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Communicating with global modernity: Malay women, Asian soap opera and adult capacity

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This article is concerned with how urban and remote Malay women communicate with the images of global modernity mediated through Asian soap operas. Asian soap operas have been identified as a popular platform for Malay women to engage with modernity in contemporary Malaysia. While promoting it at first, as appropriate television programme, this television genre has created some discomfort amongst the Malaysian authorities due to excessive representation of foreign images such as consumer culture and middle-class lifestyle. They believe the excessive of these representations might compromise the cultural values and identity of Malay women. However, we want to argue that Malay women are critical viewers who are able to communicate and negotiate global modernity without necessarily ignoring their identity. Importantly, as an adult and matured audience, they perform specific watching competencies with which to engage the depiction of various issues of modernities in the Asian soap operas.

Keywords: modernity; television; Malaysia; Islam; women

Communicating with global modernity: raison d’être

The Malay woman has often been represented in Malaysian studies as co-opted into the national development plan as passive recipient of the dominant national discourse. As subject in a rapidly modernizing country, the Malay woman is often a human resource for both the productive and reproductive sectors. Inevitably, the Malay woman finds herself carrying a double load of workplace and domestic responsibility. Our interest is in the struggle of Malay women, amidst massive social upheaval, to shape a desired version of Islamic womanhood. The Malay woman is no longer a peasant governed solely by customary laws. However, there remains much work for scholarship on the implications of local mores and traditional practices to the everyday lives of Malay women. This study looks specifically at how Malay women respond to television, and how they select and translate these materials to represent themselves. Upholding the significance of being Malay and Muslim, yet not entirely undermining the dominant discourse on what this means, women in the study demonstrate their competency to

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filter, negotiate and appropriate references from television to reify their identities as Malay, Muslim and as women oscillating between the modern and traditional.

Often used in contrast to traditional, the term ‘modernity’ opens up a space to visualize new standards of living, to make lifestyle comparisons, to make choices for or against particular innovations into traditional culture and to realize different ways of being ‘modern’ (Sabry, 2010). This imaginative project is premised on the idea of a fluid society and the belief that change can actually happen in everyday lives. Progress or being modern faces off against traditional ways; paradoxically, the traditional juggernaut of globalizing capitalism and new media communication is placed in opposition to revaluation of the essentialisms of national culture and identity. The necessity for debate springs from the gap between lived realities and imagined worlds. But the juxtaposed modern against traditional in exploring the mediation of global flows from a global origin to a local context, opens up new ways of thinking about television and consumption. Anthropologist Miller (1995) highlights the term that often takes an economic use and therefore gives the impression of choice – consumer. He also suggests a philosophical position underlying this notion of consumption that is useful to our study of Malay women and television. Miller posits,

... to be a consumer is to possess consciousness that one is living through objects and images not of one’s own creation. It is this which makes the term symptomatic of what some at least have seen as the core meaning of the term modern (Miller, 1995, p. 1).

The play is in the dance between the consciousness of the private individual and the public domain.

The determining notion of situated reality is important when considering any dialectic between the individual and the community. Chow (1991) suggests that subjectivity – both as a reality and as an analytical category – is constituted as an effect of historical forces beyond individuated consciousness. The text of the modern woman is therefore a given and it is this ‘givenness’ which determines her capacities as an agent in society. Chow also theorizes that fantasy structures can tell as much about the politics in play within the social context as anything else of import. When arts and culture are colonized as an instrument of social management or exploitation, we believe that the focus of enquiry should not be concerned with the juggernaut of ideologies, but directed towards the grassroots where local and institutionalized power networks impact on the lives of individuals (Belfiore & Bennet, 2010). We are interested therefore in an ethnographic study which is not significantly bound simply to an analysis of the texts (soaps chosen by personal preference of our women informants) and the functions of genres and modes, but in a research project which takes into account how our respondents actively make sense of their surrounding world and give personal meanings to the complexities of their daily lives. We are also taking up the notion of ‘being modern’ as intrinsically important to our respondents’ self-identities.

Our methodology is fundamentally influenced by the work of Radway (1984), which links the experiences of women to the reading of popular romance narratives within a patriarchal matrix. We maintain the relevance today of Radway’s research on women subverting the patriarchy in understanding women and the issues they face within modernity:

‘By selecting only those stories that will reinforce their feelings of self-worth and supply the replenishment they need, they counter the force of a system that functions generally by making enormous demands upon women for which it refuses to pay’. (Radway, p. 184)
We infer our respondents are not only fed up with criticism from various authorities levelled at their voyeuristic participation in television melodrama but that their needs are also neglected for consideration in the social system giving rise to frustrations about their lot in this new society endorsed by the nation-state. While this attitude of dissatisfaction is not a fundamental challenge to the patriarchy, it does predispose a perverse use of the given narratives for return protest to make sure a product which both benefits others financially and reinforces female containment to a nurturing role within the family benefits the women themselves, in terms of welfare, social agency and personal emotional satisfaction.

