

# Imagining Transnational Modernity in Contemporary Malaysia: Malay Women, Asian Soap Operas, and Moral Capabilities

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## Abstract

This paper is concerned with how urban Malay women negotiate and imagine their modernity as mediated through imported television dramas. It is clear that one of the platforms through which to articulate modernity in contemporary Malaysia is the consumption of popular culture. Promoted at first as an appropriate television genre to strengthen the agenda of Malaysian modernity, Asian soap opera has not been without its tensions. Some authorities have expressed anxiety over what they consider to be the negative influences of foreign issues of morality, which they believe might undermine the standards of Malay womanhood and compromise Malay cultural and national boundaries. Against this perception, however, we propose that urban Malay women negotiate their cultural resources to establish specific watching competencies with which to intelligently and adeptly engage foreign lifestyles in Asian soap operas imported to Malaysia. Watching competencies involve an active mobilization of those resources through which Malay women watch these soaps and measure their adherence to tradition. This paper will focus on how selected urban Malay women exercise their cultural resources, particularly those of *adat* (the traditional Malay custom as practiced by the Malays in Malaysia) and Islam, to form specific watching competencies for engaging with the depictions of complex inappropriate foreign lifestyles portrayed in Asian soap operas.

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## Key words

Asian soap operas, Malay women, Islam, watching competency, television consumption

## Introduction

Popular culture is a crucial domain of modern life often used to channel the aims and projects of a new regime, in this case one of modernity. In the earliest phase of television broadcasting in Malaysia (during the 1960s and 70s), Western soaps were reported as being the most popular program among local audiences. This trend continued after the privatization of the Malaysian television industry in the early 1980s. Many Western soaps, particularly those from America such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Baywatch*, and *Beverly Hills 90210*, were the most popular programs (Karthigesu, 1991). However, the images of modernity in these American soaps, with their emphases on consumerism, materialistic lifestyles, and sexuality, were criticised by the local authorities as a threat to Malay cultural life. Therefore, from the early 1980s onwards, Asian soap operas from neighbouring Asian regions were promoted by the local authorities to counter the perceived negative influences of American popular culture and to promote images of modernity from culturally proximate Asian locales. Nowadays, Asian soap opera has been identified as one of the most popular ways Malay women in the urban area engage with the modern world.

Scholars such as Hobson (1982), Ang (1985), Buckingham (1987), and Geraghty (1981) define soap operas as long-running television programs which include elements of melodrama, realism, familiar narrative, and domestic and ordinary issues including family and love relationships. However, soap operas need to be culturally and historically specified (Cantor & Pingree, 1983). As Bielby & Harrington (2005) demonstrate, although soap opera is commonly known as daytime serial drama in America, there are various forms of this genre elsewhere, particularly in Asian countries. Allen (1995, p. 112) categorizes soap opera into two types of serialisation structure: while most soap operas produced in the Western world, including Australia, typically apply open-ended storytelling; those from Asian countries are characterised by closed-ended narrative.

Soap operas are a global phenomenon that shares various similarities in terms of structure, format, narrative, characters, and more importantly, the sense of the ordinary. In Asia, popular television serials produced in Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and Indonesia all retain

the typical format of soap operas of seriality, romance, family themes, melodrama, and suspense (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Iwabuchi, 2002, 2004). The great majority of Asian soap operas evince the same grammar and style of soap production including seriality, romantic scene, cliffhanger suspense, attractive actors, and emotional background songs (Hobson, 2003, p. 35). The widespread appeal of soap opera has demonstrated that this genre's dramatization of the "familiar" may act as a platform through which to engage with modernity in many areas of the world. As Giddens (1990, p. 20) observes, "Modern organizations are able to connect the local and the global in ways which would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies and in so doing routinely affect the lives of many millions of people."

The popularity of Asian soaps amongst urban Malay women in Malaysia has not been without its tension. The local authorities, especially UMNO (United Malays National Organization), have expressed anxiety over what they consider to be the negative influences of foreign issues of morality as portrayed in Asian soap operas, which (authorities believe) may undermine the standards of Malay womanhood and compromise cultural and national boundaries. What we want to argue is although urban Malay women have expressed their excitement in articulating images of global modernity through this television genre, they are still rather cautious because they are not keen to contradict their positions with their cultural resources, particularly with regards to Islam and Malay *Adat*. Unlike Islam as a religious ideology, *Adat* is often invoked as a more secular code of general ethics or cultural norms that is seen as a timeless tradition with Malay roots which 'directly and indirectly defines Malay life' (Abdullah, 1984, p. 100). *Adat* is seen as providing the framework for systematising the more mundane aspects of Malay cultural life like social etiquette, family values, community interaction and interpersonal socialisation. Islam is invoked as the moral and spiritual foundation for Malay life, but discourses of mundane social behaviour tend to be associated with the cultural norms of *adat*. *Adat* is also often invoked as a moral ethic to guide issues pertaining to social behaviour that Islamic tenets may not touch upon. For example, it is the *adat* perception of Malays as tolerant, benign people that is often invoked to promote a harmonious multiracial society, a subject that may not find direct resonance in Islamic tenets. In fact, Malay women consistently

