preoccupation with differentiated bodies termed as 'sexes'.[73] Patriarchy, in this

[73] Massey formulates this position in reference to Henri Lefebvre's account of phallic space. Working with the notion that the phallus is a privileged signifier, Lefebvre roots the phallus in space by describing how it is a metaphor that at the same time marks 'the brutality of political power' (2008, p. 287). The violence emphasises the corporeal dimension of this process. Matching the body and the environment in a way that a masculine power could be identified links

view, relies very much on bringing the spatial and the sexual together as the belief that the world should be designed in the image of a dominant sex at the expense of a weaker one requires that such a world be built in the first place.[74] Therein lies the danger of the phallus's illusory anticipations of wholeness. The link between spatial and bodily displacement I sketched, where the young working men of an emergent modernity—who straddle uncertain employment amidst a rural-urban divide that preoccupied their national discourse—reveal a masculinity that struggles to imagine itself in a world where the built relationship between sexual and spatial hegemony might never be realised. It is out of this circumstance that the uneven phallus has provided material for comedy where its domination is articulated along with its lameness; its subject status easily objectified and always instantaneously too.

The bigger question this raises is if the uneven phallus indicates that the Malay context is in effect non-patriarchal. At the very least, I hope my argument addresses the question of whether or not Malay patriarchy will take the same form as colonial-capitalist modernity. This chapter resonates with various

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the aggression of the image to the aggression of space itself: 'By the time this process is complete, space has no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualisation. It is thus—not symbolically but in fact—a purely visual space. The rise of the visual realm entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the body and usurps its role' (Lefebvre, 2008, p. 286).

[74] She also links this to the capitalist economy that enables such an ethos: 'The hegemonic spaces and places which we face today are not only products of forms of economic organisation but reflect back at us also—and in the process reinforce—other characteristics of social relations, among them those of gender' (Massey, 2013, p. 183).

similar observations regarding how phallic thinking in the Malay context is relatively diminished. Recent studies on local phallic imaginaries point to the *keris,* a traditional Malay dagger, as an example. But while this is historically significant it remains rather removed from everyday encounter, use or relevance (G. C. Khoo, 2006). Cheryl Nichols and Kimberly Cline (2010) find an analogy of how the nail is positioned in a popular horror story, while Mark Thornton Burnett (2016) shows a straw and needle used for a similar reason in a local adaptation of Othello. Popular-cultural instantiations of the Malay phallus, even if one insists it is ubiquitous, do not exude superiority.

In a similar vein, the relative lack of phallic spectacles in contemporary Southeast Asian modernity, explains the relative lack of allure around the penis. Christine Helliwell's (2000) study of rape in the Dayak community of Borneo stands out in this regard. She notices in the Dayak a relative lack of mystique around the penis, owing to the fact that the culture is not in the fold of the Western gender regime. This is not to say that rape does not exist or is taken lightly in Dayak culture. Rather, for Helliwell, it is a useful foil with which to check Western feminism's equation of sex with subjectivity in its totality. Claims such as rape is worse than death, for example, appear to be an outcome of a distinct Western outlook on gender, where sexual infringement is regarded as a dissolution of autonomy altogether. This is tied to a longer-standing epistemic presumption: "Most feminist models of gender, while wishing to draw attention to the socially constructed character of difference have nevertheless assumed—however reluctantly—that gender ultimately relates 'back' to sex, that is, to the differences between 'male' and 'female' bodies" (Helliwell, 2000, p. 797). Dayak culture (which shares the same country as Malay culture) was never consumed

by that epistemology. Thus, when asked about the lack of panic around rape in Dayak culture, the retort was 'it's just a penis.' The lack of mystique around the male organ allowed Dayak women to fight back and make more demands on their men.

2018 is far from the days when Malay modernity and Malay masculinity were uncertain. Phallic thinking is evident and now constitutive of its politics. This was clear as recently as 2017, when former Prime Minister Najib Razak's rivalry with current Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Muhammad took the form of competing skyscrapers: the former's 106-floor 'The Exchange 106' would be the tallest building in the country by June 2018, superseding the latter's 88-floor Petronas Tower built 20 years earlier. Malay comedies have also toned down the slapstick and while exaggerated and theatrical disguises are common gags, cross-dressing or overt phallic referencing has faded, indicating that the organ's (ideological) role too has firmly (if not more dangerously) become unconscious, taken for granted as the governing outlook. This is aided by how fear-mongering against sexual minorities is encouraged even at the highest levels of the government. But if we take films to be channelling a political unconscious they serve as crucial reminders regarding the uneven nature of the development process. Where masculinization is concerned the phallic conquests that have concretely shaped the developmental process necessarily contend with historical limitations. Here the rural-urban divide, as we shall see, will continue to inform Malay cinematic imaginary and challenge straightforward fantasies of sexual difference. Our next two chapters take on the different ways this divide has been engaged with regards to time.

CHAPTER 5: MIGRATION BETWEEN MOURNING AND LOVE: KAMI'S EMBRACE OF THE TEMPORARY

Introduction

So far my study has shown how the modern Malay man is unable to feel at home in a modernity that constantly displaces him. He is unable to adjust to the modern work regime without identifying with the Malay woman's more advantageous position in it. His virility has also been frequently parodied in anxious acknowledgement of an uneven phallus, as I described in the previous chapter. This resonates with the underlying thread of my argument about the uneven character of his modernisation. The limitations to his dominance reveal him to be displaced and unable to fully embody the modern expectations of power and productivity set upon his gender. The next two chapters extend this insight for an inquiry into its implication on temporality. We have seen how Malay masculinity is displaced by modernization. How then are we to characterise the distinct temporality therein and its politics?

This chapter answers this question by looking at two features common to the films we have seen so far if not the broader tradition of local popular culture they represent. The first is that the men's displacement—constantly being in transit and in-between homes—situates them in the temporary. The second is how this temporariness animates a distinct experience of love as one that is caused by, and situated at the heart of, uneven development. Based on this I argue that temporariness is an opening to alternative attitudes towards time against the ostensibly inevitable and homogenising futurity of capital. This

inability to resolve time—into a predictable linear stream—similarly complicates notions of atomised love where love would be understood in terms of resolution or wholeness. Once formed by the temporary, love becomes constantly written by the coming together of differing and incommensurable temporal sensibilities. This amounts to a love underlined by difference rather than a uniformity of perspective.

I shall make this argument by considering how mourning is depicted in the film *Kami* (1982). *Kami* is a coming-of-age story about Tookoo and Din, two runaway boys who meet as homeless strangers and cultivate a loving friendship before being found and separated by child protection services. The temporary sway between loss and reconnection is captured in the film's final scene. While playing, Din meets with an accident. He is taken to the hospital where he is assigned to a foster family by the state's child services. Tookoo accepts that this is the end of their friendship and, with little choice left, resigns himself to sadness. He is then shown walking away from the hospital before Din, standing on crutches, calls upon Tookoo. He turns and they run to each other in slow motion and the film concludes with both pausing and smiling in each other's embrace. This ending indulges in the film's emphasis on the temporariness of their friendship throughout. Set amidst a rapidly modernising Kuala Lumpur, they undergo various misadventures that show their bond to be at constant risk, thereby always undulating between loss and attachment. This resonates with the general theme of uneven masculinity I described above, as mourning shows them to be both at the heart and margins of historical change at the same time.

I will deepen the account of temporariness therein in two ways. First, I shall show how it resonates with the Lacanian account of mourning, where the

loss of the old converges with a struggle to symbolise the new. Similarly the mournful love in *Kami* occurs in a decade that was still coming to terms with the intensity of rural-urban migration and the farewells it has demanded. Key here is how the film accentuates the ways in which Lacanian mourning resonates with uneven development's mixed temporalities, namely how the past and present are not separate phases but are rather negotiated concurrently. The mixed times is evident in how the film would underscore mourning even when the boys' friendship is at its liveliest, placing them at the heart of Malay modernization's temporal changes. Past and present then are imaginary times that must be organised from the totality of history. But the suspense with which *Kami* concludes shows how the Real cannot be enclosed. The temporariness in Malay modernization means that the vision of a linear and certain capitalist future is not certain. The future of hegemonic masculinity too can therefore be questioned as a result.

This brings me to this chapter's second theoretical component, namely, how temporariness also allows us to think of how love becomes politicised amidst modernization. *Kami's* mournfulness is a part of a broader wave of narratives exploring the challenges and cultural demands caused by rural-urban migrancy. Eric C. Thompson (2007) observes that the profound infrastructural changes in the 1980s and 1990s saw an entire popular culture of melodrama and melancholia that would critique, address and parody the contradictions of development that were encountered in Kuala Lumpur. Love would be a constant theme in how it would highlight the emotional and familial costs of the departures forced by migration. In particular, the fact that *Kami* ultimately features a friendship between two subjects makes for a productive comparison

with Alain Badiou's notion of love as Two-ness. Where Badiou calls for the Two to resist the atomizing hegemony of liberal capitalism, the temporariness in *Kami* forges the two of unevenness: a love that resists the enclosed oneness liberalism demands as each side comes together amidst a contestation of temporalities. Temporariness does not simply indicate the historical contingency of the couple form. It also speaks to the inability to harmonise modernization's temporal contestations.

We shall first begin with context. We would be more able to appreciate *Kami* as a historical event by first considering how it features Sudirman, Malaysia's foremost singer-entertainer of the 1980s, in his first and only film appearance. The film's success and historical relevance is largely due to how it captures the zeitgeist of the time, where letting go and moving on were a constant preoccupation, owing to how the Malay context was uneven.

Part 1: Kami in Context

Sudirman

Sudirman is celebrated today for some of Malaysia's most cherished songs. They remain popular, namely to mark key turning points in Malaysian modernity. For example, 'Balik Kampung' ('Returning to the Village') is a staple tune to this very day, repeated on radio and television during Raya (the Malaysian version of Eid, the Muslim holiday after Ramadan) and even Deepavali (the local version of Diwali, the annual, national holiday for Malaysia's Hindu minority). The song is about the excitement of returning to the village for the festivities for a major cultural event where Malaysia's major cities empty out as

hundreds of thousands clog the highways to visit their families and relatives. This annual exodus signals the cultural significance of the rural-urban gap that intensified due to the massive modernisation of infrastructure undertaken by the state during the New Economic Policy. As I described in my introduction, it indicated not just spatial divisions but a generational-cultural gap between the future and the past, the developed and the backward. 'Balik Kampung', therefore, sings of the joys and anxieties of returning to where one was from while being away for work and the promise of an emergent modernity.

'Tanggal 31' ('The 31st'), a song about *Merdeka* (the Malayan day of Independence), is another milestone in Sudirman's legacy. It differs from other patriotic songs for its upbeat tempo and light lyrics, evoking the spirit of independence in terms of joy and celebration, as opposed to other songs in the genre, which more often reference conflict and sacrifice. Sudirman then took his popularity overseas by bringing Malaysian music to the international stage, winning Asia's No. 1 Performer at the Asian Popular Music Awards in 1989. A comparison with P. Ramlee's legacy might offer some perspective on Sudirman's stardom: Both used their platforms for social critique but where P. Ramlee's larger-than-life iconicity was largely posthumously constructed, given the neglect to his works towards the latter stages of his life, Sudirman was affirmed and celebrated up to his sudden death in 1992 at age 37.

Less recalled today, despite continued references to his mainstream success, was that Sudirman brought a certain politics along with his stardom. In 1985, a proposed concert in Bangi at *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* (Malaysian National University) generated protest from the official student organisation (Maidin, 2010). Claiming that the concert was immoral and un-Islamic, they

chastised not only the organisers but also other students and faculty who supported it. Some were even threatened. This became a nationwide issue, drawing strong reactions for and against from national newspaper op-eds, politicians, opinion leaders and public figures. After weeks of intense debate, with both sides seemingly at an impasse, it was left to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed—himself under fire for being secular at that time—to approve the concert. It took place on campus as planned on January of that year under heavy security, attracting a crowd of three thousand students. The significance of this concert should not be disregarded, given the intensified cultural divisions of the time. Islamist revivalism was beginning its show of force and cultural appeal, generating a tug of war between the emergent middle classes who strongly identified with Islamic values and the then-secular government. But this never deterred Sudirman, who often affirmed Malaysia's multicultural identity as the rare Malay singer who would perform popular Cantonese and Tamil songs as well. He performed 'Lorelei', originally by Alan Tam, in a concert in 1987 and the Indian classic 'Anbeva' in 1989. [75]

Sudirman made history again in 1986 (J. Sim, 2017). Wanting to bring his music to the people, he staged a free concert in Chow Kit, a poor neighbourhood known, especially at that time, for drugs, prostitution and crime. It was a historic feat not only for attracting the 100,000-strong audience but also for the massive traffic jams caused around Kuala Lumpur as a result. Needless to say, this worried and irritated the city authorities. No other pop concert of that scale and

[75] Anecdotal accounts of the film's origins claim that the script was initially in English and that Sudirman oversaw the translation to Bahasa.

character was ever organised again in the city. It was a decision that spoke to the broadening social stratification at the time. The New Economic Policy—the state's drive to root capitalism among Malays — gradually turned from centralised planning to privatisation. In step with the global ascendance of neo-liberalism, the Malaysian state sought to deregulate the economy. Foreign investment expanded as national industries were managed as businesses rather than state enterprises. Kuala Lumpur, being the only major commercial city at the time, was where the contradictions caused by that policy were starkly seen and felt.

