Filmic Depiction of Malay Subjectivity in the Late Yasmin Ahmad’s Films

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Abstract
Besides P. Ramlee, Yasmin Ahmad’s name is synonymous with Malaysian cinema. The award-winning Malaysian filmmaker’s death impacted not only the Malaysian film industry but also those who admired her work. The late legendary filmmaker was a liberal Islamic Malaysian who explored Islam and humanity through interracial love stories. These filmic stories resonated with the ordinary Malaysians as they were compelling and courageous, often challenging the norms and conventions of other Malaysian films by daringly dramatizing and visualizing societal taboos and hypocrisies on the cinematic screen. The employment and integration of cosmopolitan themes of love, humanism, and humor in her films sets her apart from other local filmmakers. Yasmin’s films had attracted international attention and garnered awards at film festivals in Europe, North America, and Asia. This paper attempts to analyze her cinematic approaches of the construction of Malay subjectivity in all of her six films. For example, interracial relationships in Muallaf and Talentime is the dominant leitmotif of each, which connects the films with parallel events occurring in real-life Malaysia. The author interviewed production crew members who worked closely with Yasmin for her six films and tried to have a better understanding of the narrative motifs and themes in her films. These interviewees provided a comprehensive picture which drives her films, even now, to move beyond being focused on multiculturalism and to more socially, culturally and politically issues related to Malaysians.

Keywords
Malay subjectivity, Malaysian film, independent film, Yasmin Ahmad, critical discourse analysis, in-depth interview

Introduction
In Malaysia, “with its commitment to ethnic Malay nationalism and Islam as the state religion” (Hamilton, 1992, p. 83), the Malay-language film is always in the center of Malaysian cinema and performs generally as the “national film.” These “objects” of Islamic knowledge and an Islamic-based cultural orientation are constructed and comprehended in a controlled manner according to the rules dictated by a hegemonic social discourse. Malaysia film critics (i.e., Khoo, 2009; Lee, 2015) argue that Malaysian films have been produced through a limited racial lens which suggests an inability to regard Malaysian subjectivity, the organization of Malaysian reality and existence as its more inclusive and complex whole. Although subjectivity and identity, which are culturally constructed notions, are regularly reflected in Malaysian films, this paper aims to demonstrate that the films of Yasmin Ahmad offer an alternative, expansive and more inclusive Malay subjectivity. Furthermore, it asserts that her strategic creative and constructive process purposefully transcends racial and ethnic boundaries and offers both a more universal appeal for Malaysian cinema as well as an on-going national legacy of identity. Besides P. Ramlee, Yasmin Ahmad’s name is synonymous with Malaysian cinema. The award-winning Malaysian filmmaker’s untimely death in 2009 impacted not only the Malaysian film industry but also those who admired her work. The late legendary filmmaker was a liberal Islamic Malaysian who explored Islam and humanity through interracial love stories which resonated with the ordinary Malaysians. According to Yusoff (2011), Yasmin’s films “exemplify interaction between [the narrative] and realism, with the romantic narrative endings negotiating the impossible resolution of a race/gender/class-nexus building up” (p. 41). Her films were compelling and courageous, often challenging the norms and conventions of Malaysian films by daringly dramatizing and visualizing societal taboos and hypocrisies on the cinematic screen. Malaysia is representative of a multi-racial and multi-religious country. “One of the outstanding characteristics of its multi-ethnic population today is its highly variegated