**Watching competencies and fluid audiences**

In our study, we look at the ways a group of Malay women in the selected area engages with soap operas and how they negotiate their identities as modern women, while not denying their position within the dominant construct of the Malay woman. For doing so, these women demonstrate what we will call watching competencies. Our theory of watching competencies is not a set of static skills, but fluid tactical responses, which are performed spontaneously through deep-seated cultural conditioning and education. Watching competencies are innate and embedded in the psyche of the mature educated adult and totally self-interested. There is no precise or static framework which encompasses their negotiation and engagement. These competencies are generated as the inner pole of the reactive arc between the imaginary lives of individuals, groups and the demands of society and the environment. They operate as a bastion against violent events and are essential to the survival, protection and advancement of the individual within the desired polity. We have identified two types of watching competencies in our case studies, which have been practised by Malay women to negotiate modernity, while maintaining their tradition at the same time: adult capacity; strategic obedience.

Malay convention respects age and wisdom over wealth, higher education or public status. A person reaches mature status – comes of age – when they achieve the markers set by society, successfully performing to expectation in relation to family duty and community obligations. The position of elder is related to one’s holistic knowledge of Malay culture – specifically related to the teachings of Islam and adat – and ability to guide the younger generation. The new Malay challenges this traditional precept of authority with a stereotype of ‘muscular’ youth – energetic, educated and cosmopolitan go-getters. However, the role of women between the world of traditional mores and the young lions of business, industry and politics creates problems of identification, especially when the public sphere is coded masculine and rhetoric confines women to the home front. The aspirations of women to public life and their dereliction of domestic duty is often blamed for the social ills of contemporary life – drugs, disaffected youth, divorce and the breakdown of the family. There is no dignity or respect generated in scapegoating.

Our Malay respondents in this research lay claim to authority and agency by virtue of their status as mature married women with children in their care. They claim to be dutiful and responsible citizens with lived experience. However, at no point do they claim a license to watch Asian soaps without caveat, but accept the responsibility of maintaining the social integrity of Malay-Muslim conventions – duty and obligation go hand in hand with position and authority. The privilege of being mature members of society also gives them space to create strategic disobedience, an accepted stratagem, for questioning the authorities in terms of being modern. An examination by Halstead
However, of the nexus between status, place and media finds that some respondents are moved to change the ‘… public meanings of their presence in relation to media, specifically television and place, as a way of also altering their visibility’. She argues, this kind of behaviour is predicated upon the subject’s visibility vis-à-vis their position in the landscape and the house and assumed ‘… as forms of agency in order to privilege particular narrative over others’ (Halstead, 2009, p. 37). These women want a voice in the public domain.

Although television is touted as an important tool in the social construction of identity and the reification of dominant discourse, it also provides fodder for the subaltern to contest and reconstitute the representation of their lives; for example, Mankekar (1993, p. 557) in her research of the constitution of national and gendered subjects found that popular cultural texts, disseminated by the televisual media, make the space for women to realize specific subject positions. They are an easy target for propaganda, but this facility still remains a matter of individual acceptance and negotiation: ‘… viewers variously interpret, appropriate, resist, and negotiate these subject positions.’ In this research, our respondents also reject the notion that they are victims of malign influences or vulnerable subjects in need of care and protection. In the main, they accept the premise of cultural containment without question, obedient to society’s mores. Watching competencies therefore can be conceptualized as a form of tactical mediation through which Malay women interpret soaps in a manner that helps them to negotiate any conflicts with powerful censors (authorities).

Previous scholars have remarked on soap’s potential for women to stage resistance against patriarchal order (Brown, 1994; Geraghty, 1991; Lee & Cho, 1990). However, the concept of struggle and resistance has faded in cultural studies (Morris, 1990), before theories of new consciousness, self-reflexivity and social balance. We are interested in strategies of negotiation which reach beyond primitive aggression, coercion and victim theories towards a new world of sweet reason, democratic processes and social justice – modernity’s dreaming. Therefore, building on the strength of previous research that had been done by scholars, such as Abu-Lughod (1995), Das (1995), Halstead (2009), Mankekar (1993), Miller (1995), we conceptualize watching competencies as an extensive framework for the negotiation of representation and agency in a civilized form.