That *Kami* would solidify Sudirman's screen legacy as boyish is not that unusual when we consider his distinct media image. One can say in fact that his towering fame is often overshadowed by a certain aura of an extended adolescence. There is his small physique. He stands at 4 feet 8 inches (1.47 metres / 142.2 centimetres) tall. Often in photos he would be the shortest and most small-framed person. In one of the most circulated images of his performances, we see him visibly shorter in between two taller, towering female dancers. His diminutive size, in fact, would be a common mention in local press coverage, albeit endearingly, often as *kecil-kecil cili api* (as small as red chilli), a local saying that refers to the 'force' that some small things or people have. That his distinct, powerful voice contrasts with his small frame suggests just as much: He has an alto range that separates him from other men in his genre, where lower-ranged tenor or baritone voices were the norm. His build, alongside his

smile (he never kept facial hair) maintained his boyish charm well into the latter part of his career.[76]

Young and homeless

I will have more to say about the historical significance of Sudirman's boyishness in my conclusion. For now we should turn to how *Kami* provides a productive intersection to link Sudirman's awareness of historical changes and his popular cultural impact. Firstly, the film is set when the wave of migration from villages to Kuala Lumpur marked a cultural transformation of historical proportions. The intensification of capitalism in the late 1970s and 1980s required erecting new industries and infrastructures, which compelled the mass movement of millions from villages to the newly constructed cities that were rapidly expanding as a result. This process was particularly crucial for the dominant nationalism at the time. As Ross King (2008) indicates, the future of a prosperous Malaysia required Kuala Lumpur to be Malayised. The May 13 riots occurred when tensions between the urban Chinese population and rural-poor Malays coloured the nation-building project. The aftermath saw more Malayness imposed into what was for a long time an established Chinese-and-colonial-influenced urban space. Streets were renamed in recognition of Malay male icons

[76] His sexuality became a matter of speculation with rumours that he died of HIV-related complications. This was never mentioned on national media, which stated 'pneumonia' as the official cause of death. HIV, however, remains to this day the default guess for chatter or questions about the supposedly real reason for his death. Note that the early 90s were also a time of national anxiety towards AIDS amidst a panic over endemic levels of heroin addiction, of which Malay youths comprised the overwhelming majority of victims.

and enclaves such as *Kampung Baru* were granted special protected status. Tookoo and Din run away from home amidst this wave of political transitions where the future of a Malay identity was manifesting as a new vision of a prosperous and developed urban Malaysia.

That *Kami* features children is instructive in how it also places 'youth' at the heart of uneven development, namely, as the making of urban Southeast Asia was allegorised into a discourse of age-consciousness. For example, James Siegel's (1986) account of youth culture in early urban Surakarta points out the currency acquired by the concept of *remaja* (teenager). It spoke to a new generation ushered in by modernity and the rural-urban divide. The 'invented' term's increased usage stands in contrast to *pelajar* (student) or *pemuda* (youth). City life thereby became associated with 'the future', as it unsettled previously-established, traditional, and age-based hierarchies, as indicated by Victor T. King and William D. Wilder (2003). Youth's newly acquired cultural prominence, however, did not happen without a price. In Malaysia, urban youth identity emerged out of a mass out-migration that saw the dissolution of rural Malaysia. Beginning in the 1980s, a nationwide shift of priority towards building an industrial economy saw the gradual devaluation of the rural, which up to then was the focal point of Malaysia's largely agricultural economy. Millions of young men and women from the village would supply the labour force for the new infrastructure. The association of modernity and youth is not only evident in the city depicted in *Anak Halal* (Pillai, 2007) and *Budak Kelantan* (Ahmad Puad, 2008) (where migration is more obviously featured) but also *Songlap* (Grand Brilliance, 2004) which stresses youth (though with typically bleak urban

undertones) by featuring a pair of siblings who support themselves in their parents' absence by being human traffickers.

Thus, migrating to the city was seen in many ways not simply as a pursuit of greener pastures but also a coming of age:

> An important component of men's migratory experience from rural to urban areas is the desire and imperative to acquire the wealth and social standing required for them to transform themselves from dependent children into responsible adults. Men aspire to the status of *abang*, a term used not only for eldest son or older brother but also for husband (Thompson, 2003, p. 425).

However, it is important to note that this association between material progress and youth was not an optimistic one. Rather, it would often be underscored by developmental anxieties. Indeed it occurred alongside widespread concerns over whether Malaysia could truly 'make it.' Thus while the city was often associated with the future it was rarely optimistically so. This would situate the migrant experience in a double bind. On one hand the focus on cities left little for the village: "The very young, the very old, the temporarily unemployed and the permanently unemployable make up a large segment of the *kampung* population" (Thompson, 2004, p. 2367).[77] On the other hand the city promised very little in return. As Eric Thompson's research shows "Young

[77] This affected much of the upkeep needed: 'As my host father pointed out, with "all the young people gone", basic maintenance of the kampung infrastructure, particularly maintenance of the paddy fields and irrigation system, which residents previously conducted in *gotong-royong* [a form of collective co-operation commonly practiced in Malay villages] fashion, now goes unattended for lack of labour and initiative. Much of the labour power in the kampung is expended on urban and urban-oriented employment—working in urban areas or producing goods for urban markets' (Thompson, 2004, p. 2371).

people—for example, repeatedly told me in interviews and discussions that there was 'no future' for them in the kampung, that migration out of the kampung was inevitable" (Thompson, 2004, p. 2361).

It is crucial to note how this double bind left a whole generation of Malays neither here nor there. While Kuala Lumpur would see the expansion of a bourgeoisie profiting from the new capitalism, the rate of migration from the villages outpaced development. Relevant to our discussion is how it threw home into question. Droves of young Malays from the villages arrived to the city with no place to live, thereby settling for *setinggan* housing instead. Often translated to English as 'squatters' or 'slums', *setinggans* proliferated illegally across the city, as entire villages gradually took root on unoccupied land. Otherwise, the new migrant workforce would have to settle for cramped, run-down flats. These furthermore were Malay youths, the very ethnic demographic the state vowed to protect. The insufficiency of living spaces, amidst what was supposed to be urban prosperity, was a sore point against the national developmental aspirations of the time. Unforeseen poverty would expand alongside the newly formed bourgeoisie, overshadowing whatever advances were celebrated.

Journalist Adibah Amin, writing in 1975, describes the new living conditions of the urban poor as

> minute subdivisions of rooms above shops in dilapidated 'quarters' in cramped flats and in shacks which differ from squatter-shacks only that they are not 'illegal.' Meanwhile after toiling all day in factories and shops . . . they console themselves of the status quo in various ways. A number find peace and congenial company in prayer houses, or go to the little bazaars and food-stalls, the cinema-halls, the gaming tables, the toddy centres. (1975, p. 144)

The city divided Malays more than ever before. Where there were properly developed neighbourhoods, an enclave of urban poverty would be sure

to follow. The wealth gap sprawled to form a maze of abrupt turns. The following passage is helpful in providing a sense of the challenges facing migrants in the city but also the concrete uncertainties that underlined the mood in films of the time:

> Firstly, you are in Kuala Lumpur to live. Therefore you have to get a job. Don't go to the big buildings. There are no jobs there . . . Our country is still developing. There are a lot of factories in the outskirts of the city. Look for jobs there. You'll find good opportunities. You are among the 30%. Your wage, if you're lucky, is [MYR] 4.30 a day [GBP 0.81]. . . Secondly you need a house . . . There are plenty of houses in Kuala Lumpur. If you depart from the train station to Jalan Bangsar to Universiti Malaya there are houses on your right and left. Don't turn right, this road leads you to Bukit Pantai. The rent is no less than a thousand . . . Turn left, and you'll also see a hill—Bukit Kerinchi and you will find a house for 40.00 a month. (Nordin, 1978, p. 87)

The idealised youth of Malay modernisation were quickly punctured by the reality unfolded by the harshness of city life. Malay migration then was defined by displacement. The rural was denigrated as lifeless in light of the new urban ideal. But the present discovered in the city did not point to a better future: Kuala Lumpur turned out to be chaotic and precarious. Alienated by the city's contradictions as the rural world they left was emptied out of all potential, the young migrant belonged neither here nor there, unsettling the invested meaning and value of migration itself. The government's investment in the success of this development, meanwhile, saw the curb of dissent and protests. Plantation strikes were quelled as anti-union laws made organising more difficult. Dissidents were jailed without trial. Media was heavily regulated to rule out dissent. The tragic strain of migration then was not simply a developmental necessity to 'move on' with the times. It was also built upon the triumph of state capital.

Tookoo and Din's boyhood then could be understood as a masculinity that is forming amidst a developmental circumstance that left a whole generation of Malays displaced. That their vagrancy occurs in the structural predicament caused by the rural-urban divide resonates with the general uncertainties of a *young* country entering the trajectory of a global economy. The boys would show the unevenness in more apparent ways in how their 'home' is stretched across the spaces of a developing Kuala Lumpur. While they would stay in an abandoned bungalow they would bond most 'out there', amidst the inequalities of urbanisation. Youth, therefore, is not shaped in the confines of bourgeois domestic security but spread out to survey modernisation's concrete materiality. They live off daily odd jobs, while we see them building their bond on dirty streets, sleeping on dusty floors, drinking from public toilet taps and playing by the drain. Their misadventures take us to Kuala Lumpur's rough and dirty streets and drains, night markets, police stations and empty houses, setting their friendship against the backdrop of urban decay.

The film would highlight their encounter with modernity in terms of work. Tookoo and Din lived off selling old glass bottles, washing cars and cutting grass in the hot sun. But this, indeed, is where the boys find their fun. They become closer through surviving the risks of living on the streets: they prank a rival group of boys who want to cut grass in the same area as them. In between it all, there is laughter and dancing. The boys persist on their own terms, gingerly surviving day to day, never thinking about a sustainable future. They remain cheerful amidst instabilities they always somehow manage to dodge, indicating the fragility of their narrow escapes.

But we get a sense that the closeness will not last very long. *Pelangi Petang,* the song that is heard throughout the film, accompanies Tookoo and Din's friendship. Parts of it—whether a simple piano-based melody or a full orchestral rendition—play intermittently over the course of the plot. Its brief lyrics, which are clearly about expecting an impending departure, depict a dark journey in search of light that stumbles into a rainbow, brightening the path. The singer enjoys the rainbow despite knowing it will fade. Note, however, that the rainbow is described as "*tak bercahaya namun kau berseri*"('you have no light but you still radiate'). This contradiction speaks to how Tookoo and Din find one another: amidst poverty that nonetheless offers richness. But the film music constantly emphasises the temporariness of their bond. The closer they become, the more the audience could anticipate their separation.

The downcast feel then weaves through the boys' lighter and frivolous moments, indicating how the 'present' shaped by their friendship will always be underlined by apprehensions about an uncertain future. But this too speaks to the city's unevenness. As a space of migrant flows, it is neither territorially fixed nor definite. It is constantly changing where ideals are confronted only as they are about to fade. *Kami* is not simply a film about children being children, as their youth is placed amidst anxieties surrounding a national future in a country that is also young. Consequently, loss too is not limited to Din and Tookoo's decision to abandon their families. Rather, the film is fundamentally about managing the loss of ideals. The boys' friendship is intertwined with the general anxiety of the era, where much of the past is relinquished for a future that is clearly shown to be contrary to the rosy picture promoted by the national developmental imaginary. The interplay of hope (marked by the boys' youthfulness) and

inevitable end (marked by the song's constant reminder that they have no future together) that Tookoo and Din embody situates their bond at the heart of an uncertain modernization where past, present and future must be continuously worked through.

Part 2: Working Through the Temporary

Migrancy

It is in that sense of things that we are more able to reflect on how *Kami* renders the temporary. This is not just a delay between what was and what will be. Grounding the film in the history it speaks to shows a temporariness unfolding *in between* the past that had to be abandoned while waiting for the future happiness that was promised. This is encapsulated by the ebb and flow of Tookoo and Din's friendship that oscillates constantly between joy (performed in smiles, laughter and play) and detachment (performed by tears, apprehension and longing), where every moment of closeness is met with an interruption that threatens its dissolution. But the film does more by locating it at the heart of unevenness. The past and present are occurring horizontally across 'one' Kuala Lumpur. Finding work amidst impoverished and abandoned buildings, but bound to neither family nor state, the boys inhabit a transitory phase, at once resisting and acquiescing. Through their migrancy they can be seen as "reclaiming a radical instance of liberty and the functioning of old and new mechanisms of domination and exploitation," as Sandro Mazzadra explains in his account of migrancy's transgressive potential (Mezzadra, 2004, p. 271). To this effect, we can add Stuart Hall's description of how migrancy's unique flow allows openings to embrace difference: There is a "minimal self" that mobility ushers in

where identity insists on difference but "it is not necessarily armour-plated against other identities" (Hall, 1987, p. 46). This is evident in Tookoo and Din's easy and growing rapport with one another but also indicated in Din's hitchhike with a stranger after he ran away from home. This moment of trust and risk, in fact, is how the film sets up his departure for and eventual arrival to the city

But the preoccupation with loss indicates that *Kami* renders this in-betweenness with a unique temporal signature. Running away from a past, amidst a milieu moved by the uncertain construction of future spaces means that their bond also occurs in a phase that capitalist modernity has not closed off. They can mourn together because they bond where the old and new are happening at the same time. The temporary is more palpable in other words because capitalism has not yet completed its hegemony over Kuala Lumpur. The film places the two boys in what Wright calls "time without qualities," a temporality that "carves out breathing spots, intervals, transitory breaches in the very core of collective existence, time slots still unfettered by social and political discipline" (Wright, 2009, p. 129). *Kami* resonates with this through showing productive power of temporariness, which structures the anticipation of loss and moves the plot. We see the same use of intervals and breathing spots but not as a constant, ever-ready strategic option but one where new moments and advances for a temporary connection are registered. It is, indeed, in sensing an impending end to their connection that their levity finds purpose, for the story is developed through how the boys become closer against indications of their sheer unsustainability. Temporariness happens where their connection is constantly decentred by loss, deepening and detaching *at the same time.*

This is iterated in many ways through the film, all of which point to the fragility of the boys' circumstances. Tookoo is actually reluctant to befriend Din, as he is content to keep the abandoned bungalow he found for himself. Tookoo does not let Din in the first time but Din refuses to leave as it is during a storm. Tookoo agrees to let him stay overnight on condition that he leaves in the morning. Din does not and instead chooses to trail Tookoo in his routine of looking for empty glass bottles, intervening at a crucial moment to save Tookoo from being ambushed by a gang of youths. Tookoo feels indebted to Din and their friendship begins to grow from there. But while the temporary is felt most in such close calls, they also highlight the harshness of city life. It is important for my inquiry to show how temporariness is productive, that Tookoo and Din connect beyond the exigencies of survival. Later in the film, a thief, running away after stealing from a nearby newsstand, accidentally runs into Tookoo and Din. The money falls on the floor near Tookoo and the police mistake him for the thief and give chase. He is handcuffed and taken to lockup as Din sprints after the police car barefoot, seen in slow-motion, to follow his friend after their explanations to the police were ignored. Din reaches the station sad and exhausted. He breaks down as *Pelangi Petang* plays. Pak Do, the owner of the newsstand, then spots him and offers to help by telling the police what actually happened, after which Tookoo is released.