position their cultural resources to develop specific competencies for being more discerning in the contestation over the cultural ramification of modernity. In this article we explore how Malay women in the urban area of Kuala Lumpur developed moral capabilities which increased their critical watching competency, aiding in the process of their intelligent and critical watching of Asian soap operas. Malay women exercise moral capability, enabling them to negotiate and discern the positive and negative aspects of the morally contentious or undesirable content of Asian soaps.

This qualitative research involves eight urban Malay women in the city area of Kuala Lumpur as participants. We define the urban Malay woman as a Malay female who has settled and lived in the city area for at least five to ten years within the age group of between 35 to 50 years. We chose a small number of respondents because the initial fieldwork showed that the answers from the women was not only quite uniform in terms of content, the feedback also quickly reached a saturation point (Lee, Woo, & Mackenzie, 2002; Mason, 2010) in terms of the research themes that could be derived from these casual discussions. Therefore, it was decided that a smaller sample size and in-depth interviews would be more appropriate for the study. While the relatively small size of my focus group may raise doubts about the representativeness of the study, we must note here that this study does not present an overall picture of the patterns of consumption of Asian soap operas amongst Malay women. In fact, we believe that instead of undertaking the formidable task of formulating a study that would be a reflection of the whole population of Malay women, paying attention to the nuances of each response in our study helps foreground the 'diversity of experience' (Wilson, 2004, p. 18) that may exist in a society with reference to one single phenomenon.

As the capital city of the nation, Kuala Lumpur is not only the primary growth area for the current economic boom but is also the dissemination hub of transnational cultural text flow. As the central location of the local television stations, Kuala Lumpur is the key shopping center for foreign consumer products such as mobile phones, computers, name-brand outfits and cosmetics; it has a spectacular urban landscape and modern lifestyle. In short, Kuala Lumpur is the ideal setting to conduct interviews about watching soap operas and observing

transnational modernity experiences. Living, studying, and working in this capital city for decades, we have experienced and observed the full extent of the development of the urban lifestyle and tracked trends in contemporary popular culture consumption. Although we presume these factors might help us understand urban Malay women better, we are still cautious about approaching them as researchers due to our obvious outsider status with no history of previous social interactivity with these subjects. One should keep in mind here that urban Malays have at times been identified as tending to be more individualistic and hesitant to socialize in their own neighbourhoods (Hamid & Mion, 2007).

Considering the possible individualistic character of urban Malay women, we opted to utilize in-depth interviews as the main research tool to gather information. Since our objective was to seek a variety of interpretations of Asian soap opera consumption through the establishment of specific watching competencies, we built up a network of subjects by way of the snowballing technique (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 93) in order to identify potential urban Malay women who may be willing to participate in this research. Using the snowball technique, we contacted some Malay females who were known to be habitual viewers of Asian soap opera and, with their help, six potential participants were recommended and identified, and all of them agreed to participate in the interview. As the snowballing technique could help identify potential participants only through networking, some issues such as the personal background of the participants might be discovered to influence their interview responses. However, allowing for these limitations, this research yielded important evidence on the variety of interpretations of Asian soap opera consumption associated with the establishment of specific watching competencies. We must note here that the selection of our participants through the snowballing technique may have led us to choose women who knew each other and belonged to the same socio-economic demographic. However, we did not focus on the relation of their class and socio-economic background with their attitudes because this issue seemed somewhat irrelevant, since all the respondents seemed to express similar worldviews.

### Watching Competencies as Tactical Negotiation

Watching competencies can be conceptualized as a form of tactical negotiation through which Malay women interpret the soaps in a manner that helps them to negotiate potential conflicts. It is crucial to point out that with the term “cultural resources” we refer to women’s interpretations of the systematized ideologies prescribed as models of ideal behaviour by the state. We suggest that, given the pervasive hold of the cultural ideologies of *adat*, Islam, and some discourses of the local authorities that help construct Malaysian modernity, Malay women must negotiate any depictions of modernity through the kaleidoscope of these worldviews. But they invoke their own interpretations of the ideologies of Islam and *adat* imposed on them by the state’s directives to reconstitute their own version of cultural resources. With this argument of watching competencies, we want to suggest a perspective that transcends the extreme arguments of Islam, *adat*, and the desire for both kinds of consuming modernity.