**Representation, power and television**

Electronic media, especially television, play a major role in the formation of identity (Appadurai, 1996; Kitley, 1999; Morley & Robins, 1995; Shohat & Stam, 1996). Appadurai suggests that electronic media acts as a prime mover in shaping and modifying popular imagination in contemporary life. He argues, ‘such media … offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds’ (Appadurai, 1996, p. 3). Reality television is believed to have a role in reconstituting postcolonial womanhood and in realizing the new femininities (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009; Kraidy & Sender, 2011). Das, however, reflects on television as virtual experience, ‘not belonging, even as fiction, to life’s reality’ (Das, 1995, p. 170). She argues that although television reduces life experiences on screen and collapses the individual subjectivity of viewers to a collective mass of consumers, it still does not translate viewers into passive recipients. She writes, ‘… the life of these electronic images does not come to an end after they have been viewed within the confines of the domestic space. These become conversational objects and acquire a social life of their own’
Das, 1995, p. 171). Thus, rather than assume all viewers consume television the same way, Das suggests ‘[w]e move from the general to the particular and see how the relation between events on the tele-screen and domestic life play out in the context of specific societies’. Abu-Lughod takes a similar line in her soaps consumption research in Egypt, arguing that despite the ways producers of television soap operas posit themselves as mediating modernity for the subaltern, constructing them as subjects needing enlightenment, the subalterns are not passive recipients or not bland consumers. Rather, the

... Egyptian villagers not only select by interpretation but also through what they choose to focus upon and ignore on television. They extract those images and issues that they can use to negotiate their own dialectic of being modern and being traditional (Abu-Lughod in Miller, 1995, p. 15).

Asian soaps and the lure of proximate modernity

The popularity of Asian soap operas from Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan and Philippines with Malaysian audiences illustrates changes in the political landscape. Asian soaps were thought to be an important cultural site, worth promoting by the state because they conserve traditional values – a focus on the family, social etiquette and respect for the elderly – which were perceived to be lacking in Western soaps. They offered ‘good, clean entertainment’, rather than the corrupt influences of immoral habits and hedonistic lifestyles (Bernama, 2007a). Asian soaps attracted Malay women, in particular, who appreciated the rich and diverse repertoire of images and discourses that provided a legitimate counter-narrative to Eurocentric modes. Asian soaps were deemed to have a significant impact on Malay women’s identities and the construction of the ideal Asian family and came to occupy a substantial share of the transnational media flow into the country.

Seduction

On the surface, Asian soaps are no different from their Western counterparts, with a focus on consumer culture, urban lifestyle and ordinary life events (Hamzah, 2006; Saharani, 2007). The question becomes what differentiates Asian soaps and gives them the popularity edge with Malay women. Built on formulaic storylines and lowbrow content, soap operas are ‘revered by fans, reviled by some critics’ (Hobson, 2003, p. xi) and labelled as ‘women’s trash’ (Allen, 1995, p. 3). However, the passion of women viewers for this genre – particularly those products from non-Western locations like Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand – is hardly affected by negative critique. Why the attraction?

The stories in Asian soaps are panned by critics as lowbrow, simplistic, repetitive and melodramatic, but those are the very features which enable audiences to latch on with an ease (John, Damis, & Chelvi, 2003a). The content is manageable and viewers get what they expect. John, Damis, and Chelvi (2003b) list the typical features of the soap opera genre that may be found in Asian soaps: a beautiful heroine; a handsome, somewhat rakish male hero; and a liberal sprinkling of issues of interest to women audiences – family feuds, vengeful rivals, nosy neighbours, corruption, middle-class affluence and narratives of social rise and fall. Malay women respond to melodramatic plotlines which keep them on tenterhooks, drawn to tune-in on a daily basis, taking a
daily roller-coaster ride on the suspense – vicarious excitement in dull lives (Bernama, 2007a, 2007b). Popular Asian soaps also provide a fictional female-centred world of romance and family, in which women’s experiences are privileged and valued. Women are presented in a positive light, independent and free of constraints, which interfere with their imagined happiness.

**Look East**

Asian soaps are also promoted because they reinforce consumer spending as well as middle-class values and aspirations (John et al., 2003b). However, it is possible that the new fad, as the government authorities like to call it, is simply a symptom of disaffection from the dominance of American content (Bernama, 2007a; John et al., 2003a). Governmental authorities, like the Malaysian Ministry of Information, describe Asian soaps as a ‘passing culture’ and declare that they are a trend ‘fuelled by viewer disaffection for the standard American fare on offer now’ (John et al., 2003a). Malay women are fascinated by the allure of exotica, but reassured by cultural proximity – Asian values, Islamic culture and alternative modernities. And for Malay women the imaginary lands often become the real destinations (Silva, 2005). Thus, Malay culture is gently re-orientated through tourism, manoeuvred towards new bonds with the outside world – re-imagined and re-territorialized – however, the process is a two-way exchange. Korean culture, for instance, also returns to Malaysia in reconfigured forms, as dubbed theme songs and halal kimchi (Bakar, 2010; Farinordin, 2003).