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 agrees in conceptualization, Mulvey et al. (2017) main-
tensified personalization results in an increased
“is to present images that elicit only a very limited number of
features of the story” (Moreno, 1953, p. 341). Thompson and Bordwell (2008) point out that “Cinematic
subjectivity goes inward,” to present the conditions of the
mind or perception of characters, rather than the general
experience of their filmic reality. Therefore, subjectivity is
constructed through a series of oppositional terms that
includes ethnicity, stereotypical ethnic traits, political
and religious ideologies, and world-system hierarchy.
In the essay titled, “Yasmin Ahmad: Auteuring A New
Malaysian Cinematic Landscape,” Lee (2015) argues that
Yasmin Ahmad’s “stylistic signature of openly discussing race
and ethnicity, coupled with her cinematic capabilities and artistic
styles featuring in all her films would position her as an auteur” (p. 89). Khoo (2009) argues that an analysis of Malay
Muslim subjectivity would explain the rationale of critics on
Yasmin’s films (p. 109). Although the controversy surrounding
her works seemed terminable, Yasmin’s films embrace issues
in terms of diverse ethnic groups and supra-ethnic religion in
Malaysian society. Yasmin Ahmad’s films thus may serve as a
consequential object of study and their examination would pro-
vide a better understanding of the cinematic construction of
Malay subjectivity within the modern Malaysian context.
According to Khoo (2009), “Yasmin’s cosmopolitan rep-
resentations raise the possibility of transcending racialized
boundaries of religion and language, and blurring those
between domestic/public, human/animal, physical love/love
for God, and the sacred and the profane” (p. 117). Such works
of film had been widely recognized both locally and interna-
tionally. Her films had received many awards and special
mentions at several prestigious international film festivals
such as in Berlin, Cannes, Tokyo, San Francisco, and Pusan.
Yasmin Ahmad and her works would never been out of
sight though she passed away on July 25, 2009 in Kuala
Lumpur, Malaysia at the age of 51 because of a massive
stroke. In conjunction with the 8th Annual San Diego Asian
Film Festival Spring Showcase organized by Pacific Arts
Movement, three movies directed by late Yasmin Ahmad—
Mukhsin (2006), Muallaf (2008), and Talentime (2009)—
were shown under its feature film event in 2018. In addition,
a documentary about her life, titled Yasmin-San by Edmund
Yeo, was also screened at the same festival. In 2012, Leo-
Burnett Malaysia released the book “Yasmin How You
Know?”. It is a collection of words and anecdotes about
Yasmin and those who knew her, contributed by her family
members, her close friends, people who worked with her,
and others. The other book—“Yasmin I Lup Chew”—was
published by Leo-Burnett Malaysia in 2018. It is a curation
of Yasmin’s ideas, her musings, and her encounters with people
who may have inspired her films and advertisements. The
content came from her personal lined notebooks that were
kept in a shoebox with a yellow covered photo album with
images that were also published in the book. In 2017, at the
direction of this paper’s corresponding author, the Center for
ethnic mix” (Muhamat et al., 2012, p. 504). Within this mix,
“the ethnic groups of Malaysia consist predominately of the
Malay community, the Chinese community and the Indian
community” (Wang, 2019, p. 540). Aboriginal and indige-
nous Muslim Malays are identified as the bumiputra, immi-
grant Chinese and Indians, are grouped together as the
non-bumiputra. Although the use of the terms “race” and
“ethnicity” may be problematic if used interchangeably, a
phenomenon of this multi-ethnic mix identified by Hisham
(2019) is that the “viewing habit in Malaysia is influenced by
race and segmented especially local movies but all races will
watch Hollywood movies” (Hisham, 2019, p. 142). From the
early 1990s to 2019, approximately 930 films of various
genres have been produced in Malaysia, including a number
of them that were not in the Malay language. Yet, according
to the National Film Policy published in 2005, “only films
using Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) can be regarded as Malaysian
(films)” (Koh & Balasingamchow, 2015, p. 9). However,
Malaysian-produced Chinese-language and Tamil films nar-
rate their own communities’ story and reflect community
identity and cultural space in the society. Therefore, it can be
understood that films in the Malaysian cinema have been
constructed with targeted appeal to audiences from a certain
culture, ethnicity, or race. Furthermore, despite the official
designation of a more limited representation of a national
Malaysian identity, Ahmad, may have subverted and opposed this
constrained subjectivity of culture and consciousness of
identity in her films.
Several existing studies use cosmopolitanism as a route to
discuss Malaysian films and filmmaking activities, since
cosmopolitanism encompasses ethnicity and identification in
its focus on human subjectivity. Rovisco (2012) explains that
“Cosmopolitanism is often used interchangeably with
notions of transnationalism, postcolonialism, diaspora and
hybridity. . .” (p. 150). Furthermore, although possibly
Eurocentric in conceptualization, Mulvey et al. (2017) main-
tain that cosmopolitanism can be understood as “a normative
idea to address one’s detachment from one’s community of
birth or desire to connect to other regions” (p. 2). Within this
framing, “subjectivity is precisely the condition of our being
which enables us to recognize ourselves as subjects or persons” (Sheikh, 2017, p. 1). Films employ various procedures
to evoke subjective feelings by impeding or blocking our
ability to project what we see onto an objective. The simplest
way to evoke a feeling of subjectivity with filmic storytelling
“is to present images that elicit only a very limited number of
propositions and which have no obvious links with the con-
cerns of the protagonists” (Grodal, 2009, p. 6). As Moreno
(1953) explains in contrasting film with novels, “Motion pic-
ture narration, on the other hand, is tending toward a greater
personalization of the story, replacing impersonal presenta-
tion of the facts by narration by one of the characters or,
going further, presenting the events subjectively, as seen and
felt by one of the characters” (p. 341). The construction and
intensification of personalization results in an increased
identification of the spectator “in the position of a partici-
pant, involved in the world of the narrative, living as his own
the experiences of the story” (Moreno, 1953, p. 341).

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ASEAN and Chinese Screen Studies organized the *Yasmin Film Fest and Forum* in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This event presented the workings and life experiences by her family members, her close friends, and people who worked with her. All of her six films were screened, and her photographic works were exhibited at the same time.

**Literature Review**

The existing literature on the film industry in Malaysia only provides limited discussion on the Malaysian female director. It has identified that the context of the film industry and its representation for Malaysia embraces “local articulations of Islam in relation to specifically Malaysian sensibilities, cultural identities and ethical norms” (Zainal, 2019, p. 16). While discussing a cinematic new wave in Malaysia, Raju (2017) states that:

In the case of Malaysian cinema, the nation-state undertook a racializing drive following the pro-Malay policies utilized in other spheres. Although the Malaysian film industry was founded on Chinese money, Indian imagination and Malay labour, the hybridity of the Malaysian nation and Malaysian cinema was never celebrated in Malaysia. (p. 225)

Although Malaysian cinema embraces “modernity and changing gender configurations” (Khoo, 2006, p. 5), it has been reported that “The gender disparity women directors’ face in the film industry” (Astro Awani, 2014, para. 2) is obvious in Malaysia. Zainal (2019) also points out the existence of “social hierarchies around gender, class and ethnicity” (p. 16). At dispute may also be how this lack of gender equality and access in the creative production of cinematic construction may also shape and limit the representation of subjectivity in its filmic stories.