It is in such uncertainties that highlight the temporariness of what they have, that the boys also find laughter and joy. They go to the night market one evening to dance to a song with other children only to be stopped halfway as the music is playing from a nearby shop whose owner doesn't want to be treated like a nightclub. Later on the boys try to find an unlocked car to sneak into so they

can play a cassette. Tookoo finds one and enjoys the song briefly before someone they think is the owner approaches from a distance. The boys run away together in another moment of misadventure that defines their closeness. Their many sudden dashes upon unexpected encounters and turns of events serve the plot but also say something about the temporariness in which they bond.

Mourning as temporary

We shall now turn to the temporal politics this presumes. The idea that loss opens the temporary is echoed in, and could be explored via, the Lacanian account of mourning. For Lacan, mourning is a painful struggle with "the hole that has been created in existence" (Lacan, 1977, p. 38). This hole is a void in discourse where 'what once was' (something that a subject associates with the past) no longer carries the same meaning, owing to the limits of all available resources of signification: "The real is traumatic because there has been no sufficient symbolic or imaginary network in place for 'representing' it" (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 34). This is what it means to say that the Real is beyond the symbolic. What the mourner loses, along with the person, ideal or place that had organised his identity, is the ability to articulate and accept why the loss is so devastating. The loss that leads to mourning is a loss of the object that sustains the subject's place in the symbolic order in which 'the world' and his or her place in it is structured. In this sense, mourning takes the subject to the threshold of the social order as the subject must confront a breakdown in "the system of signifiers in their totality" in order to desire again (Lacan, 1977, p. 38).

It is in working through this confrontation, to fashion a new place in the symbolic and to regain one's 'bearings' as it were, that we get an indication of mourning's temporal quality. For the goal of desiring again orients the grieving to an unknown horizon ahead. Indeed, for Lacan, mourning is fundamentally about an "unrealised future" (Boothby, 2013, p. 217). Whereas mourning is typically construed in terms of 'moving on', 'getting over', or leaving the past behind, Lacan emphasises how the same process also repairs desire by placing the subject in a fantasised time to come. Here we should note that what makes the affect of mourning distinct is that it can only partially symbolise. A future is seen and yearned for but it cannot be fully desired, leaving the subject suspended between an illusive possibility and a real impossibility. Thus for Richard Boothby Mourning works along the "*unavoidable* margin of futurity that cannot be pressed in the mould of any expectation, that remains indeterminate and unknowable" (2013, p. 217; emphasis added). This proximity to the Real leads Lacan to speak of its 'positive phase' to ask "why shouldn't we rejoice at the fact that the deceased existed?" (Lacan, 2014, p. 36).[78] Mourning labours through the temporary. The notion of past and future are negotiated but without closure.

[78] That Lacan makes it fundamentally about an unknown time to come, as opposed to a past certainty, has exposed him to charges that he actually has nothing much to say about mourning per se. Thus, for Roberto Harari (2013), Lacan mentioned mourning to make a bigger point about the anxiety of not being able to fantasise again. Alessia Ricciardi (2003), who criticises Lacan for devaluing past loss in order to highlight future desire, argues that his account of mourning presumes a society of the spectacle, always ever tempted towards a fascination for the new while disregarding the subjective destitution caused by loss.

We are more able to understand what makes the Lacanian account of mourning distinct —as opposed to other 'standard' ones that seeks a return to "healthy" neurotic desire —when we consider how the its encounter with the void of symbolisation enables the new to be conceived. Thus the 'past' is merely instrumental to the more urgent need for *reconstruction*: "The fact that the subject relives, comes to remember, in the intuitive sense of the word, the formative events of his existence, is not in itself so very important. What matters is what he reconstructs of it . . . when all is said and done, it is less a matter of remembering than of rewriting history" (Lacan, 1988, p. 14). The past is still significant, and the loss is still felt but would now be recoded differently given how it is felt alongside the real void of signification. What happens from here, as the old and new are blended, is a transformation of subjective standpoint. Other things also appear differently: "From that perspective, as the mourning for a lost object which can scarcely even be remembered as such, the path back through the other objects shows them radically modified and transformed as well" (Jameson, 1991, 169). In mourning, there is no 'history' as such, so much as an uneven present where a past is reconstrued in light of current anxieties of signification.[79]

Writing mourning

The notion of re-writing the future is made literal in the film's writing scene. We are now towards the end of the film as we see Din and Tookoo at their

[79] For a more in depth account of Lacanian time see Chenyang (2019), a book which I wanted to engage with and cite but would only be released at an affordable price after my submission.

house. Tookoo is reading the newspaper when Din asks to be taught how to write. It is here that Tookoo says he studied until Standard 6 (which is usually up to 12 years of age for the average Malaysian student). They are both on the floor and the camera assumes the view from their angle as we see Tookoo slowly and visibly writing D-I-N. Din being totally new to this process cannot hold the pencil still. He struggles to trace the letters of the alphabet. Halfway through this attempt, Tookoo corrects Din by demonstrating the proper grip. Their fingers now touch briefly, in the film's only moment of intimate affection. This stands out as a stark contrast to their otherwise rough-and-tumble daily existence between odd jobs. Upon the second try, Din is finally able to write his name out. They both celebrate in jubilation. The frame follows Tookoo and Din, from lying down on the floor together to standing up, where Tookoo now writes out his name for Din. Din observes and in turn writes it out as well.

Din now marvels at his newfound ability to write. He asks for Tookoo to teach him more and Tookoo draws a circle to explain the shape of the globe. Tookoo draws an arrow to show the spot where they are, pointing out their place in an enormous, roughly drawn-out world. They both stand at a distance from the world to admire the crudely drawn globe, located beside T-O-O-K-O-O and D-I-N, as if to look at themselves and each other from the outside. A key gesture also stands out in this moment: Tookoo and Din's lesson is accompanied by loud, repeated proclamations of their names. The spelling lists out the letters of the alphabet required for each word, after which the *Tookoo* and *Din* would be loudly uttered together to be heard.

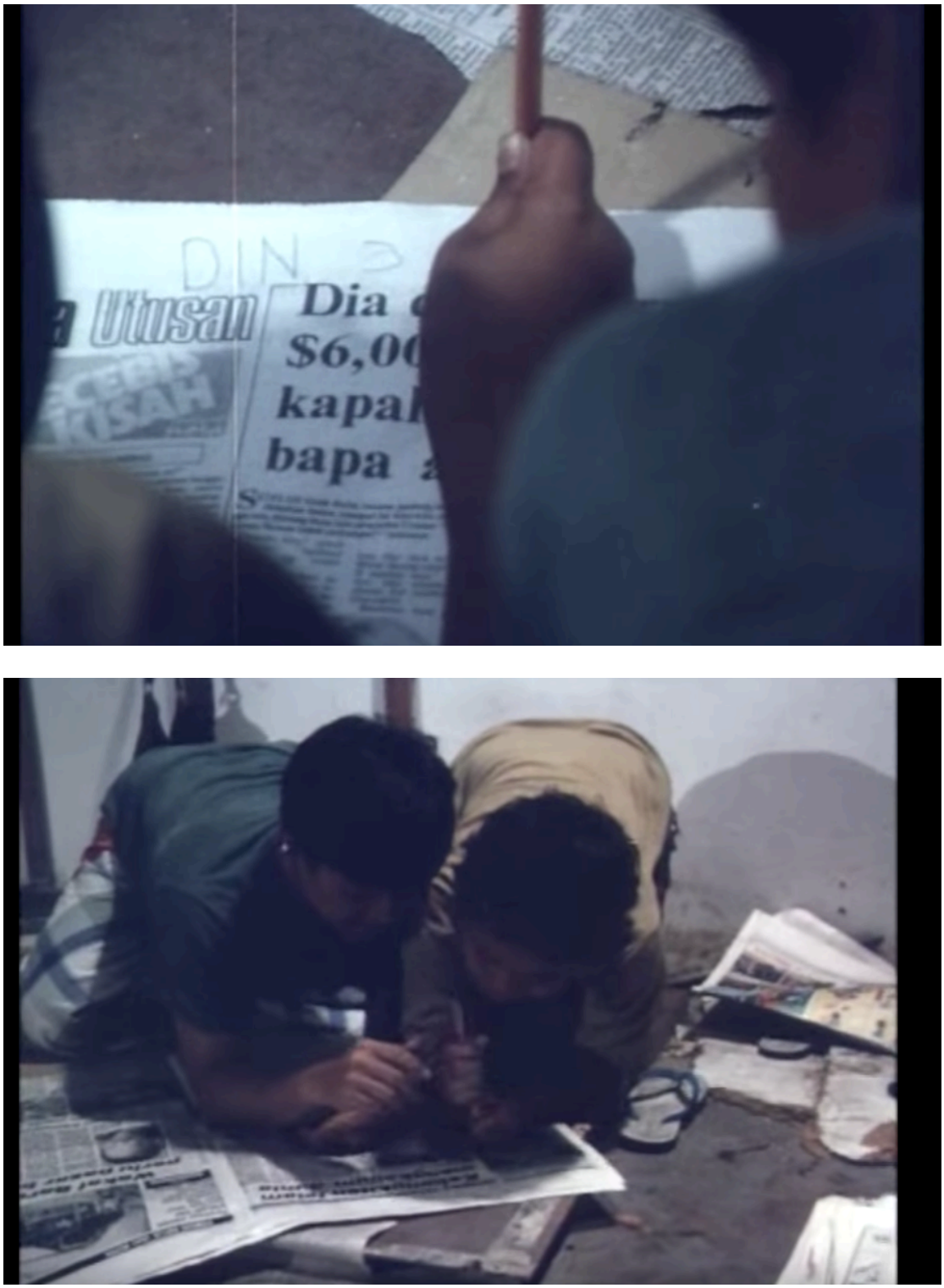


Figure 5.1.. Din and Tookoo writing their names on the floor before writing them all over the wall.

The high-angle view into the moment sees us looking down on Tookoo and Din. This places them close to the ground beside their meagre belongings on

the floor. More than that, this flatness is where their overcoming occurs. They write their names to affirm their connection after a long, painful divorce from their difficult pasts. There is an obvious moment of symbolisation that occurs here. Writing, in Lacanian terms, is a way of making something out of nothing. It connects the symbolic, the presumed and available meanings within a given linguistic circumstance, with the Real. Here a prior anxiety is granted 'sense' and 'understanding' by which the subject is anchored into an underlying structure thereby giving 'meaning' to what would otherwise just be disintegrating anxiety This is presumed in Lacanian accounts of mourning, which identifies an unsettling void in the symbolic: Just as mourning is coping with this loss while in search of a new object of desire no longer governed by loss, writing is a way of making meaning for what was once not 'there': it organises chaos and uncertainty into the legibility within a given symbolic order. Thus, the uncertainties endured by Tookoo and Din find reprieve in this moment. As Tom Eyers puts it, "Language has both the function of constituting the subject and continuing to write the subject, constituting in a double move the contours of psychic reality and the threat of its dissolution" (Eyers, 2012, p. 93). Tookoo and Din's journey is always already fragile given their obvious non-future. The melody of *Pelangi Petang* is repeated throughout to show the temporariness of whatever joy we see them claim at any moment. But now, Din's joy of seeing his own writing, with his eyes clearly marvelling at the letters as they form, marks an arrival at a new identity beyond the old, aided by the deep friendship fostered with Tookoo.

But true to the film's rhythm this closeness would only be temporary. The next day, while playfully out and about with Tookoo, Din writes their names on

an office window they pass by, clearly excited to express his newfound spelling ability. One of the office workers sees this and tells them to go away and they laugh it off and move on. This also says something of the matter in which their twoness is inscribed, namely the city's thin and fleeting grounds: The vapours tracing out the alphabet on the glass, an old newspaper and the walls of an abandoned house are all fading things, especially as the city continues to be constructed towards an uncertain future. The jubilation signalled in *Kami's* brief but significant 'writing' phase indicates a newfound friendship and with that a newfound future but one inscribed on fleeting and random space. This, therefore, is less a matter of fixing the symbolic so much as marking presence on constantly shifting grounds. On one hand, writing stabilises meaning very much in terms Eyers and Hook describe. But *Kami* renders this to show how the writing fades. The future is similarly not fixed and the boys must constantly reaffirm their bond amidst the temporary.



Figure 5.2. Tookoo and Din get caught for writing their names on an office window.

Contingency

The contingency of Tookoo and Din's friendship is underscored by how the city is not foregrounded despite their immersion in Kuala Lumpur's margins. Indeed, while we see the city, it is insofar as we grasp their status as a duo. Thus, the city's vastness is never shown as an immediate spread of terrain. The film's intimate feel is built up through a succession of small compositions of the boys in uneven spaces. The smallness not only speaks to their age and size as children. It also specifies their proximity as 'Two': they are frequently depicted physically close together and the most crucial moments of their friendship occur in cramped alleyways and abandoned rooms. Indeed, the city is shown as considerably restricted compared to rural Malaysia's open highways and wide greenery. This is a point made in movement, as rural openness serves as the backdrop of Din's journey, which eventually reveals the city via its dazzling night lights and busy roads. But even this is a quick glance. There is never, at any point, a skyline for an establishing shot. Nor does *Kami* reference the capitalist work regime allegorised in emergent factories and offices that tempt the mass migration of Malays to begin with.









Figure 5.3. The boys in tight frames to show 'the Two' amidst the uncertain terrain of rapid urbanisation.

Exploring the film's consciousness of their friendship as a form of coupling could be further explored through Badiou's account of love as the Two scene. It is "the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference" (Badiou, 2009, 17). By this, love no longer becomes a narcissistic cycle of one projecting on another. Rather it leads to a "decentred point of view other than that of my mere impulse to survive or re-affirm my own identity" (Badiou, 2009, 25). Badiou emphasizes the political quality of this decentering by describing it as an event: it has a disruptive quality for intervening in the immediate and established order of things. Love stays loyal to this interruption as the Two Scene endures through a process of constant reconstruction. Love, in this picture, is neither harmonizing nor ecstatic. Nor is it about self-discovery. For Badiou the Two scene forms "the panorama of the world through the prism of our difference" (Badiou, 2009, 26). But this prism is labored in duration: "love is a reinvention of life: to reinvent love is to reinvent that reinvention" (Badiou, 2009, 33). He describes the process as a "tenacious adventure" (Badiou, 2009, 32), always "contingent and disconcerting" (Badiou, 2009, 29).