**Geopolitics: Asian soap opera and anxiety over the establishment of Malay identity**

In the quest for an alternative modernity to Eurocentric models, the Malaysian Government chose to align with the Southeast Asian region under the ideological banner of the Look East policy and Asian Values assuming that soap opera from the region would automatically reflect the ideal Asian role models (the stereotypical narrative perhaps of the woman who conducts herself with grace as the nurturing mother or the loving wife). At first, Korea and Japan were flavour of the month then Indonesian soaps were given more prominence because they incorporated Islamic values for social conduct (Hamzah, 2006). Islamic themes told moral fables of the triumph of good god-fearing Muslims, encouraging religious faith, norms of social interaction and approved practices. However, Asian soap has now come under fire as a poor influence, for its preoccupation with family conflicts, violence and dysfunctional relationships.

Authorities in the guise of representatives of Wanita UMNO⁴ (the women’s wing of UMNO), have suggested that Malay women should stop watching Asian soaps altogether. A spokesperson said, ‘we now see too many Indonesian and Filipino programmes like the drama Bawang Merah Bawang Putih⁵ on television. There’s nothing positive to be gained from these programmes, only negative (sic)’ (Bernama, 2006a). Puteri UMNO, another women’s body under the UMNO, urged the government to “curb the addiction to soap operas which deviated from the Islamic faith or propagated new ideas to do wrong, practice free sex or damage society’s norms and social fabric” (Bernama, 2006b). In fact, moral panic was generated on the grounds that these soaps lure mothers, wives and friends away from their normal duties and engagement in everyday life. The husband of one fan – colourfully referred to in a newspaper critique as a ‘telenovela widower’ – lamented: “no wonder the house is in a mess” since many
housewives dismiss all their housework and bring life at home to a halt when the soaps are on television’ (John et al., 2003a). And again, a Puteri UMNO spokesperson admonished authorities who, ‘slip in a slot or airtime with dramas that go against our culture during the time for Zuhur, Asar and Maghrib prayers’ (Bernama, 2006b). A popular Indonesian religious soap, Mutiara hati was criticized harshly because it used Islamic terms, such as mukjizat and Malaikat in an incorrect manner (Hashim, 2007). Once under scrutiny by the religious police, Asian soap was hauled over the coals for an inappropriate dress code and permissive behaviour between the sexes. Characters often wore revealing outfits or behaved in licentious ways – sacrilege in the eyes of Islam (Bernama, 2006a). Women were positioned centre stage to bear the brunt of the rhetoric on new femininities, the ‘cost’ of modernity and the penetration of new technologies. They were accused of abandoning their housewifely responsibilities for frivolous entertainments, inappropriately sexualized, charged with the breakdown of the family and loaded with responsibility for disaffected youth and every other ill and issue spawned through modernity – traitors to the bonds of local culture, traditional identity and the conservative values that define the ideal of Malay womanhood (Bernama, 2006a, 2006b).

Research methodology

We present findings from a qualitative survey of Malay women fans of Asian soap operas in a remote Malaysian kampung area of Kota Tinggi, Johore and urban area of Kuala Lumpur. This region has good access to all the television channels; women audiences here are avid followers of Asian soaps and spend a significant amount of time watching these soaps. While a number of respondents have paid subscriptions with satellite networks like ASTRO, most of them prefer to watch these Asian soap operas on the free-to-air channels run by Malaysian and Indonesian networks. Our methodology makes use of purposeful sampling and snowballing techniques to generate appropriate respondents. The focus of purposeful sampling is on a research design for ‘selecting those times, settings and individuals that can provide … [the researcher] … with the information that you need to answer your research question’ (Maxwell, 2005; p. 88). The leader of the local women’s committee was asked to contact some of her friends who in turn led to other possible respondents. Snowballing technique (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) is used for gathering the requisite number of appropriate respondents through existing respondents. Consequently, the eventual sample group was both sympathetic to our agenda and sufficiently ‘stirred’ on their own behalf to want their opinions on public record, albeit anonymously.

There are three further points of note. First, for the purpose of our interviews, we did not select specific programmes for discussion (as in the case studies conducted by Ida, 2006; Iwabuchi, 2002, 2004), but let our respondents talk about whichever Asian soap they preferred. This method enabled a more spontaneous discussion of heartfelt issues. Second, our sample group is small. We do not suggest that the particulars of our cases be generalized beyond this selected kampung/urban area or the specific Malay identities of our respondents. Our results are peculiar to the location and not to the situation of all Malay women, regardless of class or status. We observe that new reflexivities in anthropology come from intersubjective understandings. We believe that by paying attention to the nuances of each response, we help both to foreground the ‘diversity of experience’ (Wilson, 2004, p. 18) and the individuality of the discourses that exist among women in any small community in relation to a single cultural
phenomenon – Asian soap. Finally, we also recognize the bond of reciprocity between researchers and respondents in the field. There is an obligation not only to do no harm, but also to repay the confidence by publishing the results of the work where it will bring the most good.