Several studies on Yasmin Ahmad and her films have been published after her death, and their style and approach are considered similar to each other. In his “Reanimating realization through pop culture: Yasmin Ahmad’s inter-Asian audio-visual integration,” Bernards (2017) states that “in her lifetime, Yasmin playfuly irked Malaysia’s religious conservatives, but, as a devout Muslim, she always did so with a spirit of forgiveness towards her detractors” (p. 56). Khoo (2009) believes that “Yasmin proposes a cosmopolitan version of Islam that crosses ethnic and religious boundaries” (p. 112). Some articles also examine the pedagogic stability of state-defined race identities and post-colonial culture represented in her films. Sim (2018) “contends that the [late Yasmin’s] films evoke a phenomenology that speaks to Malaysia’s own geopolitical ‘sense of the world’” (p. 389). Sim’s (2018) article demonstrates “debates on the politics of race and identity in Malaysia” (p. 390). It uses an “alternative model of multiculturalism and national belonging” that addresses “cultural policy in Malaysia as well as hegemonic cultural formulations and political constructions” (p. 390). Lee (2015) argues that Yasmin’s films have “extensively altered the Malaysian cinematic landscape by removing demarcations along racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, age and gender lines” (p. 87). Yasmin’s films employ the narrative on “love, hope, forgiveness and humanism” which actually “move beyond being focused on multiculturalism” (Lee, 2015, p. 87). The narrative content distinguishes her films from others.

Other approaches have been used to better understand Yasmin’s body of work. Some of Yasmin’s films had been analyzed and discussed as case studies. Shukri and Abdullah (2018, p. 309) conducted a content analysis on *Sepet* (2004) and concluded that the inter-ethnic film “qualifies to be a Malaysian national film. . . [as it] has portrayed the people of Malaysia as multiracial, an identity of the Malaysian nation.” Ang (2007) also examined how *Sepet* “functions within local political discourse and the ongoing project of nationbuilding, and at how this film in particular—unlike other contemporary Malaysian films that are garnering acclaim in foreign film festivals” (p. 22). Ngo and Baharudin (2015, p. 111) examine the representation of multiculturalism and religion in *Muallaf* (2008); their article provided a “textual analysis of the film form on the portrayal of religious issues in terms of visual organization and narrative structure through the framework of multiculturalism.” These studies substantively demonstrated their authors’ interpretation of the texts, and a more or less comprehensive category schema according to the particular research problems. Nevertheless, the perspective on a single film usually focuses on a narrow and specific schema. In contrast this study will attempt to identify, analyze, and describe Yasmin’s consistent cinematic construction of Malay subjectivity. This paper asserts that her construction of Malay subjectivity forms a critical cinematic perspective that distinguishes her from other Malaysian filmmakers and forms a basis for her significant contribution to the Malaysian national cinema.

Culture is central to the formation of our conscious and unconscious. Although there are many definitions for culture, Edwards et al. (2019) define it as “the rules of living and functioning in a particular society” (p. 117). Sheikh (2017) further explains its relationship to subjectivity as “Subject with subjectivity is not born as such but is made so by his immersion into culture” (p. 2). In their essay titled, “A study in cinematic subjectivity: Metaphors of perception in film,” Coëgnarts and Kravanja (2017) assert that “One important mode . . . states that the feeling of subjectivity can be intensified by a represented space that impedes perceptual access” (p. 154). Two different accounts would be discussed in terms of cinematic subjectivity. One account is about “the visual or acoustic perception of characters”; and, the other is “the complex forms of introspective subjectivity” (Coëgnarts & Kravanja, 2017, p. 155), such as collective memories and beliefs. Filmmakers use narratives and the cinematographic apparatus to construct an identification experience with representations of perception and the mental processes that enable perception. Grodal (2009) argues that “feelings of
subtly objectivity and objectivity relate to the kinds of physical and mental processes that a given sequence cues” (p. 236). He believes film subjectivity can be evoked in six ways:

1. minimizing or freezing actions and blocking thought ‘action’;
2. impeding perceptual access;
3. making the access to the space deviant or distorted;
4. making the portrayed actions deviant or distorted;
5. portraying situations with a problematic reality status; and
6. portraying deviant emotions and emotional reactions. (p. 229)

These methods provide a criterion for the authors to examine the ways in which Yasmin’s six films dealt with identity and subjectivity. It will be evidenced that this is through the development of a substantially anti-mainstream set of narrative and performance styles. The way fimmic esthetics and narrative connects to the emergence of subjectivity is regarded as “as the central issue in modern philosophy” (Bowie, 2003, p. 2). Through analyzing Yasmin’s films, this study may offer a “reconciliation of[the] subjectivity with a nature which is both in us and outside us” (Bowie, 2003, p. 41). This paper also employs the phenomenological perspective defined by Craig to look at the authenticity of the ways of experiencing self and other depicted in Yasmin’s films. As Craig (2009) has asserted “One cannot directly experience another consciousness, and the potential for intersubjective understanding is thereby limited” (pp. 960, 961), but the experience offered through storytelling in cinema may offer an alternative means of transcending this limitation.