We argue that Malay women are not resistive or submissive subjects; neither are they manipulated in a negative or positive way. Although many previous scholars have suggested the potential of soap opera to be a particularly potent venue for women to stage resistance against their specific patriarchal social order (Brown, 1994; Geraghty, 1991; Lee & Cho, 1990), we want to expand on this view given the criticism of the banality of the concept of resistance in cultural studies (Morris, 1990) and the specificities of Malay society.

In their responses, the participants in this study rejected the notion that they were vulnerable subjects, but they also seemed complicit in submitting to the patriarchal order of their society. Parameters of subjecthood for the most part are defined and accepted without question. It is also important to note here that Malay women’s watching competencies are completely different from Charlotte Brunsdon’s earlier theory of feminine competencies of watching soap opera. Brunsdon proposed her theory of feminine competencies to designate soap opera as a gendered or feminine television genre. She argued that soap opera’s audiences required the possession of certain types of cultural knowledge in order to make sense of this television genre. Taking the famous British soap opera *Crossroads* as an example, she asserts that cultural

knowledge is a major form of competence for women because it closely associates with “the socially acceptable codes and conventions for the conduct of personal life” (Brunsdon, 1981, p. 36).

As further argued by Brunsdon, the relationship of women as the audience for soap opera as a cultural text cannot be determined solely by that text but it must involve positionalities of “ideological and moral frameworks, the rules of romance, marriage and family life” to create the pleasure of watching. Brunsdon’s argument is extremely important for identifying the femininity inherent to the genre of soap opera, but we should like to make a distinction in the practice of “watching competencies” among Malay women in terms of the consumption process of Asian soap opera. To an extent, of course, some elements in watching competencies might resonate with Brunsdon’s feminine competencies. For example, Malay women position their personal life, including discourses of motherhood and sexuality or even constructed ideology such as *adat*, to negotiate Asian soap operas as everyday cultural texts. However, unlike Brunsdon’s feminine competencies, watching competencies are very fluid in terms of their character and are not fixed to any specific gender or ethnic background issue. The practice of watching competencies could be very much different if different genders or ethnic groups consumed Asian soap opera or any other television programs.

In our research, Malay women’s nuanced interpretations of Asian soap operas reflect a watching competency of moral capability requiring two types of skills. Firstly, Malay women perform selective viewing to negotiate the images of modernity depicted in this television genre as a source of information to understand the complexities of modern life. Secondly, Malay women also practice oppositional viewing, whenever they perceive anything depicted on the soaps to be incompatible with Malay cultural norms. In most cases, such rejection is based on objections to issues of moral impropriety or misrepresentation of Islamic tenets. In this scenario, the process of negotiation involves the establishment of adaptation, distance, and rejection as critical behaviours, illustrating the subtle practices involved in Malay women’s engagement with modernity.

## Malay Women, Malaysian Modernity, and Anxiety over the Impact of Asian Soap Operas

One crucial question within any debate of Malaysian modernity concerns the positioning and role of Malay women. In examining the relations between women and modernity, Felski has argued, “categories of periodisation and the criteria used to define them appear profoundly altered when women become the focal point of enquiry instead of men” (Felski, 1992, p. 139). In Malaysia, the discussion of women’s role in modernization is subjected to a different treatment from their male counterparts (Stivens, 1994, p. 66). As the moral compass of Malaysian modernity, Islam and its gender norms have made the role of Malay women in the modernization process a sensitive issue to be monitored. As Maila Stivens notes, “the role of the Malaysian state in championing a version of Islamic modernity has greatly complicated the engagements of reformist Muslim women with the state in working for women’s (human) rights in families, and new form of family” (Stivens, 2006, p. 363).

Kahn (2001, p. 120) has made it clear that Malaysian modernity is not derived from Western modernity without the interrogation and negotiation required to make it more appropriate in the context of national and cultural aspirations. Othman (1998, p. 175) claims, “Malaysia is not exempt from the Islamising agenda of various forces which invariably are perceived and represented as part of the political phenomenon of the resurgence of ‘retraditionalizing’ Islam worldwide.” In other words, modern Malaysia is predicated on a traditionalism that is part of the larger Islamic agenda. This was clearly illustrated when the government introduced many policies that can be considered as modern in the local context. For example, the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1970-90) is credited with having created a Malay business class for the purpose of constructing modern Malaysia. As a result, a Malay middle-class rapidly emerged within two decades of NEP implementation.