**Adult capacity to adhere to cultural conventions: acquiescence**

The *kampung* women in our research suggest that maturity and self-discipline are a source of strength that helps them to adhere to the cultural conventions of Malay society. Their cultural integrity is their defence against accusations of laxity by authorities. The prime responsibility of a mature adult is to be a good parent. *Kampung* woman, Anisah says that she differentiates herself from her children on the basis of her maturity as an adult drawing a distinction between herself and her children:

> When my children watch cartoons on television, they often get too carried away with all the excitement and the images. I cannot imagine what would happen, if I allowed them to watch Korean soaps with their scenes of romance, alcohol, relationships. They are still *budak mentah* (raw children or immature) and can be influenced easily. (Anisah, 46, homemaker, *kampung*)

She calls her children ‘*budak mentah*’ or immature and says that she would not give them license to watch the questionable content in Korean soaps because they do not have the adequate experience to distinguish between wholesome and unhealthy examples of behaviour. Anisah takes it as a matter of course that she has the life experience and authority to lay down the boundaries for the children in her care.

Ina, another participant from the *kampung* setting, judges the content of Indonesian soap by her own cultural conditioning and knowledge of Islamic teachings. She makes a clear distinction between her own acquiescence to Malay norms and the immature fascination of children with outlandish behaviour and fashion statements acknowledging a need to monitor the influences:

> I think the outfits that the Indonesian soap heroines wear is inappropriate. They are against our tradition because you cannot expose parts of your body in public like that. I am really worried about our children getting influenced into dressing up like them. I can see some of them have already become spoiled and tend to ignore Islamic values. That’s why I do not allow them to watch Indonesian soaps. They need to go to school first and learn what they are allowed to do and not allowed to do. And yet, do you think children will think the way we think? I don’t think so (sighs). Kids will always be kids. (Ina, p. 49, Homemaker, *Kampung*)

Ina rejects the revealing clothes worn by characters in some Indonesian soaps, as she finds them inappropriate by *adat* and Islamic standards. She criticizes the prevalence of such trends among young people and emphasizes the need for children to be properly schooled in Malay cultural conventions. Ina assumes a privileged status because of her knowledge of Islamic teaching. She acknowledges an intergenerational gap and identifies children as vulnerable subjects in need of control and guidance from mature parents like herself.

Even in the urban areas, the traditional tenets of Islam and *adat* are still respected, often unchallenged, as the stalwart indicator of venerated wisdom. Fauziah claims to be just a housewife, but she is accorded a position of seniority and expected to make decisions about religious issues in her residential complex on the basis of her age and religious knowledge. She says:
Although some of my friends are more educated than me, they still seek my advice and I often worry about giving them incorrect answers for their questions. For example, a close friend came to see me yesterday to ask about the interpretation of some Koranic verse and a few weeks ago my neighbour wanted me to lead the kenduri (feast) ceremony for their newborn grandchild. They expect me to know everything because I lead the religious class. I have no choice since I am the oldest here. If you are asking me whether it is okay to watch Korean soaps on television, I might say yes and no. Yes for me, but no for young children. They know nothing about Islamic teachings and our way of life taught by adat. (Fauziah, p. 36, Web Writer, Urban)

Fauziah talks in a somewhat self-deprecating tone about the respect with which she is treated, but she accepts her role as guardian and gatekeeper of the appropriate cultural norms and is quite direct about the responsibility that elders bear towards young children, in passing culture down the generations. She emphasizes the point that children, especially those living in the city, must be monitored by adults like her who have the requisite skills. Fauziah’s response establishes that even in the city a mild-mannered, un-authoritative woman clearly sees the need to play her part in monitoring children. Other women are even more emphatic about the need for parents to exercise control over their offspring.

Formally educated in a religious school, Rabiah is confident of her mature capacity to monitor any misinterpretations of the Koran in Asian soaps:

You can’t play around with the holy Koran. I don’t want to blame Indonesian sinetron for showing incorrect ideas about Islam, but we have to realise that our cultures are different. I was trained in a religious school as a child, so I am very familiar with our holy Koran and I still try to learn more of its lessons. Now watching this Indonesian sinetron, I often worry about my children. Sometimes they join me to watch Mutiara Hati in the afternoons and they keep talking about the supernatural practices as if they were real. That is why I always sit and talk to them whenever something is shown on television. (Rabiah, p. 48, Boutique Manager, Urban)

Rabiah does not denounce soaps, but she cautions that one must watch them with a degree of scepticism and distance. Indonesian soap presents another world. Sound religious education is a safe-guard against being misled by programmes based on tricky interpretations of the Koran. She is anxious when supernatural elements are an integral element of Indonesian religious dramas and concerned that her children do not have the maturity or proficiency in Islamic knowledge to recognize the difference between fairy tales with magical elements and the hyper-real mediated allegories used to express aspects of religious experience. Rabiah therefore expresses the need to watch these programs with her children so that she can rectify any misleading or immature impressions and correct their responses, passing on her own knowledge of proper Islamic attitudes and practices to the next generation.