Objective of the Study

Yasmin Ahmad’s films express her “interest in stories on the human condition” (Baumgärtel, 2012, p. 246) which form a thought-provoking reflection on where the individual stands and is positioned within given contexts. This study aims to identify and evaluate the cinematic discourse employed by Yasmin in her attempt to make films that can appeal and reach out to any race or ethnicity across Malaysia and worldwide. It analyses her cinematic approach in the construction of Malay subjectivity in her six films. These films are Rabun (2003), Sepet (2004), Gubra (2006), Mukhsin (2006), Muallaf (2008), and Talentime (2009). The six feature-length films that she managed to complete and screen for audiences prior to her death are as much documents of the multiracial culture of Malaysia as they are an examination of Malaysians’ performance styles. The way filmic esthetics and narrative connects to the emergence of subjectivity is regarded as “as the central issue in modern philosophy” (Bowie, 2003, p. 2). Through analyzing Yasmin’s films, this study may offer a “reconciliation of[the] subjectivity with a nature which is both in us and outside us” (Bowie, 2003, p. 41). This paper also employs the phenomenological perspective defined by Craig to look at the authenticity of the ways of experiencing self and other depicted in Yasmin’s films. As Craig (2009) has asserted “One cannot directly experience another consciousness, and the potential for intersubjective understanding is thereby limited” (pp. 960, 961), but the experience offered through storytelling in cinema may offer an alternative means of transcending this limitation.

Methodology

This research attempts to identify and explain how various power relationships of ethnicities and race are represented as a discourse construction for the societal context of Malaysia by Yasmin. These relationships may emerge from her visualization and narrative in the six films in a process of meaning-making. To accomplish the aim of the study, this research employs two qualitative methods of data gathering; they are (1) a critical discourse analysis of the six films and (2) in-depth interviews with Yasmin’s film production colleagues using their commentary to produce a creative perspective for the construction of the films.

As Hall (2013) recalls, a discourse is defined as “a system of representation” (p. 3), but entails both language and practices that “produce meaning” (p. 17). This research examines a specific social practice within each of Yasmin’s films in which power is exercised. It examines how a specific type of culture of Malaysia is both represented and reflected on screen. This includes a focus of how the reality and modern understanding of traditional values as well as the formation of new values is reflected.

The concept of film discourse might be defined through the concept of film as text. Prince (1993) explains that “Stressing the signifier as a differential construction enabled film theory to emphasize communication as a discourse, as a culture-bound activity, relative to and differentially patterned by the unique social worlds of diverse groups of interactants” (p. 17). Film could be “comprehensible as discourse, as the creation of apparent meaning where only true relations of different prevail” (Prince, 1993, p. 17). This discourse analysis is employed as the method of analysis to determine how Malays are portrayed in the films through character representation, their behavior and both verbal and nonverbal communication. It primarily elaborates as analysis “the two layers of cinematic communication: the diegetic and the extra-diegetic layers” (Piazza et al., 2011, p. 3), the presentation of a world within the narrative and presentation of levels outside of it. The analytical design is formed as categories of representation for gender roles, intimacy, beliefs, and religious values. These categories are chosen for analysis based on previous research in which Malay subjectivity is the focus.

In-depth interview sessions were conducted from 2019 to 2020 by this paper’s corresponding author with four individuals who worked closely with the late Yasmin Ahmad on her film production. As King and Horrocks (2010) maintain, “conversing with people enables them to share their experiences and understandings” (p. 11). This study acknowledges that shared experience and understanding are seldom straightforward and may be subject to variations as “people participate indeterminate lifeworlds, often attaching different interpretations and meanings to seemingly similar to ‘facts’ and events” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 11). The interviewees are Orked Ahmad, Jovian Lee, David Lok, and Hassan Muthalib.

Orked Ahmad is the late Yasmin’s younger sister, and her name appeared throughout Yasmin’s films acting as the lead character. Jovian Lee, currently the head of the creative group of Leo Burnett Malaysia, had worked for Yasmin since
1995; his personal experiences were adapted into Yasmin’s *Muallaf*. David Lok acted as several “father” characters in Yasmin’s films, such as *Muallaf* and *Talentime*. Hassan Abdul Muthalib is a Malaysian animator, film director and critic, and artist who pioneered Malaysian animation. He was a close friend and mentor of the late Yasmin.

**Discussion**

**Discussion of Cinematic Style and Representation of Social Taboos and Hypocrisy**

All of Yasmin Ahmad’s six feature films, being consistent with postmodernist tendencies, can be understood to generate images and simulacra or likenesses of the past and the present—these occur in a social situation in which general societal and religious traditions have become subverted. One main postmodern characteristic of her films is their fragmentation.

Yasmin’s narrative structure and visual style are directed against Malaysia’s mainstream narrative, the ideal of the unified, perfectly coherent plot, and visual illusion of reality through extremely long shots, long shots, and the use of continuity cutting. She creates single take scenes, often consisting of a full or long shot. She confronts the viewers with bits and pieces of her characters’ lives. The importance and relevance of each sequence of scenes would be interpreted by viewers themselves. This approach “allowed audiences more objectivity than the usual ‘in your face’ approach of much of mainstream Asian cinema” (Bergan, 2009, para. 6). Malaysian viewers would probably feel these films challenged ethnic stereotypes, and they would also possibly understand Yasmin’s openness against any type of fundamentalism and racism. Unsurprisingly, her feature films were disliked by the power regime in Malaysia at that time, for tackling taboo subjects such as anti-hierarchy social settings and inter-racial romance. And through it, she retained a sense of independence over her creative endeavors.