It is important to stress that for Badiou love is not about perspectives. In one instance he describes the Two via depicting a scenario where he is watching "the peace of twilight over a mountain landscape" (Badiou, 2009, 25). Here he is clear in noting how the Two 'occurs' "not from the expression of her face, but from within the world" that is beyond the mere dependency of its singular parts (ibid.) The Two then is not to be understood as a comparison or convergence of separate standpoints but how a *new* world is being written as a result of seeing 'the world' that could only be conceived alongside someone else. This makes love an event, "namely as something that does not enter the immediate order of things," for the new world has the quality of being unanticipated that could only be revealed through difference (Badiou, 2009, 28). This emphasis on love as the profoundly transformative new emerging from the unexpected is to be contrasted with "the fusional notion of love," where Two is collapsed into one (Badiou, 2008, 181). Nor is it to be mistaken for the "oblative concept of love," where one experiences another (Ibid). Badiou also rejects "the superstructural or illusory conception of love," which is fundamentally skeptical for arguing that love just compensates for lack (Badiou, 2008, 182). By taking love beyond the realm of individuals, to the construction of a new sense of worldliness, love takes on a more expansive meaning to be imbued in the potentiality of all relations: "Longtime friends and perfect strangers are both equally suitable candidates to become subjects of love (for as a 'generic procedure' love is open to all!). What matters is that the Two recognize the sudden emergence of the amorous event, and that they courageously declare its existence" (De Chavez, 2016, 283).

It is crucial to note that Badiou grounds this formulation amidst an acute concern towards the hegemony of liberal atomism. In other words the Two is

important to him because the liberal notion of the enclosed individual, which he understands to be "liberal and libertarian," has already become hegemonic (Badiou, 2009, 10). Thus he criticises the ethos of self-preservation that leads to a "safety first" attitude where love is organized around comfort zones obsessed with minimizing the risks of going beyond the self (Badiou, 2009, 9). Narcissism and hedonism are effects of this outlook as pleasures are sought to pacify the anxieties around ensuring that the individual is sustained as such. For the self-preserving liberal, "the aim is to avoid any immediate challenge, any deep and genuine experience of the otherness from which love is woven" (Badiou, 2009, 8). The historical setting for Badiou's critique is clear throughout as this outlook is enabled by a capitalist infrastructure that constructs and encourages a self-preservation ethos. Consumerism, marriage, Coca-Cola, gated communities, online dating websites and the NATO bombing of Afghanistan are argued to be as much a part of this safety-first logic of minimizing all possible risks and excluding difference.

But while the temporary Two-ness in *Kami* also resists the individualism Badiou is concerned about, it differs in its temporal situation. The uncertainties marked by the city do not indicate the triumph of capitalism. Rather the temporary constantly puts it into question. One evening, while singing and skipping down an empty street, high on their newfound affirmation of friendship, Din gets hit by a car. Unconscious, he is rushed to the hospital, inaugurating what would become the beginning of an end to *Kami*. I have already explained early on that the film would stage an ambiguous end as its final scene, as the boys smile to joyously turn to each other for a slow motion embrace. But this must be appreciated while considering the distance the film stages in the

lead up. Indeed, the hospital would not only mark a separation between Din and Tookoo, it would see them both once again 'in transit.' Din's fate is now with the government, as I mentioned earlier, which in itself is a significant transition for the plot. Now, Tookoo is no longer in city chaos he has been accustomed to but in the organised, straight-lined paths of a sterilised state institution. We find him alone for the first time in the hospital waiting area with no one else around. The scene is composed in a long shot that sees him pondering Din's fate and their friendship's future. More importantly, his solitude takes him away from the affirmation of the Two that he was just celebrating with Din.



Figure 5.4. Tookoo now alone waiting for Din.

There is a brief silence that stands out between the time Din is ushered into the hospital and the time Tookoo is made to wait. We hear nothing but Tookoo's footsteps echoing in the unfamiliar and wide-open hallway he now finds himself in. The repeated thumps on the floor stand in chilling contrast to

the film's otherwise musical style. But more than that, it highlights Tookoo as 'one' again, as he now finds himself in the state he was in before Din entered his life. We see him slowly walking through the empty hallways of the hospital: quiet, clean, and wide-open in search of Din. In an obvious statement of his heaviness and uncertainty, we see Tookoo framed by the white of the curtains in the ward. His hesitation here is palpable, a stark contrast to his blasé attitude in the streets, leaning and touching anything around him without a care. He senses an impending loss. This is purposeful for our inquiry, and perhaps even the film's intention, that Din's extended ponderous isolation stands in stark contrast to the state of Twoness with Din that we had seen him in this entire time.



Figure 5.6.. The white hospital curtains and clean floors, as opposed to the chaos of the city, frames Tookoo as 'one'.

This is obviously temporary as we then see Tookoo in the ward, walking slowly again in search of Din. They meet for what is set up as a final moment of

their Twoness. Din says that the welfare services have put him up for adoption. Tookoo cannot identify with that future and is reluctant to partake in Din's measured enthusiasm about having a family again. They both say goodbye and this sees Tookoo staging another long walk. This would be portrayed as the fading of the Two. The white that lurks around the hospital scenes is featured more prominently as a central backdrop now. It reflects Tookoo's shadow, growing larger with every step he takes farther and farther away from Din. This is a contrast to the city space that had offered Din and Tookoo a shared world this entire time. The shadow on the wall now is a placeholder for Tookoo's loneliness. Tookoo walks closer to our view in a medium shot that also renders the shadow more visible to our eye level. Tookoo now pauses, turns back and hesitates but keeps walking anyway, evidently reluctant to let go. There is a thought process here torn between returning to Din's bed and getting over the loss. But it is at the height of this loss that Din makes an appearance out of the dark. He smiles, while on his crutches, and limps towards Tookoo. Tookoo smiles back. Excited, they now run to one another in slow motion. The ending does not change: *Pelangi Petang* plays in the background, hinting to an end, but the joy in their faces is obvious.



Figure 5.7.. Tookoo walking away from Din while his solitude is underlined by his shadow against the wall.

The Two as historical

Like Badiou, *Kami* opposes the Two against the one. Tookoo and Din's friendship sways between vibrant coupling and the threat of its dissolution. But this occurs in the uncertainties of modernisation. The Two is decentred by, and then emerges against, the pressures of homogenous time, leading to a narrative that sways between constant sadness and levity. The disparate times are not harmonised. Rather their differences are extended, through which a love based on difference could be forged. The unique trajectory this comparison brings out should be noted. The Two of *Kami* emerges not to resist atomistic enclosure. Rather it is an encounter of different temporalities that cannot be resolved. This in many ways extends similar themes that could be found in examples from previous chapters. The sagas of Kassim Selamat and Sabariah and Zack and

Azura were premised upon the historical incompatibilities between "man" and "woman" that Malay modernization underscores. Indeed their tragedy and melodrama in many ways indulge in the fundamental incompatibility of the divergent temporalities. *Kami*, however, shows a Two-ness of love with affirmative uncertainties revealed in the difference.

Sudirman's iconic status also suggests that *Kami* is making a statement regarding its era. The slow motion in the ending magnifies the fact that seventeen-year-old Tookoo is played by a 28-year-old Sudirman. One cannot watch *Kami*, in fact, without the consciousness of Sudirman's actual age, as we see him relishing his juvenile role. This is further underscored in how his role requires that he establish a friendship with the nine-year-old Din. In this sense, Sudirman offers more than just a performance. A certain temporal unevenness is embodied in his undulation between adulthood and the boy.[80] He comes of age in

[80] His image, situated amidst rich historical details of social change, conjures a certain difficulty of distinguishing boy from man. And this may have been something Sudirman wondered himself. A survey of his columns, written rather from 1983 – 1984, reveals the preponderance of childhood recollections. A lesson from his past would be referenced from what appears to be every single encounter, incident or new experience; observation on matters as wide ranging as badminton, natural disasters, courtship or Thaipusam (a Malaysian-Tamil event honoring Murugan, the Hindu God, who has a distinctly Malaysian-Tamil history of veneration) would be linked to some childhood memory or lesson. For example, in one entry he wrote about a conversation he overheard at a nearby newsstand where the owner was upset that kids would come over to browse his books for free. Sudirman then continued by talking about the virtues of reading, before soon describing, in detail, how his father, uncle and grandmother encouraged him to read. In another entry Sudirman criticized the Malay tendency to believe in ghosts and superstition. He begins by describing the different types of creatures that are usually talked

the heart of poverty when prosperity was anticipated, allegorises the developmental anxieties of post-colonial nation-building and with it the peculiarity of Sudirman's national legacy. Indeed, the film would not be so celebrated without the distinct experience of seeing someone of established national success hesitating to 'adult'. Earlier I mentioned how urbanization was allegorised in terms of 'youth,' in ways that allowed a newly independent nation a way to imagine its temporal situation. In Sudirman they had an icon to which they could project their anxieties regarding the future. It is fitting then that his legacy would be crystallised in a film in which youth is celebrated but not romanticised and where the promise of development was far from believable.

about before focusing on *kum-kum,* a ghoul that preys on young women. The essay then brings up how his mother used to tease him about his fear of ghosts before ending on two different notes: the importance of religion in determining proper faith from false belief and then a final paragraph wishing his young readers good luck for the upcoming exam season.

CHAPTER 6: THE RURAL STRIKES BACK: OMBAK RINDU'S TEMPORAL POLITICS

Overview

In this chapter, I argue that *Ombak Rindu* (Waves of Longing; 2011) is a film of temporal redress in two regards. First, it sees the rural engulf the city to be the space where culture is decided. This goes against the association between the city and futurity that has long been taken for granted in the Malay national imaginary. Second, it does so by feminising history, making the female characters (Izzah, Mila and Datuk Sufiah as the archetypal overbearing mother-in-law) mouthpieces of anxieties about the future. It is a redress more specifically in how the feminisation of time is a response to the hurt caused by Haris, the film's rapist misogynist. In this sense, I understand the film as an exercise in aesthetic time 'in which aesthetic engagement repairs or even reinvents temporalities jeopardised by the pace, priorities, and sheer novelty of modern life' (Matz, 2016, p. 217). 'Repair' speaks to the film's historical location in two ways. First, *Ombak Rindu* acquired its popularity and cult status at a time when Malay patriarchy has been more thoroughly institutionalised. Secondly, it was also popular at a time when Malay capital has stagnated, unable to grow and fulfil its developmental ambitions.

The effect shows Haris is neither here nor there' in two regards. First, he is seen trailing the film's women with no sense of his own direction or future. But this displacement is also assumed in the film's gratuitous display of rural landscape. *Ombak Rindu's* eventual emphasis on the rural and the feminine

places it in the periphery, 'outside' the national-developmental imaginary's focus on men and urbanisation, which I read to indicate anxiety about modernisation itself. But the depiction of the rural too is underlined by its own anxiety. This brings me to the second way in which the film is uneven: the rural landscape undulates between abundance and emptiness, indicating the space modernity has left behind but cannot overcome.

That *Ombak Rindu's* deployment of rural vastness stands in contrast to the dominant nation-building framework marks a certain developmental anxiety. This is particularly evident in how the vastness is deployed to engulf the urban where capital is shown to be most hegemonic. Indeed the overwhelming natural presence of village landscape would be shown to consume the city. That this occurs along the lines of the main character Izzah's migration expresses a counter-urban, spatio-temporal sensibility placing its mass appeal at the heart of insecurities over the chances of Malaysia securing a first-world future. Thus the rural-urban divide is made anxious—the rural at times stands alone or is linked and differentiated from the urban or at times all of the above—because it speaks to how Malay capital too has yet to fully colonise space. *Ombak Rindu* evokes the rural to stress unevenness. It is a space that cannot be homogenised in the terms determined by the state because the rural represents another time that is non-contemporaneous with the pace of national development.

This spatial politics will, in turn, bring me to the film's second political resonance, namely how it offers night into a Malay intimate public. Coined by Lauren Berlant (2008), an intimate public is formed via a collective affective struggle among women. While Berlant understands it to be woven into the general public, it is crucial to note how an intimate public speaks particularly to

the marginalisation of women caused by an *impersonal* public sphere. Intimate publics, in other words, are formed by the disenfranchised as a response to their lack of political recognition. Thus it "approximates the feeling of reciprocity otherwise absent in the world" (Berlant, 2008, p. 264). Here I am particularly drawn to how this intimate public is an active way of shaping history. Berlant describes it as "associated with a strange mix of the community's absolute historical locatedness and its restlessness, its rage for change and its passivity, its refusal of the terms of the conventional world" (Ibid). But the unevenness presumed in Ombak Rindu's critique of capital makes it about challenging the very gender of development. The way Ombak Rindu situates Malay-feminine struggles amidst rurality and the historical anxieties it evokes could be a basis to explain its mass popularity and how it unsettles the demographic that has benefitted the most from the national development agenda, namely Islamists and urban liberals.

Part 1: Intimate Public

Controversies

For this we should begin with how the film made national news for its disturbing plotline where Izzah, the film's heroine played by Maya Karin, is taken to the city from the village to be sold into prostitution and raped. Much worse, the story proceeds to show her eventually falling in love and, in earnest dedication, marrying her rapist Haris. He gets away with his crime while the couple sail into the sunset for a happily-ever-after ending. What is more disturbing is how the film owes its mass profitability to its female Malay fanbase.

[81] It is currently the seventh-highest-grossing local film ever produced, having raked in over ten million ringgit out of a budget of 1.5 million. It had a first day earning of RM 750,000, an impressive amount for local standards ("Hari Pertama OR Kutip RM 750,000.," 2011). *Ombak Rindu's* commercial achievements are further complemented with accolades. It won two awards at the 2012 *Anugerah Skrin* (for best actress and supporting actress) and two more at the Twenty-Fifth Malaysian Film Festival in 2013 (for best actress and theme song).[82] In addition to a successful musical adaptation in 2015, and an upcoming mini series slated for a 2020 release on Iflix, the film's impact is felt beyond the local mediascape: a wedding ballroom (Bluewave Hotel, 2016), a homestay villa (Booking.com, 2018), bakso noodles (Admin, 2019) , iced tea, *Nasi Dagang* (a northeast coast delicacy) (Zubir, 2018) and signature cookies by a special prisoner work program (Iwan Shu, 2019) are among the products that have been named after the film.[83] It is not surprising then that *Ombak Rindu's* mass popularity angered

[81] The moral polemics overshadowed allegations by Fauziah Ashari, the author of the novel the film is originally based on, that she was not fairly compensated given the film's eventual box-office success.