Norsiah is an older woman, of the same age as Rabiah, but who keeps an ironic distance between her life and what she regards as largely frivolous entertainment. She is aware that some Indonesian soaps are roundly criticized by authorities for misrepresenting Islamic religion through supernatural themes; however, she laughs off the suggestion that the inappropriate content of Indonesian and Filipino programmes incite her to indecent sexual behaviour. She ripostes that her mature age endows her with the capacity to control herself:

There are many bedroom and kissing scenes in Pangako Sayo that I believe are against our Malay adat and Islam. Well, I am married and these subjects are not a big issue for me. It’s normal you see (chuckling). I am too old and I know how to control myself (laughing). Sometimes if the romance scene in Pangako Sayo is too long or graphic, I feel
quite embarrassed and irritated. Then I just switch to another channel. (Norsiah, p. 48, Homemaker, Kampung)

Norsiah argues that you can’t repress human nature, or elide human frailties or eschew the titillating potential of storytelling. She appreciates the ironies of voyeurism and has a fine sense of humour about what is naughty and what is nice. Norsiah asserts that her age and marital status accord her the status of a mature adult and claims the privileged position of watching these soaps because she has the experience and self-discipline not to be swayed by inappropriate content; she can keep a tight rein on passion and has no qualms about losing control. Norsiah says that she watches the soap for its narrative content and accepts the romance scenes as part of the narrative. Nonetheless, when she thinks that the sexual content unnecessarily overwhelms the storyline, she expresses her discomfort even disinterest.

Strategic disobedience against paternalism

One of our respondents, Erna, is confident enough of her adult capacities to stage what we call an example strategic disobedience. She is proud of her interpretation of Islam and uses her knowledge to answer back to the demeaning criticism from the authorities at the urban centre:

When we talk about religion, we should not be so rigid and authoritative. Islam is about allowing people to express their faith in God, not about ordering them around. You cannot claim something is wrong without giving a good reason. If they stop airing these programmes, I would say that the government is behaving like an immature child. (Erna, 37, School Teacher, Kampung)

Erna implies that the authorities are despotic and uses her own interpretation of religion to assert to the contrary that Islam is a liberal faith, which accommodates personal choices. She asks the authorities not to dictate, but to engage viewers in a dialogue, giving adequate reasons for their policies. Erna also implies that the authorities intervene too much in people’s private lives. She argues that it is not people who need guidance, but the authorities that are acting like immature children and fractious with irrational demands.

Another respondent, Rosmah criticizes the recent denouncement of soaps for their part in propagating immoral sexual conduct. She says:

There is a lot of sexual content on these soaps. If they want me to follow all the rules of Islam, I don’t think I could watch any of these soaps. They need to accept that these things happen in our real lives as well and not pretend as if sexuality is not an issue for Malays. I think they need to be more reasonable. (Rosmah, p. 35, Government officer, Urban)

Rosmah claims that the demands of living in a modern world mean that one cannot follow all the rules of Islam. What one needs is a sensible approach with flexibility in interpreting religious faith according to the practical needs of modern life. She rejects the claims of authorities who often invoke some tenet or other of Islamic faith to denounce romance scenes as haram by Islamic law. She rejects the hypocrisy which pretends that sexuality does not exist in the Malay world. Further, she argues that because sexuality is a fundamental fact of life, Malays must adopt a more flexible approach in their religious norms and make space for the discussion of such issues.

Noor makes an interesting point about the need to differentiate between Islam as a spiritual faith and adat as the social ethic, which is more suitable for governing matters of everyday life in the Malay world. She asks the authorities to understand the nuances of difference between the two and not confuse one with the other:
I don’t see any problem for us in watching Filipino soaps. You cannot stop airing this program just because you don’t like to see women wearing revealing clothes. I guess our leaders are confused, because they are judging this issue by Islamic standards. If they want to judge everything by the strict codes of Islam, I don’t think we can watch anything on television. If you want to discuss the issue in terms of our adat, I don’t think the way the heroines dress up on the Filipino soaps is wrong. We have to know the difference between Islam and adat. (Noor, p. 34, Government officer, Urban)

Noor stages a case of strategic disobedience when she raises her objection to the authority’s confusion between adat and Islam. Her capacities as a mature adult to think through the distinctions are based on her cultural knowledge of the specifically Malay way of life. Noor asks the authorities to think more creatively, outside the box. She suggests that Islam should take its place as a religious spiritual faith and adat be understood as a secular code of ethics to guide everyday social interaction. She thinks that such a distinction would alleviate most of the confusion created by the overtly stringent norms of Islam.