Her films were widely regarded as independent films. Yasmin is one of the Malaysian directors who are “accused of ‘*syiok sendiri*’ (making films to please themselves)” (Khoo, 2015, p. 213). In 2006, the provocative television debate by the government-run television station RTM1 resulted in an attack of “‘liberal Malay Muslim independent filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad’s films in the weekly television forum’” (Khoo, 2011, p. 200). She was not afraid to continue making films which reflected the struggles and cultural diversity of Malaysian society. According to Orked Ahmad when interviewed for this study, support, trust, and optimism from her family made Yasmin continue her filmmaking. In 2007, her film *Mukhsin* was awarded the Grand Prix by the Kinderfilmfest International Jury and a Generation K-Plus Crystal Bear Special Mention at the 57th Berlin International Film festival. According to Koay (2007), the jury’s citation described *Mukhsin* as:

A wonderful, almost magical atmosphere, enhanced by a striking soundtrack, poetic images of the closeness of a family and community. Witty script combined with well-rounded and humorous characters. All this in a story of a friendship that dared not cross into love, and a love for which friendship is no longer enough. (para. 4)

Yasmin’s *Mukhsin*, is the last film of the Orked trilogy, and is a prequel to the films *Sepet* and *Gubra*. It is the story of first love innocence and a nostalgic portrait of young people. This film explores what happens when two teenagers start to develop romantic feelings. It revolves around the first love of a 10-year-old Orked and a 12-year-old boy Mukhsin. The narrative reveals the ideal equilibrium between the awkwardness and incompleteness that exemplifies Yasmin’s commercially driven open filmic form, and her signature art-cinema construction. Amir (2010) stated that:

There’s a real sense of family in her films, not just because of the domestic unit that is always foregrounded, but because there is a humane yet raucous inclusivity in her stories, which become miniatures of how Malaysian society can function. . . (para. 12)

As the last film of the trilogy, *Mukhsin* details the earliest stories in the Orked chronicles, narrating Orked’s adolescence after the depiction of her teenage years in *Sepet* and *Gubra*. *Orked* is the screen name used throughout the Orked trilogy and it is designated to unify and act as a form of interacting parts in these films, though Jason also appeared in the form of a physical appearance and as audio conversations. Orked Ahmad states that their parents suggest that Yasmin uses the names of siblings since the trilogy is about their family.

Though the Orked trilogy is about Yasmin’s family, they are “politically progressive, intellectually suggestive, but the same time unabashedly sentimental” (Sim, 2009, p. 48). Yasmin’s films tackle humanistic themes by narrating all Malaysian races’ own stories, while “almost all films by Malay directors revolved around Malay people, instead of Malaysia” (Satriyandinar, 2018, para. 12). Her films appear to show a sense of heart and introspection that allows the world to have an unbiased, more authentic view of the Malaysian experience, in both mainstream and independent cinema.

Yasmin Ahmad’s films could be contextualized in both mainstream and independent spheres. Baumgärtel (2012) believes that Yasmin’s films “have drawn the ire not just of the Malaysian censorship board, but also of people who think of themselves as highly religious Muslims” (p. 246). Omar (2011) argues that the “uniqueness of Yasmin Ahmad’s work lies in her representation of Islam and sexuality as a mean to subvert Malay subjectivity” (p. 163). Her works not just redefined the Malay experiences, especially the experiences of Malay women, but also the experiences of all walks of Malaysian lives. Viewers have their perspectives to perceive the experiences depicted in her films. To ensure Yasmin’s film could be successfully released to mainstream cinema in
Malaysia, “Malaysia’s Censorship Board . . . made eight total cuts to Sepet” (Bernards, 2017, p. 61). Muallaf obtained approval “by the censors with three audio mutings” (Bergan, 2009, para. 9). Scenes discussing sex, racial stereotypes, and involving some nudity in her films usually led debates and rejections from Malaysia’s Censorship Board. However, according to Fatimah Abu Bakar—an actress and close friend of the late Yasmin, Yasmin “had a big heart and vision that we usually don’t understand. That’s why people misunderstood her. But she never intended any malice” (Koswanage, 2009, para. 6). It can be asserted that Yasmin portrayed the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of Islam in her presentation of the faith and religion by focusing on subjects that are rarely addressed in the mainstream cinema.

Discussion, Interviews, and Analysis of Representations of Inclusion, Family, Love, and Religion

Yasmin’s first feature film—Rabun—went forth in undisguised imperfection, and firstly demonstrated that Yasmin’s liberalism understood the practice of the true Islamic faith to be antithetical to all intolerance. She had placed Rabun in a tension of spatial and cultural experience that included a conflicting narrative of race and ethnicity. It set the narrative style for her other five films.