Former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohammed enthusiastically labelled this emergent middle-class group *Melayu Baru* (New Malay), and his administration idealized them as a capable new community equipped to confront new challenges in the modern era (Shamsul, 1997, p. 257). The invention of the *Melayu Baru* was part of the process of moderniz-

ing not just the economy, but also the Malay citizenry. As this new middle class began to emerge in society, however, cultural predicaments began to emerge as well. As Stivens (1998, p. 92) perceives, the new Malays were understood to be gendered as male, while women were still conceived traditionally “as bearers of families’ moral and religious worth and of ‘tradition’—indeed, of the nation.”

Another predicament was that *Melayu Baru* has been seen as a threat to Malay culture even though it was positively glorified by some political interests. This arose when the image of *Melayu Baru* started to be isolated from village (*kampung*) culture and identity. The creation of *Melayu Baru* also involves the participation of Malays in the industrial-based economic program to boost up the national economy. In the meantime, many Malay women, mostly young and rural-based, had started to enter into the industrial sector as part of their participation in creating the new Malay middle class or *Melayu baru*. However, there were some Islamic concerns over the association of the middle class with consumerism and a materialistic lifestyle (Stivens, 1998, p. 92). For example, the involvement of women in this industrial sector had been used as a metaphor for the conflicting aspects of modernity (Stivens, 1998, p. 93).

Common concerns in these discourses were the changing social activities of young women attributed to increased freedom, the breakdown of family values, and the general problems of children who are brought up by mothers who are in the paid workforce. Similarly, while women have been mobilized for modernizing the economy, they have also been criticized for posing a threat to male authority and the traditional economic dominance of men (Ong, 2006, p. 35), which indirectly excluded women’s role in society. Ong (1990, p. 268) reports that parents of young women wanted them to work in the factories, but suffered conflicting anxieties centered on the fixation with their honor as Muslim women. In short, their association with the industrial sector and involvement in the various modernity projects of the Malaysian economy were seen to encourage some form of moral disruption of Malay womanhood.

Consequently, the movement of Islamic resurgence appeared to be part of the salvation mission to end the breakdown of the morals of Malay women. In fact, this movement was instigated by the new middle-class group that includes ministers in the Malaysian cabinet, scholars, and academics, as well as corporate figures (Shamsul, 1997, p. 254). The

Islamic resurgence developed as a reaction to the newfound freedom of young women which precipitated a sort of moral panic centered on the appearance of permissiveness manifested most obviously in the adoption of Western clothes (the “sarong-to-jeans” movement), make-up and cosmetics, and perhaps the greatest threat to the gender and moral order, the forming of relationships with non-Malay men and women who appeared to be no longer restrained by family guidance. They were labelled *bukan Melayu* (not Malay). For Ong (1990, p. 268), it is clear that one of the key elements in the social construction of modern Malaysian society has been the prevalence of competing images of women.

However, in contemporary Malaysia, a key method for constructing the notion of being a modern state was through the establishment of media and telecommunication systems such as the broadcast industry, especially television. Established in the 1960s as a tool for imagining modernity, Malaysian television consumption has become a “social practice” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31) for Malaysians. The first television broadcast began in 1963 through Radio Malaysia (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 5). Today, more than 5.5 million households in Malaysia own television sets and there are six Free-To-Air television stations (Ali, 2005). Two of the television stations are state-owned (RTM1 and RTM2) and the other four stations (TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9) are owned by Media Prima Bhd. Group, one of the biggest media conglomerates in Malaysia. It has a total of 11.2 million television viewers everyday. In addition to that, the satellite television company, Astro All Asia Networks (Astro), broadcasts to 1.4 million households and has a viewership of more than six million everyday (Ali, 2005). It is fair to say that the penetration of radio and television is more than 95% and access to satellite and free-to-air television channels is available in most Malaysian households (Pawanteh, 2004, p. 209).

The establishment of television in Malaysia has provided a new specific site for Malay women to engage with modernity. Unlike the national project of modernity, which did not assign new roles for Malay women, television, through its specific programs has given Malay women opportunities to engage with the modern world. One of the popular television genres celebrated by Malay women is Asian soap opera. Wahab (2006, p. 183) in her review of contemporary television in Malaysia argues that the development of satellite television with several channels encouraged

the flow of transnational television programs, including Asian soap operas. As she claims, the obvious fascination with Asian soap operas started when the new television station NTV7 was launched in 1998. The influx of Asian soap operas is also associated with the existence of ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Under this agreement most of the previous regulations that prohibited the flow of capital within Asian countries, including cultural texts, is no longer applicable. In fact, Hassan and Ahmad (2006) in their study of Malaysian television reported that the government itself has been trying to promote ASEAN culture through ASEAN television programs, including soap operas. This circumstance has allowed the flow and active screening of Asian soap operas on all Malaysian television stations.