Juliana also makes a distinction between adat and Islam, but goes further by asking the government to look to the local way of life before trying to enforce cultural norms or religious fundamentalisms imported from another country:

I cannot understand this controversy. I am an adult. I don’t mind if they say that young children will get spoilt by watching these soaps. Besides, I think Malay women have to be aware of all the trends in the larger world. We are not living in an Arab country. If you know how to drive a car like a Korean soap actress, why is that a problem? We should be more progressive and independent while retaining our cultural identity. Look, please think carefully before you decide to ban everything. (Juliana, p. 36, Web Writers, Urban)

Juliana sees a danger to Malaysia’s autonomy in globalizing Islam and exhorts the authorities not to be swayed by other nations simply for reasons of cultural proximity. She understands Malay Islamic practice as a local institution formulated to suit the nation-state’s own people. She asks the government not to imitate the Middle East at the expense of the freedoms Malay citizens enjoy.

These women are confident enough of their opinions and the value of their counter-narratives to openly question the stance of local authorities, like UMNO, for their constant criticism of Asian soap and their paternalistic approach to Malay women’s lives. Rahimah likes Thai and Indonesian soaps. She uncompromisingly rejects the authorities’ intrusions and their obsession with controlling her viewing habits:

I don’t care. Please stop telling me what to do. I am not a child anymore. I don’t think this soap will teach me to do wrong things. If they insist that it is bad for me, then they must prove it with reasonable evidence! Otherwise, please shut up (in a mock stern voice). Even, my parents do not dictate what I can or cannot do. And if my parents do have some advice to give me, they are open and reasonable. (Rahimah, p. 35, Human Resource Officer, Urban)

Rahimah has no sympathy for any organization which refuses to respect her personal freedom – an insult to her maturity as an adult. She is disrespectful of the foolishness circulated by half-baked lobbyists and scaremongers who dare to cast aspersions on her moral fibre. Rahimah argues that even her parents, who have the greatest authority in her life, treat her with more consideration in giving her advice on personal issues.

Emma also argues for the important distinction between adat (as secular customs and traditions that have meaning as the embodiment of the spirit of the people) and Islam (as a form of religious fundamentalism and pious observance imposed by priestly elite). She
sees the division as a means of avoiding some of the problems caused when religious codes are enforced as stringent social norms. She complains that local authorities stigmatize the use of supernatural themes in Indonesian soaps as contrary to Islamic faith. She declares that she is a *kampung* woman who believes in practices like faith healing and witchcraft. Emma cites her knowledge of Malay traditions on the supernatural and argues that authorities cannot ban these practices as contrary to Malay cultural values:

I love watching *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. I have no problem with the depiction of magic in this *sinetron*\(^{12}\). Well, you see supernatural practice is part of our Malay culture. It is also mentioned somewhere in the holy Koran. We also have magical legends in our tradition although it is not so exaggerated like the ones in *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. Why should we forget that part of our tradition? It is also part of our *adat*! (Emma, p. 37, School Teacher, *Kampung*).

Emma uses *adat* in an instance of strategic disobedience to claim that supernatural practice is not against Malay cultural norms. She argues that local authorities have failed to appreciate the significance of supernatural practices in Malay cultural life. Emma accuses them of marginalizing *adat* in their attempts to re-enforce their own version of a modern Islamic revival.

Nani is irate about the fitness of authorities to criticize foreign soaps at all, when the quality of local productions is so abysmal:

Have you watched our local soaps lately? I think it is worse than Korean soaps. Have you watched *Anak Betong*\(^{13}\) and *Kliwon* on television? There are so themes of the supernatural in these local soaps just like *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. The government also encourages the production of similar soaps. At least the imported soaps are more interesting than our local soaps. If they are worried about the ill-effect of foreign soaps, they should stop talking too much and come out with good local programmes for us to watch. (Nani, p. 46, Homemaker, *Kampung*)

Nani argues that if the authorities are really concerned about the potential of imported soaps to corrupt women, then it is their responsibility to produce appropriate local content capable of attracting Malay audiences. She sarcastically points out that the local soaps not only imitate imported Asian soaps, but some of them have content that is even more questionable than the discredited foreign soaps. Nani is expert on her chosen subject and not interested in smoothing over incompetence. Her strong verbal criticism of the home product expresses her dissatisfaction and turns the debate back on the government demanding a better standard of product and service. Nani is fully conscious she is a driver in a capitalist economy. Her attitude demonstrates she is confident of her individual agency as a critical and flexible consumer, with intelligence, spending power and consequently the right to influence the market. Her outspokenness however may be taken purely as the discretionary cultural jamming of an objectionable product, or construed as a form of subtle but legitimate civil disobedience. We suggest the presence in play of both strategies. Nani challenges the government to lift its game.