[82] This is remarkable given that the film was a business risk. Its style was based on popular television melodramas (Azizi and Muhammad Al Qayum 2011) Low on special effects with a small cast of eight characters in a simple, indeed common, storyline of forbidden love, *Ombak Rindu* did not offer the cinematic extravagance of other major films of the same year such as *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, *KL Gangster*, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* or *Senario the Movie: Ops Pocot*.

[83] What is notable about these examples is how they are from at least five years since the film was released. Consider another: In a 2019 interview, K-Deaf (KClique, 2019), a rapper with the Sabahan rap group K-Clique, mentioned that *Ombak Rindu* made him cry. K-Clique has nine

Islamists and liberals: How was it possible, they wondered in indignation, that such a film with a plot like *that* could do so well given Malaysia's status as a modern and Islamic country?[84]

I should stress before proceeding further that I do not by any means regard *Ombak Rindu* as a feminist film. The conclusion in no way signifies a 'victory' for women. The ending, while acknowledging the primacy of a feminine perspective broadly construed, all too easily lets rape off the hook. This, however, should not come at the expense of noticing what it might offer to the masses of Malay women who do enjoy it.[85] There is for one its melodramatic

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members, all of whom are men. Their songs are known for their hyper-masculine sound and gangster lyrics.

[84] *Ombak Rindu* stands out too as the rare commercially successful romantic film, a notable feat when we consider how the majority of the top thirty most profitable Malay movies ever made are horror, comedy, action or period pieces. Needless to say, the director, Osman Ali, is particularly proud of this achievement, hoping it could spur a comeback of romantic films for the big screen, which has been waning due to concerns of the genre's profitability ("Ombak Rindu mengganas.," 2011).

[85] The obvious answer is that Ombak Rindu instantiates the standard 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' template. This storyline usually features a poor orphan who finally unseats her evil mother figure. This tussle between good and evil, moreover, assumes an element of social climbing. It typically begins with a woman suffering hardship and proceeds to show her eventually winning against all odds. This is common to many fairy tales (stories about innocent persecuted heroines are at times referred to as Cinderella stories). Pretty Woman and Notting Hill are often cited as contemporary manifestations. For more see *Western Folklore* (1993) 52.1.

form. While typically associated as a feminine genre for its emotional excesses (aka 'women's weepies')—which run contrary to the subtlety more characteristic of 'high culture' films—melodrama typically constructs "feminine subject positions" to express "a modicum of power and pleasure within the given limits of patriarchal constraints on women" (Williams, 1991, p. 8). The ardent ways in which power and pleasure are performed to highlight those constraints indicates that melodramatic identification is not straightforward.

Thus, it is not as simple as "Malay women think like Izzah" just as it would go against a good scholarly conscience to assume that "urban liberals think like Carrie Bradshaw." Melodrama and the excessive emoting it demands is 'gross' because "identification seems to oscillate between powerlessness and power" (Williams, 1991, p. 8). There is much insight to gain, then, on how genders are negotiated in the mire of these performances: "Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problem they address; but genres thrive also in their ability to recast the nature of these problems" (Williams, 1991, p. 12). This contradiction between power and pleasure, or finding release where oppression is most articulated, speaks precisely to the contradiction that animates an intimate public. It ideologically structures what Berlant calls a cruel optimism that leaves its participants "attached to disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism in their personal and political lives" (Berlant, 2008, p. 2). This is a political and strategic consideration for it is only through propping up oppressive scenarios that the narratives, and calls for belonging and recognition, could also be

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Identifying this pattern in Ombak Rindu, however, is different from considering why it remains compelling.

delivered. Indeed this interplay of call and response, among those who otherwise have no voice to politically assert their grievances, is what the intimate public structures.

This dynamic of victimhood and reciprocity could be better apprehended when we see how an intimate public is fundamentally a realm of complaints. By 'complaint,' Berlant means something very specific: "They foreground witnessing and explaining women's disappointment in the tenuous relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy" (Berlant, 2008, p. 1-2). Why this is a complaint, rather than "protest" has much to do with how it in many ways reiterates its own structural premises: "The complaint genres of 'women's culture,' therefore, tend to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women's intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place" (Berlant, 2008, p. 2). So it goes without saying that the complaint is not necessarily progressive. It neither overturns the gender binary nor campaigns for a revolution in the domestic sphere. This however is just one side of the story. Complaints incite ways of observing and documenting how agency is expressed despite significant constraints: "This very general sense of confidence in the critical intelligence of affect, emotion, and good intention produces an orientation toward agency that is focused on ongoing adaptation, adjustment, improvisation, and developing wiles for surviving, thriving, and transcending the world as it presents itself" (Ibid).

What this amounts to then is seeing "a culture of 'true feeling' emerge that sanctifies suffering as a relay to universality in a way that includes women in the universal while attaching the universal more fully to a generally lived

experience" (Berlant, 2008, p. 12). This has the very powerful effect of blending the personal with the political, or more specifically, the private to a public that has otherwise thought of itself as neutral and indifferent to systemic plight. The complaints would have "women generate an affective and intimate public sphere that seeks to harness the power of emotion to change what is structural in the world." (Berlant, 2008, p. 12). In this context, understanding *Ombak Rindu* as a complaint as Berlant formulates it allows us to address concerns over Izzah's marriage to her rapist. It is not meant to be didactic, for one. But more than that it also becomes a way to capture contemporary Malay womanhood's paradox of marginalisation. There is an appeal to the intricacies of lived experience but the fact that this is rendered cinematically, with such popular resonance, also gives it a place in public memory or history, or in other words, the 'universal.' Hence, the oppression shown is a narrative device to evoke discontents that are pervading in the zeitgeist but have not met political redress. Therefore, without disagreeing with the protests against the film's disturbing conclusion—indeed, my inquiry takes much of it for granted—I will look into how it nonetheless is politically of value for its massive Malay female consumer base in potentially critical registers. Here, we find the film extending the underlying argument of my project, namely how Malay women occupy a future standpoint in ways that unsettle hegemonic masculinity.

This is relevant given how the masculinity *Ombak Rindu* depicts is situated at a time when the national-developmental project was at its most questionable. By this point, the New Economic Policy has formally ended and the Malay nationalist authoritarianism that reigned for twenty years is beginning to unravel, as the post-May 13 generation is becoming more vocal about their

democratic and multicultural aspirations. What is perhaps most damning is the increasing inequality among Malays as the government-driven initiatives, designed along collective-nationalistic lines, appear to have only widened the gulf between the rich and the poor. Where Chapters 1-4 saw masculinities modernised along the path of material prosperity, *Ombak Rindu* situates it at the point at which Malay development was proven to have reached an impasse, with the future it once promised thrown into question, if not doubted altogether. It is also noteworthy that the Malays were then led by the former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who at the time of writing, is on trial for corruption charges. Should he be found guilty he would be one of Southeast Asia's most corrupt leaders. What has accompanied talk about his legacy is how often he would be overshadowed by his wife, Rosmah Mansur. Her commanding aura over her husband inspired countless memes and jokes on about his secondary role in their partnership. Her lavish spending, glaring fashion sense and influence over the Prime Minister's Office's affairs was a common topic of everyday chatter among Malaysians. The subtext is clear. While the state and its many institutions remain masculine in representation and influence, a woman still leads the highest office simply by virtue of running her marriage.

Thus Haris' state of neither here nor there echoes the political sensibility surrounding the film's reception. The Malay man had arrived to historical impasse, unable to progress in accordance with the national vision that is shaped in his image. But this does not amount to a total dead end for it would show Malay women at the helm of temporality. The movie would constantly have Haris perplexed, perturbed and unable to decide for himself, as women author the different future options available before him amidst the film's consistent

depiction of lush rurality. This links to the broader theme of my study as his impasse is depicted as one of displacement, as we see Haris rendered immobile in comparison to the women's command of time and space. From here my argument will proceed in two parts. Part 2 explains the consistent link the film makes between time and femininity. Part 3 links this theme with how rural landscape is depicted as a space that modernity cannot overcome. We see migration to the city, but we also see the rural compelling constant returns to it. By now a feminine temporality is established.

Part 2: Malay Women, Time And Space

We have the most obvious articulation of future concerns in Datuk Sufiah, Haris's mother, who insists that he marries his fiancée, the overseas-educated, up-and-coming actress Mila, who is equally enthused by the prospect. The tension is such that he has to acquiesce to the two women's demands despite how 'deep down inside' he is actually in love with Izzah. Key is how this tension is performed. Haris is often shown stumped and passive before Mila and his mother's persistence, which more often than not revolves around marrying so that both families can strengthen their joint business venture. He does not protest and is willing to go along with it despite the misery it causes. Indeed his mother performs the castrating-prohibitive function throughout, to the point of ensuring that Haris is separated from Izzah as much as possible. Indeed, Haris' eventual union with Izzah is earned largely because it goes against the future his mother and Mila demand.

Izzah, meanwhile, is the naïve girl from the village who appears generally unmotivated. She is, however, fond of talking about the future as 'fate', which shapes a great deal of her monologue and outlook. She evokes fate when she suffers, is blessed and even when she is by herself thinking about the world. That the film ends to her favour shows a strategic positioning of 'fate'—as the eventual confirmation of the inevitable—which we should note is a temporal resolution. Fate takes us to the ending that could not have been otherwise. This constitutes a significant part of the film's spatial politics, which I will discuss in the next part.

For now, it is key to note how the dialogue assumes time is an open field with women at the helm, however much their respective attitudes differ. In fact the film's men are almost in all cases positioned behind time. Izzah's violent uncle, who forces her into prostitution, is never seen again afterwards. He was said to have passed away. There is Mail from the village, whose masculinity is playful but only serves the film as Izzah's loyal friend. He leaves the village for a chance at a better life in Kuala Lumpur but never quite arrives and soon returns anyway. Later in the films it is revealed that Pak Dollah, the family chauffeur, is actually Haris's biological father. He gave Haris away because Datuk Sufiah and her husband (who is not named) are barren and in desperate need of a child. Pak Dollah is not seen again after this ostensibly crucial moment that happens out of nowhere. He just hastily leaves the scene, which appears odd considering that this moment of truth has cleared the way for a reunion with his son. In the end, it suffices for the film to merely deploy him as a messenger of this revelation. Haris doesn't appear to care either, treating the shocking admission as less of a chance to bond with his real father than it is to finally disregard his overbearing mother

and be with Izzah. This is a crucial detail, as we shall see, for it shows that Haris does not end up with Izzah on his own efforts but is guided by circumstance. This serves the film's focus on fate. But it also shows that, like the rest of the men in the film, Haris does not really actualize desire himself but is led to Izzah by circumstances.

The Conversation Scene

The feminisation of temporality is captured in a crucial scene right before the conclusion of the film. With his mother now no longer a part of his life, Haris is he able to finally be with Izzah. He looks for her at the village and finds her. Their enthusiasm, however, is curt short. Mila catches on to him and appears at the point where they are about to rejoice. This brings the love triangle, which Haris had been concealing up to that point, to a head. The prospects of Haris and Izzah being together again are thrown into question. What is curious is how *Ombak Rindu* extends the suspense by leaving Haris without a say in the matter. Indeed, Mila and Izzah will determine the future of the relationship as he looks on from afar. But more than that the decision is eventually made purely upon contrasting their outlooks. Nothing is said of Haris himself, or the merits or demerits of their connections with him. Whether they choose him or not depends on what they take their relationship to the future to be. Where Mila, on one hand, is the vocal English-speaking cosmopolitan urbanite, affluent and decorated with jewellery, Izzah, on the other, is the poor village girl in her demure posture. She is often silent, tentative, looking down or to her side but never directly.

The conversation begins via a contrast in values when Izzah suggests, as a form of appeasement, for them to 'share' Haris in a polygamous marriage. She sees this as a form of *pasrah*, or acceptance of fate. Note that it is not clear at this point if this is also what Haris wants. One would not assume so as it is stated earlier that he no longer loves Mila. In any case, Mila rejects Izzah's proposal and asserts that there can be no 'acceptance' as long as the heart refuses. In perhaps the most intellectual moment of the film, Mila distinguishes *redha* (acceptance) from *pasrah* (resignation). She stresses that she will not be party to a polygamous marriage and opts for a divorce instead, insisting that she will do everything in her power to forget Haris forever. In what would become a peculiar affirmation of liberal agency in a movie that is otherwise conservative, Mila walks away while proclaiming that she no longer wants to have anything to do with Izzah or Haris. True to their personas from the start, Izzah's contrast with Mila is one between passivity and agency. Izzah stresses her belief in fate. Mila insists on her own path.





Figure 6.1. Mila and Izzah compare their outlooks on the future while Haris waits and looks on from afar.

The evident event here is that Izzah 'wins' without recourse to liberal agency, indicating the strategic evocation of fate and passivity. But what is even more crucial to note here is how Haris is left entirely out of this discussion. This reiterates the largely secondary standpoint he has been assuming in the film. Earlier, I explained how he is beholden to Mila and Datuk Sufiah's marriage demands where his future was, in effect, left in their hands. This also sees him silent and stumped before their often more domineering presence. There is a scene where he spells out how he has no feelings for Mila and, thus, should not be forced to marry her. Mila doesn't care and insists that they should marry because she loves him. The film spends considerable time showing him in utter misery afterwards, in montages where he stares into space and pines for Izzah while in Mila's proximity. These instances, where Mila and Datuk Sufiah's constant speech stands out in contrast to Haris's stumped silences, clearly show the women of the dynamic to be the agents while he resigns himself to merely be dragged into their decisions. But the sense that his time is out of joint is also

indicated by how he can be seen limping with a walking stick in the latter parts of the film. This is a result of an earlier car chase when Mila angrily leaves Haris after walking into him consoling his friend Wafiah in close proximity. Haris goes after Mila, trying to explain the misunderstanding before swerving into a ditch and ending up in the hospital. Haris then, in ways unbecoming of his otherwise aggressive manly swagger, is always trailing events that are decided by the women around him. The leading man is outside temporal thinking and this does not change even in the end. Mila's exit finally clears his path to be with Izzah, but not without first showing him to be dependent on women's time.