As regularly reported in the local press, Malay women's interest in Asian soaps mainly focuses on domestic issues and depictions of ordinary life. Asian soap opera offers many depictions of ordinary life in foreign countries and cultures that bring into play urban morality issues that are inappropriate to Malay audiences, such as family feuds, divorce, unwanted pregnancy, jealousy, and personal freedom. It was reported in the local press in Malaysia that the programs feature elements of consumer culture, urban lifestyles, spectacular geographical scenes, and contemporary problems including family breakdowns and dysfunctional relationships, as well as supernatural revenge (Hamzah, 2006). For example, the famous Korean soap *Winter Sonata* has attracted millions of viewers due to its various depictions of the complexities of love and family conflict issues. The screening of the Indonesian soap *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* (shallot and garlic), which features an engaging narrative of middle-class Indonesian family life and supernatural revenge, had an extremely high average percentage of four million viewers per episode (Saharani, 2007).

Asian soap operas significantly created a new phenomenon when they became the "must-watch" afternoon television programs. The popularity of Asian soap operas in Malaysia has caught the attention of media planners and policy makers and has been discussed and politically reviewed in relation to its perceived capacity to undermine Malay cultural resources, especially *adat* and Islam. It is important to bear in mind that the flow of transnational cultural texts, including Asian soap operas, has been continuously monitored and controlled by local authorities. An

evaluation panel was established under the Ministry of Information and Ministry of Energy, Water and Communication to review the suitability of Asian soaps before they are screened on public or private television. The panel's aim is to ensure that the content of Asian soap operas does not subvert Malaysian values (Kim & Nain, 2001, p. 7).

The popularity of Asian soaps has raised serious criticism and concern among local authorities including the government ruling political party, UMNO, which perceives this television genre to be a negative force deteriorating local culture and values. Concern has been articulated in the mass media, meetings of political or social organizations, and even in parliament (Bernama, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b). Loud criticism of Asian soap operas was raised again in the recent UMNO political assembly as some representatives reacted to the popularity of the Indonesian soap opera *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, which began to be broadcast in Malaysia in 2006 (Bernama, 2006a). For example, some representatives of Wanita UMNO, the women's wing of UMNO, have recently suggested Malay women should stop watching Asian soaps altogether. A spokesperson said, "we now see too many Indonesian and Filipino programs like the drama *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* on television. There's nothing positive to be gained from these programs, 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 deviate from the Islamic faith or propagate new ideas to do wrong, like practicing free sex or damaging society's norms and social fabric" (Bernama, 2006b). Some have condemned these transnational soaps as compromising Malay cultural life by imparting values that are contrary to Islamic teachings. A Puteri UMNO spokesperson admonished authorities who "slip soap operas in a slot or airtime that go against our culture during the time for Zuhur (midday), Asar (mid-afternoon) and Maghrib (sunset) prayers" (Bernama, 2006b). A popular Indonesian religious soap, *Mutiara hati* (Pearl of the heart) was criticized harshly because it used Islamic terms such as *mukjizat* (miracle) and *Malaiikat* (Angel) in an incorrect manner (Hashim, 2007). Further, while being based on religious themes, these Indonesian soaps often portray characters wearing revealing outfits or behaving in inappropriate ways. This has invited complaints from lo-

cal religious authorities who see such misrepresentations of Islam as being sacrilegious (Bernama, 2006a). In unison with the UMNO women's wing's condemnation of these soap operas, the UMNO youth, representing male voices, not only spoke out about Malay women compromising their religious faith, cultural values and domestic duties, but even deforming the national project of modernity for an enlightened middle class (Utusan Malaysia, 2006). This is a larger concern about the dilution of national identity and the state losing its paternalistic hold over its female subjects.

This controversy over Asian soap operas is indicative of a larger global trend of anxiety over mass importation and free flow of foreign cultural content and the impact on local social structures. In China, the popular Taiwanese soap *Meteor Garden* was banned by the authorities on the grounds that it had the potential to corrupt young people with its content of romance and rampant consumerism (Ting-I, 2002). In Saudi Arabia, the Turkish soap *Noor* was denounced for misleading women and causing a high rate of divorce cases (Al-Sweel, 2008). In such a scenario the government has decided to actively intervene by monitoring the flow of transnational cultural texts.