Rabun is inspired by her parents. It narrates a story of an older couple who are free-spirited—Pak Atan and Mak Inom. After growing tired of city life, they decide to spend more time in the countryside. However, when a distant relative, Yem, defraud them of money, they realize that staying the old Malay village is not such a good idea. They disconnect him, and Yem plots vengeance. Meanwhile, the couple’s daughter Orked is being courted by a young man, Yasin, in the city. The tension between spatial and cultural experience is encapsulated in the old Malay village. The conversation between Pak Atan and Mak Inom, while they are on the way to the old Malay village, narrates their complaint about human relationships in the urban setting of Kuala Lumpur and exemplifies their ideal of the village life. Mak Inom says neighbors look after each other and it is safe to leave doors open at night in the village. The old Malay village in the film bears the burden of a kind of spatial authenticity. Nevertheless, the mutual trust and religious emphasis is completely unfounded. The resolution of the film is no longer an expectant conversation between Pak Atan and Mak Inom but rather an anger and disappointment while they quickly drive away from the old Malay village. They could not trust their Malay relative. And they now have more trust in the Chinese vendor who lays cement floors for them.

Rabun does not depict stereotypical ethnic traits but offers a lens of openness. Yasin expresses his straightforward opinion—“strange,” when he witnesses the old couple shower together. Yasin’s opinion expressed in the film represents the tension between traditional and modern values. It could be read as an effect of a changing Malaysian society, a challenge to stereotypical ethnic traits or both. According to Jovian Lee when interviewed, Yasmin’s official reason to start directing a feature film was to entertain her parents, and her parents were truly romantic. They showered together; and they held up each other’s hand while sleep.

Scenes of home settings are commonly used in most of her films, and home becomes the spatial concept that accommodates conversation of social taboos and hypocritical relationships. Home space in Kuala Lumpur, in Rabun, permits the old couple flirt with each other freely though their daughter and daughter’s friend are around; home space at the Malay village allows the old couple to discover the false appearance of virtue and goodness, especially with respect to religious and moral beliefs.

The family in Yasmin’s films is usually seen as falling within the realm of Malaysia’s multi-ethnic culture. Yasmin envisioned a hybridized or blended race which is promoted through mixed relationships and marriage. This is evidenced through the romantic affair between Orked and a Chinese boy—Jason in the film Sepet, and later between Orked and Jason’s brother in Gubra.

Sepet is the “iconic Malaysian film on interracial romance” (Chalil, 2020, para 1). This film showcases Yasmin’s effort to construct her filmic language for expressing the story of first love with ethnic differences. This results in a bifurcated comparison between the Orked’s loving home and the rather darker space of Jason, which is a split between a gruff home life and a gang of lawbreakers. Though the establishing scene in Sepet indicated a warm mother-and-son relationship, quarreling dominates the diegetic at their home space most of the time. Orked’s home in Sepet was a double story landed property where there are conversations themed on colonialism, postcolonialism, and liberalism. Orked’s open mind was visualized from that foundation.

When Orked and Jason went out on a date at the open-air food court, the conjunction of their words results in something altogether different than any simple dialogue between a garrulous Malay girl and a taciturn Chinese boy. The entire scene, which was done with a single medium long shot, depicts a difficult yet exquisite negotiation of attraction and cultural difference. They openly critique the stereotypes of Malay and Chinese through societal lens, and also humorously admit to the existence of stereotypical ethnic traits.

Yasmin explores Islam and humanity through interracial love stories which resonated with ordinary Malaysians. These stories were compelling and courageous, often challenging the norms and conventions of Malaysian films by daringly dramatizing and visualizing societal taboos and hypocrisies on cinematic screen. Nevertheless, from the first feature film to the Orked trilogy, Yasmin leaves her distinctive creative signature. She conveys religious and moral issues that are common to her countrymen, but she subverts their preachiness or familiarity precisely by interpreting them in abstract filmic forms. At the very end of the film
Gubra, three senses of praying and worship were intercut with each other at three different locations—the spirit tablet at Jason’s family, the Christian church in the town, and at Maz’s musolla. Yasmin quoted Rumi’s poems “One One One” at the end: “The lamps are different, but the light is the same.” All of these shots could be seen as “enframed” artistic discourses but no less sentimentally persuasive for that visibility. But, according to Jovian Lee, these three scenes along with the quote resulted in ferocious attacks via emails and SMSs directed personally at Yasmin.

Analysis of Filmic Construction of Malay Subjectivity

Subjectivity can be understood as drawn within the framing of a world picture. Furthermore, it can be “analytically deconstructed and reconstructed in a process” which discloses “a mode of understanding which enables ‘restraints’ in the face of the irresistibility of enframing” (Kochan, 2017, p. 360). Yasmin’s films can then be understood to demonstrate two processes: (a) deconstruction of reality in conceptual acts of dramatization and (b) reconstruction of the whole work as the sum of interacting parts. The analysis on the two processes provides a means to understand the association between Malaysian reality and the choices about what to address and how to enframe it as filmic representation.

Some theories of postmodernism argue that since life (or much of life) is a fiction, we should participate in the drama ourselves and live a life of play. In effect, life can be viewed as a symbolic arena for the performance of imaginations. Rather of realizing that reality is a fabrication, we consciously participate in its formation by building identities, subcultures, and alternate world as means of social experimentation.