Temporal Anxieties

The film's conclusion resonates with Izzah's monologue about fate, the sense of what will be will be. Her resignation to 'come what may' is, more disturbingly, rewarded by a marriage with Haris. But it is curious that this take on fate also requires Mila's perspective as a foil. The scene begins with Mila and Izzah at the centre of the frame, depicted as equals in conversation. Indeed, as it proceeds one notices, more and more, that Mila is coloured as out of place: she enters the lush village's many shades of green with her big white BMW, with a dark-tinted windscreen, black pants and big metallic bangles. Her blue top stands in contrast to the lush bright green background. Mila, to be clear, is not vilified. In fact, she stands out as the protagonist here, the character with the clear motivation and challenge. The dialogue, for one, is steered by her questions and assertions. The pacing also reveals she is the scene's focal point. She reasons with deliberation, enunciating each word as if to ensure that Izzah understands

her. Mila even shows concern towards Izzah, stressing how she would only be hurt if Izzah does not decide for herself. This highlights their starkly differing worldviews.

It is also a contrast with the Mila from before, whose domineering presence is defined by how she does not need to reason or explain herself. Mila's agency is highlighted with a shot that sees her take a slow walk to Haris where she hands him her ring while demanding a divorce and to be left alone. He receives the ring and agrees, in typical perplexed silence while he witnesses his future being decided for him. It is Izzah's turn now to watch from a short distance behind them, further confirming that this is in fact meant to be Mila's moment. Mila leaves Izzah and Haris alone to chart their own future together, and Izzah is poised to take over as she is framed in between Mila and Haris's exchange the entire time. They get their happy-ever-after ending as Mila also gets to assert her own autonomy. Everyone 'wins'.



Figure6.2.. Mila gets her moment in the film as she walks to Haris to leave him as Izzah looks on.

Temporality and the Nation

We would be more able to appreciate the significance of women embodying time if we consider how the association between temporality and masculinity is crucial for the logic of the modern nation state. As Benedict Anderson (2006) describes, nationalism is justified as a break from the past upon a distinct mode of 'homogenous, empty time.' Whereas pre-modern notions of time often presumed purpose (a beginning, an ending, one's current location in that trajectory and the reasons why) modern time was open ended. Its only content is speed shaped by the rhythm of productivity. This would also allegorise masculinity as the incarnation of rationality, industry and force—the qualities needed for this sense of an open-ended future to take hold. Man would become "the progressive agent of national modernity (forward thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity" (McClintock, 1993, p. 66).

'Masculine' and 'feminine' then would be more entrenched from here on out in terms of 'men's' superiority over women' via fixed roles and expectations, differentiating an order of bodies and desires not for difference's sake but such that progress could be organised and realised. As Anne McClintock puts it, "Nationalism's anomalous relation to *time* is thus managed as a natural relation to *gender*"(1993, p. 66).[86] Nowhere would this order of separation be more

[86] This is a departure from how the Middle Ages held a view of the body that was more 'sensory' and 'continuously in flux' (Blackman, 2008, p. 51). It was 'more leaky and permeable' (Blackman, 2008, p. 51) then. The obsession with genitalia and also racial types occurred precisely out of this outlook but it also sustained modern individuality as the embodiment of rational self-ownership

'naturalised' than the family. The inevitable violence entailed in nation-building is likened to childbirth: painful but redemptive as it anticipates arriving at Enlightenment. Thus, it is not unusual that the nation would often be referred to in parental terms, as motherland or fatherland or both. That the nation is also symbolized as one big 'family' offers the national narrative a romantic veil, under which real tensions are made to appear as mere bumps in an otherwise natural path through time towards civilisation. But beyond being a relatable way of describing a temporal ideal, the family has also informed nationalist attitudes towards embodiment. The nuclear family's compatibility with capitalism is based on how it internalises discipline while ensuring a gendered division of labour that would place individuals where they are most adaptable to the productive demands of the modern clock. Here men would be thrust into the process of building a modern nation and its attending innovations whereas women are trailed behind, often relegated to domestic work with the household ensuring that masculinity would be associated with dynamic progress and femininity with the lumbering work of care.

The picture of uneven development *Ombak Rindu* takes for granted, however, is a different one. Haris is unable to empty time. Instead, as I've shown above, he is beholden to the temporal thinking delivered through the conversation scene by the film's leading women. He is at the centre of attention but only in terms of his existence between two articulations of time that are not his own. But this, to be sure, is less about him being submerged in women's time

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wherein sameness and difference are statements of contrasting realities rather than variations of a similar theme.

than it is about how women position temporal anxiety. Note how the conversation flows. On one hand, it explicitly brings out the cultural codes that are latent in the love triangle (Mila is urban liberal while Izzah is passive and traditional). These are not merely coincidental but signify differing orientations toward the future. Mila makes way for Izzah to be with Haris but this is shown in deliberate slowness (another common reference to rurality) accompanied by sentimental violins playing in the background. On the other hand, the uneasiness of this scene brings us face-to-face with an impasse between two compelling and yet intertwined narratives of womanhood. Finally, it is Izzah's passiveness, as opposed to Mila's assertive posture, that is most effective.

Haris's emasculation is also underscored by how the scene ends, as Mila exits to a wide and lush empty rural landscape. This is an obvious statement about the film's gender politics. For Doreen Massey, "The hegemonic spaces and places which we face today are not only products of forms of economic organisation but reflect back at us also—and in the process reinforce—other characteristics of social relations, among them those of gender" (2013, p. 183). This has masculinity as the phallic standpoint that sees space in abstract terms as territory to conquer. But Haris's look is far more passive in relation to space. Herein we see Haris's displacement: mute before two women's recoding of time, surrounded by village landscape in its natural fullness. The magnitude of the space is captured in how the viewer sees it from a perspective located far behind the bushes, rather than an elevated master view. The couple is also framed in an unoccupied, temporary empty shelter (where farmers rest). The landscape is also 'alive' as we never see the characters fully as they are composed behind or among grass or other greenery, however subtly. Not only is Haris behind time; he

is also taken over by space. Just as Haris is clearly beholden to the temporalities articulated by the women, so too is he shown diminished amidst the terrain around him. This is a significant statement, given, as my project has shown, the consistent association of masculinity with the city that pervades throughout Malay cinema.



Figure6.3.. Mila's exit scene. Haris and Izzah are clearly framed within the hut as one unit as Mila drives off, her car only faintly visible behind the bushes.

Part 2: Landscapes of Displacement

Picturing the Rural

It is crucial to note the sense of being 'neither here nor there' that is latent in this scene. On one hand, the closing rural landscape clearly marks a 'victory' for Izzah: Haris, the prized object of all three of the film's main women, is now in her territory. Mila, having established her choice, also exits via an extreme long shot that recedes to diminish her stature. This is shown via a wide-angle shot that sees Haris and Izzah holding one another, positioned within the square

outlined by the wooden frame of the hut. We see them from afar with Mila's white BMW visible but only if one looks hard enough. But this moment of triumph is also underlined by a certain anxiety, given how the film is clear that the rural's significance remains undetermined. On one hand, Izzah, her uncle and Mail all demonstrate at one time or another that the village is a place to leave. This is emphasised by how Mila too returns to her 'rightful place' in the city because there is another world 'for the taking' that awaits the independent, aspirational and privileged young urban liberal woman. But on the other hand all the film's characters, with the exception of Wafiah, have to come to the rural to find the truth of their situation. Time, then, is clearly determined in the rural. The rural remains compelling but because it literally is unsettling, that is to say, a space that is left 'behind' but also cannot be ignored.

Thus, the film favours Izzah at the cost of depicting the rural as both empty and abundant. It is empty in relation to the city, which the film repeatedly speaks of as a place to leave the village for work. Moreover, Izzah would also be shown returning to the village in frequent sadness, owing to how it constantly reminds her of her poor and miserable backstory. But the rural is also abundant for hosting a multitude of revelations. This is resonated in its rich landscape and expansive greenery, shown through constant evocations of lush natural panoramas. *Ombak Rindu*'s deployment of rural anxiety, the sense that it is home and not-home at the same time, of loss but also love, will be explored through considering the politics of visualising the rural. *Ombak Rindu* would concur with familiar tropes of the rural as a space defined primarily as other to the urban. But it would also do more by showing how it anchors modernity. We shall consider both in turn.

The Politics of Panorama

Landscape actually marks a crucial aspect of Fredric Jameson's notion of allegory: "Allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall" (1995, p. 5). For Jameson, film has an advantage by affording an incision into the scale landscape aims to capture, covering 'everything' from the minute to the enlarged. But why space has to be represented in the first place is in effect a recognition of and response to the spatial dislocation capital causes. Thus, it is imaginary in how it captures a fraction of modernity's broader fragmentations. As Jonathan Crary explains, "A structure that seems magically to overcome the fragmentation of experience in fact introduces partiality and incompleteness as constitutive elements of visual experience" (2006, p. 21). Thus, while the panorama landscape offers a certain 'magisterial gaze', the 'range' it offers actually attests to an anxiety about the impossibility of representation, a limited grasping of totality insofar as is visually allowed. In the gap between the fullness and limitation rural panorama negotiates lies its underlying historical unevenness.

We can begin exploring this by noting how rural fullness is often represented explicitly against the modern. This is particularly the case for heritage films, as they turn to the rural to envision a lost past or a more authentic identity or time where certain notions of land and their related signifiers are idealised. Aesthetically, "The large and impressive is prioritised" as "the beautiful is chosen over the ugly, the pleasure of landscape over the trials and challenges

of working the land" (Cardwell, 2006, p. 26). Thus, the vastness connoted in rural landscape is a statement of a distinct 'world' rather than a mere contextual detail. Rural scale, however, encounters a paradox in its frequent associations with emptiness. This is obvious in how clear and open land are often common tropes for the rural. However implicitly, 'openness', achieves its effects by being devoid of inhabitants. The spaces of heritage "presented in landscapes [are] almost always empty of people. There are few or no depictions of the characters' relationship with the land, no sense of what difficulties and benefits that relationship might entail" (Cardwell, 2006, p. 26).

Similarly, *Ombak Rindu* would deploy the wide pan and deep focus typical of the genre to provide the spectator with a "magisterial gaze" (Fowler & Helfield, 2006, p. 8). But while the land rolls out widely and openly it is neither worked nor grappled with. Thus one can assume that there is a peasantry economy, insofar as there are clearly wide-open paddy fields waiting to be reaped. But insofar as they are there for viewing rather than worked the question of labour is raised. Indeed, for a 'rural film', it lacks any indication of the pastoral or an active relationship with the land. This suggests the persistence of rurality despite the absence of a peasantry economy. Indeed the fact that one needs to leave the village for work indicates the uneven circumstance that sees a rural populace that is subject to capital living in a space that is not. The film narrates the absence of employment in the village in tragic terms. This was what led Izzah to be sold to prostitution. But insofar as rural space itself thrives in the film it boasts a land that is not colonised by capitalism.

Beauty and emptiness, then, are linked to make a historical statement: "Awareness of the landscape as not only spectacularly beautiful but as signifier

of a venerable past is an essential theme" (James, 2006, p. 198). This could mean anything from "a preindustrial/premodern or more recently a postcolonial world" to "an appreciation of natural beauty" to "the land of the ancestors; fear of the untamed and, if unfamiliar, the unknown; and respect for the grandeur of the land" (Aitken, 2006, p. 75). At times, it would suffice to simply speak of it as "the open and uncontrollable spaces that lay outside" (Woods, 2011, p. 3). Insofar as the rural was where Izah came from it stands out as the past she eventually returned to. But Ombak Rindu's evocations of the rural as the pre-industrial also project a space that capital cannot overcome.

The issue then is not just that 'emptiness' would stand for a rural space that is 'idyllic', 'undeveloped', or 'tranquil'. Rather, rural emptiness and beauty is actually less about the rural than it is about where capitalism meets its limits. This is what makes visualising the rural—where fantasies of modernity and its 'other space' have to be connected—anxious. For example, Michael Woods observed that "the media can help to reproduce discourses of rurality as much through silence as through active representation" (2011, p. 35). For Jonathan Rigg, "The urban is present in rural spaces through, paradoxically, absence—namely, the absence of people" (2013, p. 21). 'Countryside openness' then is a convenient imaginative move because it is the diametric opposite of the overwhelming force of modernity. The spectacle of urbanisation, industry and commerce animate narratives of progress and their challenges. Indeed, the rural is more of a challenge to depict owing to the longstanding association between cinema and the urban: "On screen, the city sparkles in the light. Traffic, people, city life all move to the rhythm of the twenty-four-frames-per-second beat, as if

celluloid is providing the heart for the metropolitan corpus" (Fowler & Helfield, 2006, p. 1).

That *Ombak Rindu* constantly reminds its audience of its rural setting, with long takes and panoramic shots of clear green and open land in abundance, should also be understood as an attempt to visualise capitalism's 'other'. The challenge of objectifying the rural, where we can begin to trace its representational anxieties, requires that it be seen as both outside and inside history. It is outside as peripheral to the urban, where the future is materialised. But it is also 'inside' as a place that is a part of the history that makes 'the urban'. In other words, landscapes of rural emptiness and their opposite, urban abundance, are in many ways two sides of the same coin. They "are inextricably linked as points of tension rather than points of contrast" (Fowler & Helfield, 2006, p. 3). The rural, then, is not just the space that is peripheral to capitalism. The undulation between emptiness and fullness that underpins lush panoramic accounts of the rural show it to be neither here nor there: as the territory the logic of capital cannot fully make sense of.

The Rural in *Ombak Rindu*

But this undulation of abundance and emptiness would also echo throughout *Ombak Rindu* as a place that cannot be left behind. The frequent departures from the countryside are depicted by equally frequent returns. This becomes all the more apparent when we keep in mind the film's small cast of eight. Five of them (Haris, Izzah, Mail, Izzah's uncle and Mila) head to the village from the city. That the journeys are made to begin with is curious, given, how the film already features an overall countryside motif as I described. In a basic sense,

this constant moving to and from the village reflects the rural-urban divide that, as we have seen in Chapters 3 and 4, is a common trope in narratives of Malay modernity. But what sets *Ombak Rindu* apart is how the rural determines the temporality of movement via its gravitational urgency. Thus, it is not just that the rural is repetitiously revisited, the revisits also gradually blur the film's sense of space. For example, the rural-urban divide is presumed in how the city is clearly shown as peripheral to the village, depicted in the first place as occasioning ceremonious farewells at the train station. Landscape would be showcased to feature the big blue train cab moving on a long train track to signify the scale and distance of Izzah's migration. But the overall sense of journeying would eventually be forgotten altogether, as Haris and Mila would later on be seen zipping to and from the village instantly in their cars.