In his study of television policy in Indonesia, Kitley states that some television programs like soap operas and serials can be conceptualized as a site of mediation between the state, as a producer, and the public, as the audience. According to Kitley, "the two-way movement between the expectations, interests, demands and needs of spectators, and the nation building and cultural objectives of the producers created a tension in the production process" (Kitley, 2000, p. 153). A direct example of Kitley's contention is visible in this conflict over Asian soap operas in Malaysia. But the situation is a little different in Malaysia, where the state has little stake or authority as a producer of cultural content. While the government has tried to utilize popular culture as a vehicle to mobilize its "nation-building and cultural objectives"; soap operas sponsored by the government have not been able to capture local audiences due to lack of technical and creative prowess. For example, *Mahligai Gading*, a drama serial with a focus on stories espousing Malaysia's multiculturalism, was not successful because of poor public reception (Saharani, 2005). Given the high demand for foreign Asian soap operas,

the Malaysian government nowadays acts more as a filter monitoring the programs that are broadcast into the country. It also attempts to regulate audience's appropriation of the soap operas.

Interestingly, this criticism was mainly directed toward Malay women, as the local authorities believe the popularity of Asian soap operas is able to propagate deviance. It is feared that the audience, particularly Malay women, will compromise their cultural resources, especially *adat* and Islam. In fact, the possibility of Asian soap operas providing specific modern images is challenging the national framework of modernity that has largely relied on and stressed the process of developing traditions as an important element of modernization. They have regarded some Indonesian and Filipino soap operas as detrimental due to excessive depictions of revenge, divorce, materialism, and sexual issues.

However, it is within this wider political, religious and cultural terrain that Malay women develop watching competencies to accommodate the seemingly conflicting values of modernity and tradition. As we observed and examined in fieldwork, Malay women locate and exercise their cultural resources, especially *adat* and Islam, to frame their competencies for negotiating the kind of inappropriate urban morality and social expectations evoked in these discourses as they watch soap operas. With the ability to adjust according to content, Malay women at the grassroots level frame what authors refer to as a moral capability for negotiating and engaging with the depiction of modernity in Asian soap operas, while retaining their cultural values and life expectations as enforced by authorities and civic groups.

### Selective Viewing

While the government has voiced its concerns about the corrupting effects of soap operas on all Malay women who watch them, women residing in urban areas are often the prime targets for such criticism. The lifestyles of *kampung* (village) Malay women are seen as being more proximate with the Malay norms required by *adat* and Islam. In contrast, urban Malay women are often perceived as being in a somewhat morally ambiguous position (Dass, 2002). Faced with the temptations of excessive consumerism, urban lifestyle, and industrialisation, Malay women

in urban areas are seen as being more susceptible to the ill effects of soap operas. Given this contention, urban Malay women are under greater scrutiny in this larger conflict between modernity and tradition. It is feared that Malay women might be lured into relinquishing their traditional roles. We raised this perception about the moral degeneracy of urban Malay women amongst our respondents. Most were literate, conversant with popular culture, and had exposure to many aspects of modern life in the city. But these urban Malay women argued that such perceptions were not justified. They argued that they did not explore or pursue the lifestyles shown on television. Rejecting the paternalistic tendency of the local authorities, they argued that they were not only able to meet these challenges through their exposure to urban life, but that these issues served as cautionary lessons for them to cope with the complexities of urban life. These soap operas, with their portrayals of domestic troubles like divorces, family feuds, and unwanted pregnancies, are seen as an opportunity to learn about social ills prevalent in the modern world from a distance.

As part of this tactical negotiation, Malay women tend to view the depictions of themes like consumerism, romance, and family conflicts in non-Western soap operas as a means to learn about the potential hazards of modern life from afar. As Iwabuchi notes, the depiction of consumerism and urban lifestyles is one of the major factors that have made Asian soap operas popular in the Southeast Asian region (Iwabuchi, 2002, 2004). To give an example, Hasnah, who lived in a suburb on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, said these social problems were of universal significance. Married with three kids, she moved to a housing estate in the Bangsar suburb and has resided there for more than thirty years. As a well-educated woman, Hasnah said that these social problems were of universal significance; and as a woman living in the city it was important to understand them through these fictionalized representations of Asian soap operas. She said:

I know that Korean and Filipino soaps show many habits of urbanized western lifestyle such as drinking, clubbing, and premarital sexual relationships. I guess all of these things that we consider unacceptable are part of their lifestyle. But I also

know that many Malay youngsters have adopted such ways too. I live in the city and I know what happens here. And, thus I think (urban) societies in Korea and Indonesia probably have the same social problems we have. I guess it would be very interesting if we could share our experiences and learn from them, even though it is just through the medium of their soaps on our television sets. I don't think it is wrong (Hasnah, 36, Bank officer).