**Locating the Malay woman in the global modernity**

Malay women have long occupied a place in the imaginary as keepers of the rural idyll, associated with ‘tradition’ and ‘community’, bound to embody *adat*. The iconic mother-figure is touted as a tigress in defence of the nation. But perhaps this notion is an overblown masculine invention designed to flatter women into acquiescence as camp followers. The dichotomy is whether women’s equality with men can be allowed to be equal in all spheres of life or whether power in the top echelons of polity is exclusively
gendered and pro-male and women cunningly encouraged to strive in separate, but parallel zones of action – appropriately tied to the hearth and domestic work, ‘empowered but domesticated’ (Ting, 2007).

It is clear from our fieldwork that the tenets of Islam are intensely central to the lives of our respondents. Islamic revivalism focuses on ‘Westoxification’ and the formation of an alternative state based on the model of a united religious empire. However, educated people recognize that there is structural violence to small nations and little people everywhere. We argue that historically Malaysia has never taken the same fundamentalist approach to religion as say Algeria or the Middle East. Malay society maintains its fluidity and is fully capable of transformation in the interests of all her citizens.

In 2001, Article 8 of the Constitution outlawed discrimination based on sex (Ting, 2007). In spite of this progressive law, however, women under patriarchal governments, such as Malaysia’s, are taken to be submissive subjects with institutionalized limits to their voices and participation in the public domain. Malay women recognize the asymmetrical nature of gender and power relations and have women’s ways of manipulating the givens of social discourse for their own benefit. Scott (1990) reminds us to pay attention to the nature of the hidden transcript, ‘things are not as they seem’. Women have made significant gains within an Islamist framework ‘in part through an Islamically orientated feminist movement that is challenging injustices and re-interpreting the religious tradition’ (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Islamic feminists in Malaysia have done much to improve the lot of women and children – taken on workplace issues – challenged both adat and Islamic laws on domestic abuse, family law, property law and equality of employment in public places (Ong, 2010; Stivens, 1998; Ting, 2007).

Modernity promises women much in exchange for their labour and compliance with the rules of a patriarchal nation-state. No doubt Malay women are irked by the aspersions cast on their status as mature and responsible adults (who know which way is up). Their responses however betray deeper anxieties about child-rearing practices, education and their children’s future happiness in work and relationships. They stress over their husband’s affections, the struggle to juggle work and domesticity, the right to personal leisure and social coercion. They worry about the intergenerational gap, not being taken seriously, being undermined by authorities and having things to which they are accustomed and rely on for support in their daily lives summarily taken away by outside agencies. Our respondents express decided opinions on issues of sexuality, fashion, religion, government policies and practices that are integral to their sense of self-identity. They also prove their capacities as canny consumers and able critics of foreign cultures. We tentatively suggest that perhaps such overblown zeal hides a sense of insecurity and fear about their subordinate position in Malay society. Consider that while women-friendly discourses have seen women empowered to enrol their children in schools, men still cede only a little of their power and control over family life. In spite of all her care and sacrifice, a Muslim mother is still not recognized as her children’s legal guardian (Ting, 2007). She has the most to lose if she can’t please a man. Out of prudence – less the heavy-handed worm turns, perhaps – Malay women collude with the dominant patriarchal narratives of the social, religious, academic and governmental elites. We infer that the dilemmas of a new woman are not simply a question of choosing and wearing a new figurative identity from a plethora of melodramas on offer in the media. Her role as an agent in the Malay community is defined by ‘a new agency, a dialectic of resistance-in-givenness that is constitutive of modernity in a non-Western, but Westernized, context’ (Chow, 1991, p. 170).
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. As the sample of our respondents is small, this study is not representative of the entire Malay women experience with soaps. Our intention is to analyse the discourse among respondents in this study.
2. *Adat* refers to traditional Malay customs that guide social behaviour and life matters in everyday life.
3. In terms of theorizing research outcome, Morley (1980) notes that while portending to study the process of meaning making, scholars tend to simplify the outcomes into easy and predictable categories that misrepresented the actually fragmented nature of audiences.
4. United Malays National Organization, the ruling political party in Malaysia.
5. Shallots and Garlic.
6. Midday, mid-afternoon and sunset prayers.
7. Pearl of the heart.
8. *Mukjizat* is derived from the Arabic term *Mu’jizah*, which means miracle used to signify the miraculous acts associated with the prophets who brought God’s message to his people.
11. Koranic verse means the chapters in the Koran.
12. Sinetron is an acronym for *Sinema Elektronik* (Electronic cinema). It is a commonly used term for Indonesian soap operas. See Ida (2006).
13. Son of Betong.

References