The speed with which the divide is traversed could be narrated, among other things, via the film's inconsistent use of vehicles. After the train, Izzah and Mail head to the city in a taxi indicating a less demanding journey. The variegated temporality of migration attests to a certain dogged urgency in the village. It is depicted as 'far away' and yet compelling, empty but never abandoned, for being the place of repeated rediscovery. By constantly bringing urban liberals to the village, *Ombak Rindu* depicts the aspirational class of Malay modernity only to drag it into the fold of a rural imagination. Here, we find less of a rural-urban divide than development embedded in a countryside that haunts Malay capitalism's most affluent and cosmopolitan agents. The film constantly makes its urban aspirational Malays see the limits of capitalism by taking them to territories it has not overtaken.

The sense that the rural is inescapable however is less fantastical than it might seem, since there is now less of a divide between rural and urban. On one hand, the discourse of the rural echoes much of how the *kampung* (the Malay term for all things rural) is perceived as peripheral to modernity: "In this narrative the rural *kampung* is always marginal to and outside the urban rather than part of the urban society" (Thompson, 2004, p. 2358). Thus, a great deal of national discourse, attesting to the power of the urban imaginary, speaks of the *kampung* as 'backward' or 'left behind'. But the unevenness of Malay development is such that the rural has only expanded into more complex forms. This links the Malay case to the concrete particularity of the Southeast Asian circumstance, namely that the forty years of development, rather than diminishing the rural, has only seen it persist to complicate modernisation. As migration distributes identities across different terrains, so too did rural identity dissolve to become more fluid. It evolved to attest to a constant state of coming and going rather than settlement per se: "People move but their registration stays put; livelihoods are re-spatialised but their identity may often remain village-centred and rural–based" (Rigg, 2013, p. 15).[87] Even more infrequent cases of "rural-returning" extend "over several years but with return (especially

[87] Eric Thompson's (2004) survey of rural labour shows how much of its workforce is connected to industrial occupations in nearby towns. Indeed, rural Malaysia stopped being agrarian as early as 1987 as the national economy centred on trade, services and manufacturing. Correlating with this are infrastructural improvements such as water, electricity, Internet access and education in the rural peninsula expanded in step with the government's drive to transform the country into a fully developed nation.

for women migrants) for child raising; to long-term absence where return is often assumed but not certain" (Rigg, 2016, p. 137).

Thus where an urban capitalist future is often colouring the national-state imaginary, lived experience would constantly point to the unevenness in the Malaysian-capitalist spatial order. Eric Thompson turns to Manuel Castell's notion of 'spaces of flows' to describe Southeast Asian rurality for this reason. It is a dynamism that reflects a "complex networked society, rather than a 'rural-urban continuum'" (Thompson, Bunnell, & Pathasarathy, 2012, p. 3). It reflects a "multidimensional complexity of socio-spatial relationships" (Thompson et al., 2012, p. 3). Thus 'the rural' is not 'either independent of wider processes (state driven or otherwise) or alternatively as dependent on them, but instead nested within a shifting web of mutual dependencies and interdependencies" (Rigg, 2013, p. 22). The visual implication of this is often presumed when, for example, Jonathan Rigg says that modernity means that "the village has become *blurred*, socially, economically and geographically" (2013, p. 15; emphasis added). The rural then is not a new frontier to take over but a spatiality that persists despite the official hegemony of a future urban social imaginary. Indeed this persistence has made rurality the placeholder for the anxieties of development as a whole. *Kampung* imagery is typically rendered as "simultaneously nostalgic and derogatory" for marking "other narratives of the histories and social lives" that do not fit the national drive to modernise (Thompson, 2004, p. 2373). The constant coming and going to and from the rural in *Ombak Rindu* in many ways speaks to this inability to move on from the rural.

Maznah Mohamed's (2013) study of post-NEP Jeli, a small town in the Islamist-governed Northern state of Kelantan, reflects how constant 'boundary

crossings' across rural and urban territories are a constant factor of instability and depression. On one hand, Kelantan has gained from modern infrastructure (so much so that Maznah even hesitates to label it rural). This echoes Rigg and Thompson's conclusions above regarding the distinct spatial interconnections the rural signifies now. But Jeli is also now home to two generations of demoralised workers who return after failing to make it in the city (mainly Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and Singapore but also nearby Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu). Many find employment but only temporarily. They often do not have the resources to sustain an extensive job search. Moreover, they return with skills that are not useful or needed for small-town living. Indeed, returning to the village is often a mark of resignation or disappointment with the promises of urban prosperity and opportunities. But insofar as this 'rurality' constitutes a big part of Malaysian geography, 'returning' remains a focal point of how Malay history is made. This situates the rural as a 'dead end' in ways *Ombak Rindu* takes for granted. But it also reveals the rural to be where culture is made insofar as it is a crucial space that the urban is linked to and in fact dependent on. History is written in constant migration but is ultimately negotiated in the rural amidst cynicism towards the future promised in cities.

The Rural Strikes Back

The inability to overcome the rural is also expressed in *Ombak Rindu* via how its landscape would eventually expand to consume the city. Indeed, for all of Kuala Lumpur's significance to the plot, its visual obscurity is curious. For example, Izzah's 'evil' uncle explicitly says that she would be taken there for 'work', which marks the fateful decision that links Haris and Izzah together. But

nothing further of the city is shown other than to depict the alienation and trauma Izzah encounters. Later, Izzah's friend Mail also asks her to take him there for opportunities although they stop short of arriving to the city proper and end up at Izzah's adopted parents' home. Mail's truncated trajectory curiously reflects his playfully infantile masculinity, as I described above, echoing a common theme I pointed out in Chapters 1 and 2, which sees men all too frequently fall short in adapting to modernity. But *Ombak Rindu* shows how the men who 'have it' are also displaced. Haris's association with urban masculinity is also diminished as we find out that his office is not based in the city after all. In a later scene, he speaks of how a meeting that was scheduled in Kuala Lumpur had to be cancelled. The non-urban character of Haris's office, where he is seen in his element as corporate-heir, is reflected in its location amidst a tea plantation. This, extending the green of Izzah's village scenery, is depicted as vast rolling hills rather than a modern corporate headquarters. Other than these instances, we see nothing else of 'the city'. Kuala Lumpur, while often referenced and mentioned, is barely seen but this is because 'the rural' stands out in its place. Thus, the *empty* rural landscapes *Ombak Rindu* begins with have a curious quality of active expansion, where its usual tropes of open and visually arresting vistas propel the film to eventually take over the supposed urban corporate world.

The presentation of rural landscape with generous colours—a spread of clear bright yellowish green, underscored by silence—is also deliberate in how it would stand in contrast to the chaotic darkness that greets Izzah on first arriving in Kuala Lumpur. The beginning of the film sees her uncle immediately taking her to a noisy nightclub in her *baju kurung* and Muslim headscarf, only to leave

her in the middle of a cramped and loud dance floor to be taken by whom we soon find out are her traffickers. Scared, she runs out of the club, calling for her uncle before tripping and falling on to the rainy-puddled street, framed in between two rays of white light beaming from a car that nearly hits her (a car we soon learn is Haris's). Indeed, if the film does have a 'villain' (a villain construed in its own terms rather than liberal morality) it would be urban narrowness framed via low shots, close-ups and two shots within small spatial confines. Izzah's immediate subjugation in the city is presented as a struggle within tight confines and this shapes her first encounter with Haris. This is seen not only in the fact that she is confined to the home for much of her marriage, but that Haris too would express his power by suffocating her: In a key scene, we see Izzah, in meek-servant mode, taking off Haris's shoes in a tight frame that sees him seated on the sofa while she is kneeling, once again, on the floor. He decides to toy with her, removing her *telekung* (Malay prayer outfit for women) and then grabbing and pinning Izzah against the couch.

The spatial contrast with Mila should be evident by now.[88] Where Mila is a well-known, overseas-educated actress-celebrity, Izzah remains, at least until the

[88] This spatial contrast bears very close resemblance to Jameson's (1986) spatial comparison of first and third world cultural products. Where "history" has been largely elided in the first world, he argues that the third world texts are still thinking historically. Space would be the best measure for this difference, as the latter would ostensibly portray spatial thinking in more acute and actively detailed ways. The key issue I take here is how he would understand this difference to be a statement of the geopolitical experience of the unconscious. He argues that the Third World has no unconscious because politics is played out more openly in historical imagination: "third-world national allegories are conscious and overt: they imply a radically different and

latter parts of the film, the hidden thing. She is no longer 'locked up' when Haris falls in love with her but even then she remains a secret long after Haris and Mila's marriage. This leaves the obvious question unanswered, laying bare the historical unevenness the film grapples with: If the rural is clearly hopeless and impoverished and the city cannot be envisioned then what are we to make of the modern? A film that begins with a consciousness of a rural-urban divide ends with an enlarged survey of the rural's variegations to displace the urban, and consequently modernity altogether. This resonates with the spatial basis of Jamesonian national allegory. Where history has been internalised into discrete atomistic spaces, the third world refuses this constriction to ensure that history unfolds within a broader spatial imaginary. Insofar as the rural in *Ombak Rindu* offers critical distance to question urbanization, it too deploys the dynamic between closed and open spaces that Jameson believes is telling of how historical thinking occurs where modernization is not yet resolved.

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objective relationship of politics to libidinal dynamics" (Jameson, 1986, 80). Based on my study, particularly this chapter, the struggle is not between an unconscious libidinal politics in the West against the East's conscious historical contention but rather who draws the terms of the symbolic order, that is to say, the standpoint with which the terms of desire and its object are shaped.



Figure 6.4.. Izzah's attempt to escape her captors leads her to a dark empty road, the opposite of the bright lush green where she came from.

Part 3: Landscapes of Anxiety

The Other Side of Capital

Ombak Rindu's exaggerated rural imaginary expands to reveal a modernity that is written in the rural. But a deeper understanding of the anxieties therein requires that we move from considering how rural landscape is used to what it actually shows. Like the ending to the conversation scene I discussed in Part 2, the film's overall use of countryside scenery depicts the rural as both empty *and* full, revealing a landscape that weaves abundance with poverty. This interplay extends to the contradictions that inform the film's understanding of the rural: It is abandoned *but* retains its force by being where culture, in the final instance, is being negotiated. Not only is it the point of constant return, dictating the terms of migration, it also pervades the urban.

But it is also crucial to note how this imaginary points to a curious presumption about power, namely in how it also underscores its absence. For Lisa R. Pruitt, rural 'emptiness' (what she calls "lack of materiality") means that

"its character as such is associated with a power vacuum of sorts," making it a "sparsely populated space" that is "arguably lacking in formal ordering because it is nearly always marked by an absence (relative speaking) of state actors" (2014, p. 197). Rural space's critical potency is built qua "stretches of undeveloped, wild or natural territory' that 'separates rural people from legal actors" (Pruitt, 2014, p. 198). Thus, while the viewer is shown stereotypical rural tranquility, its extension into urban spaces renders a lacking modernity, one that is clearly encountered in terms of what it does not have rather than what it does. The open green is visually arresting but also in ways that indicate the absence of infrastructure and the dialectic of destruction and construction that define the dynamism and spontaneity of modernisation. The "suppression of distance" that is so definitive of capitalist modernity's permutations "and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places" does not make sense in the modernity sketched by *Ombak Rindu* where only open greenery is most evident and celebrated (Jameson, 1991, p. 413).

The landscape appears to only expand. *Ombak Rindu* ends with Haris tethered to Izzah in a servile posture as he asks her what he could do to fulfil her command. But this takes place on a yacht by a beach, indicating another place beyond even the rural. We saw them by a beach earlier in the film to show 'waves' and the persistence they symbolise. But now we see a wider spread of water. The subtexts to this otherwise happy ending are worth noting, given our interest in the film's social cues. We are taken even farther away from the city. Village poverty, which constitutes a significant part of at least half of the cast's intention to head for the city, is kept unresolved and unaddressed. Haris and Izzah are both clearly without a home, which is all the more curious given how

they struggle with displacement throughout the film. The ending extends the film's preoccupation to ensure its characters are often moving. The historical anxieties the film portrays, then, are sustained even as Haris and Izzah are finally 'cleared' to be together. We witness this from an aerial position to, again, be greeted by beautiful scenery.

This much is implied in how Izzah is linked to the landscape. It isn't enough that she is profiled as the girl from the village. Blending her into the landscape makes the point about rural-ness. The film opens with her walking alone across an empty, rocky beach, looking forlorn to the horizon, turning to a loose kite flying in the wind before we see her lying on her stomach, arched above a rock amidst crashing waves while looking sad. Her monologue would accompany this scenery as it describes the wind and ocean decorating her atmosphere. The countryside, where the film is mostly set, would serve as a placeholder for Izzah's beauty and consequently personification of feminine purity, docility and innocence. This use of landscape, furthermore, would lead us to one of the film's more obvious problems. Feminist criticism has long pointed out how landscape has been feminised either as a metaphor or visual object. This attests to the binary association of woman and nature as passive, with man as active and dominant and thus 'above' nature as such that it could manipulate and conquer it or her. Heightened during the age of empire, where visualisation became intricately linked with colonisation, rural landscape is often imagined or spoken of in terms of conquest and taming, inspiring patriarchal metaphors of land as seductive or "as temptress, inviting penetration" (Woods, 2011, p. 19). Gillian Rose (2013) expands this insight to point out how woman and land would be conflated as passive objects for the masculine gaze of property and progress.

This much is presumed especially given how Haris eventually marries Izzah after she refuses to heed Mila's warnings.

But we should note at the same time that this fixity speaks to anxieties of mobility. For the landscapes show her constant coming and going from the rural and the urban. The film emphasises her virtues upon a return to the village because she has survived the twists and turns of history. Thus, Izzah represents 'fate', while positioned amidst big rocks that remain intact against crashing waves. This allows the film to symbolise her 'womanhood' as object. But this object position is not fixed as the film also takes her back and forth from the village and its uncertainties. This, however, is not an impulse unique to the film. The fact that we see purity salvaged against history actually speaks to a longer-standing anxiety regarding the meaning of modern womanhood. This is a crucial moment where the film makes a statement of historicity, marking a transition between past and present. Relevant here is what Jonathan Rigg (2015) labelled the "feminisation of migration," whereby the uncertainties of women's participation in urban-rural migration saw the discourse of modernisation became increasingly feminised and spoken of alongside concerns over moral corruption. This generated fears that women were becoming unmoored from the community towards a more individualistic identity.