Hasnah elevates these soap operas as a medium of discussion for the social problems that can occur in the modern world, but more importantly in her everyday life too. She states that such problems have every chance of occurrence in the Malay cultural sphere as well. She sees these television narratives as a window on the contentious aspects of modern life allowing Malay women a chance to see these aspects in foreign culture and then devise ways of discussing these potential social problems in a Malay context. This response seems to imply that Malay social ills cannot be completely blamed on external or foreign influence. While Asian soap operas may portray themes deemed culturally inappropriate for Malay life, rejecting them as alien influences or refusing to acknowledge the existence of these problems in Malay society is not the right way to tackle social ills. She argued that one must take a more conciliatory and broad-minded approach to understand how these issues of modern life effect people. She also saw that Asian soap operas provide a source of information through which Malay women can learn about such issues from a distance and hopefully avoid them in their own lives.

The authorities are also wary of the kind of religious practices shown on Asian soap operas and their capacity to corrode traditional Islamic practices in Malaysia. In such a scenario of anxiety over the alleged misrepresentation of Islamic tenets and dislocation of true Islamic faith, these Indonesian soap operas have incited adverse reactions from the authorities. In spite of these reservations of the local authorities regarding the popularity of Indonesian soaps, Lili argued that those issues do not detract from her adherence to Islam. As a university graduate who

currently works in a government office, Lili uses Asian soap operas as a way to enrich her life experience and interestingly she believes these soap operas give her an opportunity to put into practice all the religious knowledge that she has learned from a young age. Lili did not have any problem with this television genre since she is able to create moral boundaries to reject issues that are inappropriate. She said:

There are good and bad elements in the Indonesian soap *Hikmah* (wisdom). I know Islam in Indonesia is quite radical. Many people do not realize this fact. I think this [Indonesian soap opera] gives us an opportunity to learn about Islam, even although there are certain elements that are inappropriate. For example, I saw some characters in *Hikmah* touching each other even though they do not have any official relationship. I understand it just an act, but you must realize if we talk about Islam, we have to follow the rules of Islam. Otherwise, there is no point to talk about Islam through this [soap's] story. I was educated about this since I was small (Lili, 35, Government officer).

While the government sees these soaps as potentially misrepresenting Islam to the audiences, she seems to be consciously distinguishing differences between Malay and Indonesian versions of Islamic practice. Her knowledge about the cultural dimensions of Islamic practice in Indonesia gives her the capacity to understand the differences in order to judge elements that are unfeasible in Malay life. Because of this she can locate the “inappropriate” content on these Indonesian soaps and draw moral boundaries to differentiate between Islamic practices in Malaysia and Indonesia. Another issue that is often brought up by the local authorities in their criticism of Indonesian soaps is their portrayal of folkloric legends about supernatural phenomena that violate Islamic restrictions against such superstitions. These Indonesian soaps draw from local beliefs about spirits and fairies, which also have their counterparts in local Malay culture. These soaps incorporate such legends

within their stories about middle class life in contemporary settings. For example, the Indonesian supernatural soap *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* depicts the complexities of middle class life in Indonesia through the supernatural elements of witchcraft, spirits etc. Perhaps the most popular television program in Malaysia now, this soap opera has attracted criticism from local authorities for depicting such supernatural themes, which run contrary to Islamic faith. However, Maria, an officer in a private firm and avid fan of Indonesian supernatural soap operas, said that she saw the elements of magic and supernatural on these soaps in a very different light. Interestingly, she acknowledged the Islamic injunction against such superstitions, but claimed that she is able to treat the fantastical stories of these supernatural soaps as entertainment. She says:

There is a popular story about our Prophet Mohamed being tortured by black magic. However, what I saw on *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* was so different from the story in the scriptures. The story on the soap was exaggerated and untrue. Anyhow, I think a person who practises black magic has no confidence in taking action in real life. Allah has given us a brain to think rationally, not to practice this stupid stuff (Maria, 49, Clerk).

By citing an incident from Islamic history about the Islamic rejection of superstitions, Maria claims her ability to make distinctions about inappropriate content through her own knowledge of the boundaries set by Islam. She proceeds to critique people who resort to practices like black magic as not only failing to adhere to the true Islamic faith, but also lacking the personal strength and character to face the realities of life.

Soap operas acquire their fan following not only for the entertainment that they provide but for the cultural trends they initiate. Scholars have noted that it is the depiction of beach culture and middle class lifestyles in Australian soap operas which has created an avid fanbase of these soaps, fans who regard them as a lifestyle guide (Hobson, 2003;

Matelski, 1999). When we cited this criticism about the tendency of Malay women to follow consumerist fads, Wani rejected the idea that this would lead to a loss of Malay cultural values. She said:

Malay women need to be updated with the current trends in clothing. If you wear a *tudung* (veil), you can also wear a dress or outfit of the latest fashion with it. You need to be more creative without ignoring Malay *adat* and Islam. I work in a bank and I love to wear trousers. So, I have to think about how to match my *tudung* with my trousers. Well, you must not expose parts of your body but you can certainly take care to dress up nicely (Wani, 43, Promoter).