In Yasmin’s Muallaf, there are several scenes which involve religion and religious topics. In the initial scenes, the older sister Rohani recites Insyaa’ Allah (meaning if God wills) for starting her motorbike which keeps failing to start. Younger sister Ana addresses concerns about her older sister and Islam when Brother Anthony of the Catholic high school talks to them, and she complains, “she calls herself a Muslim but she works nights at a pub.” When Ana does not follow her teacher’s instructions, she is punished by being forced to stand on a chair, and when she talks back, the teacher reminds her about her mother’s death:

*The Valley Spirit never dies. It is named the Mysterious Female... True words are not fine-surrounding. Fine-surrounding words are not true.*

The expression of individual subjectivity can be understood to be embedded in the characterization of Ana. Ana is depicted as a rebellious school girl who is upholding her Muslim identity but also unconstrained by Islam. She is also familiar with Catholicism and she can quote the *Tao Te Ching*—the fundamental text for both philosophical and religious Taoism—as a defense for her way of mourning. She is the character who unconsciously engages in conversation by stating page numbers of religious quotations in both the Bible and the Quran. Many of those surrounding her cannot understand her and even punish her because of that. The Unconscious appears as a quality of subjectivity. According to González Rey (2017), “subjectivity is defined as a human production, capable of transcending the apparent objective limits of human existence” (p. 502). Ana is the one who has the ability to go beyond the apparent objective boundaries of human existence by reminding her surroundings through her ways of engaging with them.

Sisterhood in Muallaf is not only a social and family relationship that plays a role in constructing subjectivity, but also a relationship that results from structural inequalities. The two sisters in Muallaf experience family abuse and conflict, but they never hesitate to show love and affection by kissing each other and praying together. The relationship forms a contrast with the relationships of the male protagonist Brian. Brian always refuses to go to church with his mother on Sunday, and they quarrel throughout the film because of this disagreement. Although the leading female characters, Ana and Rohani, are Muslim, they are portrayed as somewhat open-minded. Brian is influenced by Rohani who is aware just mindful of the common philological structures and knowledge of religion and morality.

In examining the father characters, they can be understood as problematic, dramatized as the sources of the structural inequalities. The sisters’ father shaves Rohani’s head completely bald as she argues with the stepmother. Similarly, Brian’s father forces him to experience public nudity on the street because he reads an erotic magazine. According to David Lok who is the actor who plays the father of Biran, the depiction of a fierce father in Yasmin’s film implicitly reveals the social problems, representative of marginalized and low-income families. He also explained the late Yasmin’s intentions of narrative with the use of problematization of father characters in her films: though these supporting roles are depicted as being fierce and contentious, Yasmin placed her hope on the liberal modern Malays in the films. Her purpose was to inspire viewers to pursue a better society. In Muallaf, the open-minded Rohani plays the role of counselor, advising Brian to be patient with his mother and accompany her to the church.

In Muallaf, a human’s hand is coded as a form for construction of the religious belief in Malaysia. According to Islamic religious laws, “a practicing Muslim man or woman would avoid or refuse to shake hands with a person of the opposite sex who is not related to him or her by blood or marriage” (Rizvi, 2006, p. 96). Yet, Rohani does not hesitate to shake hands with Brian who sends her sister home. This plotting showcases Rohani’s comprehensive understanding on Islam and its religious laws. The action of handshaking explicitly reveals her openness as a Muslim lady. In another
scene, Rohani and Ani’s father refuses to shake hands with the private investigator who feeds a dog with his hand, as “Muslims are not allowed to come into contact with dogs” (Mak, 2002, p. 271). These two scenes of shaking hands not only reveal real-life experiences, but also create dramatic irony. Although their father is awarded with the honorable Datuk-ship, nevertheless, he drinks beer and goes clubbing.

It can be understood that Yasmin’s filmic approach in portraying Muslims is a coded discourse of ethnic and religious pluralism. The representation of a liberal Islam contests Malay ethnic supremacy, Islamic separatism, and conservative Islamic ideologies. The depiction of the father constructs an image of a hypocritical Muslim. As Lee (2015) argues, Muallaf is a departure for Yasmin, when “she paradoxically employs multi-ethnic themes to criticize society’s ignorance and tendency on turning a blind eye against racial prejudice and chauvinism” (p. 99). Lee (2015) believes that Yasmin Ahmad criticizes the social issues by “highlighting how this national hypocritically proclaims itself as a tolerant multi-ethnic nation” (p. 99). This would seem to appear through the characterization and representations of the family relationships.

From the perspective of cultural identity, both Muallaf and Talentime reflect Malaysian society as a space of conflict, drawing on real-life examples of racial tension. “To fully appreciate the contribution of intersubjective cultural representations in understanding cultural identification, we consider it important to differentiate two aspects of identification with a culture—‘identification with culture as a social category’ (category-based cultural identification) and ‘identification with culture as shared knowledge’” (Wang, 2017, p. 3078). The film Talentime, released on 26 March 2009 in Malaysia, marked Yasmin’s last feature film prior to her death on 25 July 2009. This film addresses two aspects of identification in its intra-ethnic romance which combine Malay/Muslim and non-Malay/Muslim identities.

Talentime depicts the school romance between an Indian boy, Mahesh, and a Malay girl, Melur. Although the film presents many other issues as well, “the interracial relationship is the dominant leitmotif of each” which connects the film with “parallel events occurring in real-life Malaysia” (Clark & Pietsch, 2014, p. 236). Talentime visualizes the conflicts of racial-linguistic segmentation with the unique and skillfully-set way of portraying the hero as the “mute” Mahesh who is a hearing and speech impaired Indian boy. He uses sign language to communicate with people around him. In portraying him as a deaf and mute individual, Yasmin constructs a reality representing those who do not have a voice in the society. Lerner (2016) asserts that films “use deaf characters to represent or emphasize powerlessness of certain social groups” (p. 412). The Indian community in Malaysia is the smallest of the three main ethnic groups. Clark and Pietsch (2014) state that “Indians in Malaysia . . . experience political marginalization” (p. 237). The portrayal of Mahesh as hearing and speech impaired is a metonym for the lower position of the community in the country. The film directly questions the struggle of the romance between the Muslim-Malay dominance and diaspora minority.