Rigg's (2013) overview of urbanisation in Southeast Asia as boundary-crossing notes the persistence of the inter-generational concerns produced by the process. Migration traversed spatial boundaries while also rearranging gender relations in drastic ways: "Young, unmarried women can do things that their mothers could not. They can move outside the village, unaccompanied; they can work in modern sectors of the economy; and they can build lives partly—

although rarely entirely—separate and separated from their natal households" (Rigg, 2013, p. 11).[89] *Ombak Rindu,* speaking to the anxieties of its mass audience, shows in fact the opposite. It upholds 'feminine virtues' but not without, at the same time, the real historical uncertainties that occasion the need for such an imaginary to be 'grounded' to begin with.

[89] This came at the price of insecurities. Attaining social mobility, through work in the city, ran against the need to maintain family and traditional order. This underlined anxieties around the shape of power to come in relation to male control of the Malay woman: 'In effect the employment status of working daughters [has] repercussions: [it] has loosened many [daughters] from father-brother control, connecting them instead to male power institutionalised in bureaucratic systems external to the *keluarga* [family household]' (Ong, 2010, p. 108). Aihwa Ong (2010) described how nationwide moral panics around women's sexuality, echoed by the government and media alike, developed in response to the changing demographics. Young women became consumers and romantic relationships occurred among total strangers as dating became a new form of interaction. More importantly for my purposes is Ong's conclusion that framing the uncertainties of modernity around fears of the Malay woman's impurity had the inadvertent effect of according Malay modernisation a feminine character. This became more so the case when women comprised the majority of the multinational factory workforce, thereby linking them directly to the productive strategy of Malay capital as part of the broader trend across Southeast Asia. 'With loss of family order and the village comes the threat to *Adat* or Malay custom which stems from the increasing sense, for village daughters, of their own personal aspirations and acquired interests' (Ong, 2010, p. 116). Thus obsessions about their moral purity underlined concerns about the shape of modernity to come and the uncertainties of the new femininity shaped in entirely new industries organised and funded by Euro-American and Japanese capital. Women were placed in a cultural tussle: 'The labour power which enables them to challenge male authority at home is also the means whereby they are subjected to intense capitalist discipline' (Ong, 2010, p. 113).

The Rural as Critical Distance

This brings us to the use of allegory that I laid out earlier, where landscape attempts to capture a totality out of historical contradictions, weaving a narrative that reveals its anxieties and pleasures. Previously, I described how the need for panorama speaks to an acute sensitivity to fragmentation, that a big picture is needed in response to how divisions and disintegration are increasingly the norm. Thus, the scale and expanse captured where landscape is visualised speaks to the need to resolve contradictions, to make sense where nonsense is the norm. As Maria Elisa Cevasco claims: "In a world in which the networks of multinational capital have swept through the globe, colonising all enclaves and leaving no empty spaces where it is not, the possibility of taking stock has become highly problematical" (2004, p. 95). *Ombak Rindu's* indulgence in countryside panorama offers the distance to view the city in a diminished light from the periphery of development, bringing our attention to the rural that is abandoned for being devoid of promise and opportunity, and yet abundant for being virtuous and beautiful.

Ombak Rindu may feature exaggerated female stereotypes but it also teases an engagement with history by offering a picture of the world where its anxieties could be visualised and enjoyed. Note the added contradiction: this is ultimately a defensive activity, catharsis in the face of overwhelming structural anxiety. Yet it could still unsettle dominant Islamist and liberal comfort zones. This may just be the allegory of Malay feminine cultural influence that has underlined my inquiry into masculinity this entire time: sidelined but disruptive, silent but impactful. Allegory could do well with considering temporality from how the modernisation of a gender regime marks the more fundamental struggle

over who time belongs to. The "centre-margin relationships are constantly being renegotiated and reconfigured and dispersed along not always geographically calibrated lines" (Colás, 1992, p. 267). As the rural continues to feature in the Malay political imagination to disturbing ends, allegory is more needed than ever to underscore how and why the anxiety therein unsettles everyone. But Malay cinema's constant recourse to the rural, as idea and landscape, this is not allegory that confirms to any national ideal but one that questions it.

As for *Ombak Rindu*, the more interesting question becomes less about whether it is a moral or immoral film but to characterise the political anxieties motivating its enjoyment. It is crucial to note how this contradiction is enabling: "ideological incoherence or attachment to contradictory ethics and ways of life is not a failure but a condition of mass belonging" (Berlant, 2008, 22). This organizing of contrary feelings, centered on certain narratives of suffering or misfortune, indeed is what an intimate public offers. The key here is ambivalence, which allows for the range of feelings occasioned by a given historical period to be experienced and reorganized collectively. I should stress again that Berlant is careful to note that this should not be taken to indicate a radical politics: an intimate public can "flourish insofar as they can allow the circulation of the open secrets of insecurity and instability without those revelations and spectacles engendering transformative or strongly resistant action in the idiom of political agency as it is usually regarded" (Ibid). Thus we should not overrate the actual real-life impact an intimate public can amount to. But insofar as *Ombak Rindu's* mass popularity could trigger liberals and Islamists and their fantasies of pristine moral agency it is worth keeping in mind the

allegory of anti-capitalism it offers. The future is female and is located in spaces unlike the male driven national developmental ideal.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that films of Malay men in search of home offer a rich resource into the gender-contests of Malay modernisation. Through various examples, I have identified the trend for Malay films to stage 'home' as a locus of tension between an androcentric national ideal on one hand, and the historical imprints of Malay women's cultural influence on the other. I use unevenness as the general term to describe how this tension emerges amidst the confluence of different temporalities that occurs in modernization, where notions of 'old' and 'new' are brought into confrontation in antagonistic ways. Through this my study shows how Malay films assume that the order the modern domestic sphere is meant to impose is still being negotiated: Unlike common accounts of the modern domestic sphere as a site of male dominance, Malay filmic accounts of 'home' take for granted that the gender of modernisation remains yet to be determined.[90] The six chapters that constitute my study reveals the different ways in which Malay masculinity is affected by this historical contest. As the formally designated agent of Malay modernisation, the Malay man is expected to embody the new ethos of hard work, productivity and conquest. But it is a notable quality of Malay films that his power is often limited before the presence of Malay women in various instances of cultural advantage, however much the film assumes a male-dominated circumstance. In this way I show that the Malay gender regime is also uneven, constituted by an antagonistic blend of male driven nation-building project and Malay women's temporal perspective.

[90] Chapter 1 describes the oppression nature of the modern home in some detail especially in the section where I discuss the matricidal home.

Chapter 1 outlines the historical contours of this outlook via the notion of allegory, as theorised by Fredric Jameson. This allows me to explain how Malay films about home provide a confrontation with the uncertainties of historical change through a narrative and visual form distinct to Malay anxieties. The confrontation occurs in the ways in which certain representational trends persist through time. This indicates that the narrative is moved by the need to symbolise or address certain unresolved questions that are compelled by historical breaks. This is how I position cinematic narratives about wandering Malay men, where the question of home is deployed in different ways to show their struggle to adapt to the demands of modernisation. Through various examples, I show how home or the Malay man's search for it is often depicted with him displaced amidst recognition of women's cultural advantage. This indicates the extent to which ideals of Malay modernization, and the gender roles the home is meant to organise, are unsettled by the persistence of Malay women's cultural power. Key is also how Malay women's relative cultural power would also amount to a trend of cinematic tropes that approach the nation critically. This, in turn, provides the general frame for my subsequent analyses.

Chapter 2 focuses on the domestic sphere more specifically through looking at the homelessness of blind musician Kassim Selamat in the film *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962). I point out two interrelated things. The first is how the domestic sphere is taken for granted as a domain of feminine cultural authority. The second is how the film evokes this authority to depict Kassim as constantly displaced from it. The Lacanian notion of the extimate allows me to capture the spatial anxieties therein: the film underscores Kassim's displacement by showing how he is excluded even when he is inside the home. His blindness, furthermore,

is a crucial indicator of this displacement in two ways. First, he experiences the house without ever actually seeing it. Second, the exclusion is emphasised even more through how he is blinded from the truth even when his vision is restored. The ways in which this constantly renders him lost and immobile are contrasted with how movement is crucial to express the Malay woman's command of domestic spaces. The film's depiction of a bourgeoning media industry and the construction of new infrastructures stages *Ibu Mertuaku*'s domestic politics' sensitivity to the uncertainties of modernisation more broadly.

Chapter 3 looks at the coming-of-age rock film *Azura* (1982) to explore the question of identification. The Malay woman's relative historical advantage is shown in how rock musician Zack is compelled to embody the diligence he learns from Azura in order to adapt to a modern work regime. What is more telling is how her influence emerges upon Zack's father's failure to discipline him. Thus, his transition from an indolent and restless young man to a mature, responsible adult not only sees him eventually recognising his father's authority, it also requires recognising that the Malay woman stands above men at the pinnacle of modernization. Zack and Azura's search for home is crucial in this transition, as it shows her taking him across the new spaces of the emerging Malay capitalism where he learns to adapt and therefore modernise his masculinity. I also reference how this speaks to contemporary anxieties around how Malay women outdo Malay men in various crucial sectors in development such as employment and the sciences.

In Chapter 4, I described the uneven phallus. I turned to several notable Malay comedies of the 1980s to point out their acknowledgement of an anxiety regarding the penis-phallus connection. The cultural and temporal complications

ushered by the rural-urban divide is a common backdrop in these narratives, as the leading men of the genre tend to be villagers migrating to Kuala Lumpur in search of work. It is in the uncertainties of the search, too, that they are shown in various modes of doubting or questioning (however playfully) the 'power' associated with the penis. Similarly, the Malay woman's more advantageous position in modernisation is also assumed.

Chapters 5 and 6 take on the question of time. Chapter 5 considers how wandering and homeless Malay men inhabit 'the temporary', that is, the constant state of being in transit amidst modernity's spatial dislocations. I turn to *Kami* (1982) for how the temporariness is explored through the friendship of two homeless boys Tookoo and Din. Through the Lacanian account of mourning, I show that the temporary allows for the exploration of new modes of relations rather than the dissolution of familial and community bonds. I situate this among similar trends in Malay popular culture at the time, indicating the workings of a sentimental public that explored temporariness in different ways to resist the assumption that atomistic individuality is an inevitable outcome of modernisation. This reveals a latent locus of resistance in Malay popular culture that questions the fundamental premises of modern progress.

Chapter 6 looks into how the rural-urban divide is evoked in the film *Ombak Rindu* (2011). This situates my inquiry in the context of current Malay gender politics. In particular, I show how the film straddles a duality: On one hand, it places Haris, a rapist-misogynist, front and centre. On the other hand, it is consistent that time is fundamentally the domain of Malay women. Thus, the power Haris demonstrates is always beholden to the rhythm and dictates of Malay women and their mobility across the rural-urban divide.

Through these cinematic examples I show how the question of home organises the historical antagonisms between the modernity that is constructed in the Malay man's image on one hand, and the Malay context's longer-standing matrifocality and feminine cultural influence on the other, which the androcentric developmental project neglects. Consequently, the modernisation of Malay masculinity is defined by a contest over the gender of 'home' and, thus, the making of the masculine 'world' modernity demands. Ultimately, this reveals how the contradictions of Malay modernisation are personified via anxieties over the gender of history, namely on whether Malay modernity and progress is driven and will be won by its men or women, or by some more collaborative pattern that reflects a more historically egalitarian gender arrangement. Should this argument hold—should we understand the films allegorically in the materialist sense to indicate an ongoing negotiation with history—we are brought to a key conclusion: however much men may be in power, Malaysian modernity will still not assume a straightforwardly patriarchal form, as Malay women have historical and cultural resources to be authors of Malaysia's modernity.

In closing, I highlight Ong and Peletz's emphasis on the dynamic of concurrent consent and contestation, in which the post-colonial shows that assent to hegemonic codes of gender behaviour is not total. Rather, it is colored by residues of past and new configurations of confusions, doubt, hesitance and resistance. Ong and Peletz assert that "hegemony is never complete and is always vulnerable to subversion by counterhegemonic tactics" (Peletz & Ong, 1995, p. 14). The ongoing blend of past and modern, regional and global, traditional and capitalist, among other social forces provides occasions to look

for the liminal moments and phases where hegemony breaks down: "Gender domination is never a thing in itself" (Peletz & Ong, 1995, p. 14). Similarly, my account of Malay men in transit shows the extent to which the normative scripts of gender behaviour and expectations are recognised and personified while being problematised at the same time. Men dominate various institutions of modernisation although not without encountering certain historical realities that point to the limitations of their gender power. Women are furthermore represented as formidable challengers to male dominance, assuming powerful positions and standpoints that are crucial in determining the shape of Malay modernization. Indeed we routinely see how what it means to be male or female blurred and questioned to deny the assumption that Malay modernity should be male.

My recourse to psychoanalysis allows me to explore the extent to which these gendered "postcolonial forces of dislocation…and…contestation" (Peletz and Ong 1995, p.15) are largely unconscious. Thus, the 'agent' of resistance is not situated in any person or figure but in the ways in which modern Malay masculinity has to be narrated in order to 'make sense'. Through this, we are able to see the key points of tension where history is expected to take on manly qualities but repeatedly fails to do so, indicating where and how Malay modernity cannot simply be taken for granted as masculine. This takes us to another key statement that my chapters bring together: the fundamental maleness of the Western symbolic order does not apply given the historical unevenness with which the national-developmental project must contend.

Thus, my account of Malay films departs from Barbara Andaya's claims that "the nature of 'national history' almost inevitably means that efforts to

incorporate women will become an uneasy exercise of insertion rather than integration" (2006, p. 3). To the extent that the Malay nation-state and modernisation are male-dominated institutions, the official narratives therein will overlook the place of women. However, to the extent that 'history' is more than simply official narratives, films offer a different lens than that with which the masculinisation of modernity is inevitable. Thus whatever progress Malay men could attempt to claim—and the narratives they inspire—will always be underlined by historical anxieties. Therein lies the opportunity to rethink the gender of Malay modernity differently.

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