In his benchmark article Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation, Hall (1989) states that “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (p. 713). There are many ways of defining and looking at cultural identity, and one of them is to look at cultural identity as a dynamic being, which not only belongs to the past, but also to the future. Talentime broadly addresses the question of Muslim dominance and cultural identity of Indian diaspora. This question had its histories—and the histories have their real, material, and symbolic effects. The conflict in Mahesh’s family can be understood to represent what Wan and Yu (2014) identify as the existence of “categorization of the self as part of social collective . . . with delineated boundaries” (p. 70). The Indian family depicted in Talentime resists transformation of their cultural identity but accommodate themselves as the margined social group in the society. According to Clark and Pietsch (2014), this film connects with parallel events occurring in reality—“the Kampung Medan incident” (p. 221). The American film critic Michael Sicinski believes the film Talentime mirrors Yasmin’s societal subject perfectly, as he explains:

The line is fitting not just because it exemplifies Yasmin’s ethic of imperfection both within the diegetic worlds she created and with respect to the rhythm and texture of her own films, but also because the phrase itself contains an awkward but completely comprehensible Malaysian world-English “mistake”. (Sicinski, 2010, para. 2)

The school teenagers in Talentime make all kinds of “mistakes,” but their talent-show stage, which implies a harmony or consensus orientation, represents a synthesis of societal value and beliefs.

Yasmin’s close friend Hassan Muthalib, when interviewed, discussed Yasmin’s thematic choice for Talentime. He explained that Yasmin calls us back to the spiritual world that all of us come from in order to build a better world. The title Tale n Time which was placed as the backdrop of the stage signifies this. He recalled Yasmin’s intention as “the story is of a tale in time.” Talentime, as the last film that Yasmin completed, appears to have more emotional value or intensity than her earlier five films. The Malay girl represents the face that encapsulates universal themes of emotion, and simultaneously serves to accentuate matters of race that has become more dominant in the real setting. Richards and Ibrahim (2012) conclude that in Yasmin’s films, “love is a necessary but insufficient antidote to the kinds of hatred that imperil human relations. Forgiveness is another potential solution” (p. 442). This analysis would align and concur with this as Yasmin’s construction of subjectivity.
Conclusion

In her films, Yasmin Ahmad chooses to frame the characters, time, and space as a mirror for a consciousness of Malaysian society. Her six feature films could be regarded as a reflection of modern life in Malaysia. The representation of powerful emotional experiences, outside of conscious control, trigger in viewers associations from a warehouse of shared memories from their life experience. This mixture of subconscious memory cuts across the imposed conscious boundaries of ethnicity and race of the nation.

Yasmin’s concludes the film Mukhsin with a music performance in which her real-life parents play a Malay song on a piano and her younger sister Orked Ahmad is framed as a participant. She leads the cast and crew around the piano in the final celebratory long shot. This footage showcases the joy of crew members who are from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The subjectivity expressed as life experience is profoundly influenced by the level of consciousness as are the choices that appear as options in the story.

This paper will not deny but rather affirm that Yasmin’s films challenge Malaysian cinema’s established studio-system, moving away from those artificial pop-up backgrounds, song and dance performances, and extended scripts in favor of realism and context. All her films are an act of invitation to mindfulness—reminders of what human qualities really are or should be, and a resistance to forgetfulness; They serve as a balancing act in which films reveal society for what it is and how the society cheats us from knowing the real-life experience. Yasmin’s name becomes synonymous with a unique style of narrative, that of a mix of humor, love, and unsaid realities for which most Malaysians can connect to.

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Notes

1. The interview was conducted by the author through a phone conversation on the 3rd August 2020.

2. The Orked trilogy is consist of three films—Sepet (2004), the sequel Gubra (2006), and prequel Mukhsin (2006). These three films narrate the three major relationships of Orked, a Muslim girl in Malaysia negotiating them at different points in her life. This character is named after the late Yasmin Ahmad’s younger sister Orked Ahmad.

3. Same as note 1.

4. The interview was conducted at the author’s office at Xiamen University Malaysia, in Sepang, Selangor, Malaysia, on 22nd March 2019.

5. A Musholla or Surau is an Islamic prayer room.

6. The interview was conducted by the author through a phone conversation on the 4th August 2020.

7. Datuk, is a Malay title commonly used in Brunei and Malaysia. Datuk is conferred by the non-hereditary Malaysian state leader which is nominated by the state legislature. In general, it is a title or the prefix of a title given to a person upon being conferred with certain orders of honor.

8. The Kampung Medan Incident was a sectarian violence between the Indian and Malay that erupted in a small village of Kampung Medan located in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia, in 2001. A wedding and funeral in Kampung Medan sparked a brawl between the two parties. A Malay family had their wedding ceremony at their home at the same time as their Indian neighbors held their funeral ceremony.

9. The interview was conducted by the author through a messenger conversation on the 3rd August 2020.

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