This response shows many interesting implications about the dynamics between consumerism and Malay women. Authorities may deem consumer culture as a source of moral degeneracy and vanity, which is forbidden in Islam. But in this response from Wani, adherence to the norms of a proper social image of the Malay Muslim woman is observed. Wearing the Muslim headgear *tudung* is her priority and the *tudung* seems to be at the foremost of her concerns in personal grooming. *Tudung*, also known as *mini-telekung*, is part of the Southeast Asian Islamic female dress. It is a small headscarf which covers the hair, neck and chest area and is different from the *burka* in the Middle East which covers the whole body. Wani may subscribe to fads of fashion required by an urban lifestyle, like wearing trousers to her workplace, but she does not reject the demands of Islam or refuse to wear the *tudung* any more. In fact, other items of clothing are meant as a canvas to complement the *tudung*, the central piece from which she judges her own appearance.

Wani further challenged the monolithic view of the authorities that anyone who opts for a trendy fashionable image is also a morally corrupt human being. Growing up in Kuala Lumpur and having lived there for more than thirty-five years, Wani personally judged people according to whether they had an honest character rather than according to their ultra sexy-image. Being a professional worker and well educated at a pres-

tigious local university, she has always tried to be more open-minded. She said:

If you look at the main characters *Bawang Merah* (shallot) on Indonesian soaps, they have an ultra-sexy image. Well, I don't mean that we should try to be like them, but I just want to say that if you look sexy it does not mean you are a bad person. Please don't judge a book by its cover. Sometimes, a polite well-mannered type of person can become evil. I watch the news on television everyday and I have heard so many cases about fraud and corruption which involved this type of person (Wani, 43, Promoter).

This statement opens up interesting questions about her interpretation of the issue of soap operas, where she even goes so far as to challenge moral judgments made on the basis of *adat* and Islam. This may suggest that the respondent's worldview is influenced by transnational modernity, but the picture is much more complex than that. Although she clarifies that she is averse to a trendy, sexualised image as an ideal—especially for Malay women—she suggests that seeing such images on television is a matter of being able to negotiate them through one's own common sense. She argues that it is not right to say that people will simply follow what they see on the television without thinking further about its implications.

Further, objecting to such indiscriminate criticism by the local authorities, Fatimah argued that certain matters must be left to the choices of each individual, who must be entrusted with the capability and the responsibility to make their own decisions for their lives. Particularly, as a woman who lives in an urban area, she feels that the compulsions of a modern life in the city necessitate measures which may not agree with the critical attitudes of the authorities. For example, taking inspiration from a strong-willed character from a Japanese soap opera, she enrolled herself in a class to learn to ride a scooter because of the transportation problems she was experiencing in the city. She said:

I know that most Malays are still very conservative. They might say that a Malay woman is not supposed to ride a bike because she will behave like a man, which is against *adat*. I just want to try something new. Sometimes, when you do something unusual, you may feel different about yourself. I feel like I have achieved something in my life. And what happens if you have an emergency and you only have a bike not a car? At least you know what you are going to do... (Fatimah, 39, Grocery helper).

Though she has taken up an activity which may carry negative connotations for women in Malay society, she sees her act as being necessitated in a world where certain needs require women to exercise their individual judgment. It is not a matter of rejecting the applicability of *adat* and Islam. Instead she undertakes a process of exercising individual judgment and liberty in negotiating practical needs while retaining an appreciation of what her cultural heritage means. This is not a simplistic scenario of erasure of cultural norms in the face of modernization as the authorities fear. It is instead a process of negotiation calling forth a sense of individualism, a belief in common sense and having one's own evaluation of cultural norms.

In the light of such responses, it can be claimed that with this moral capability women undertake selective viewing from contentious aspects of transnational modernity on these Asian soap operas. These responses provide a very different picture painted by the government's fear of foreign content automatically having a negative impact on local culture. There are many subtle processes in accepting and rejecting the cultural content of these Asian soap operas, with a host of selective viewing strategies. Malay women re-interpret certain contentious aspects of modernity depicted in Asian soap operas as a source for learning about the potential ills of modern life from a distance. They also interpret those elements as opportunities to create moral boundaries in their own lives too. And finally, they reject the denouncing of transnational culture by the authorities by adopting an attitude of learning through negotiation.

Such an approach reflects a new mode of exercising moral capability that encourages a more open-ended method of learning.

### Oppositional Viewing

Some respondents rejected soap operas that portrayed issues considered morally degenerate in the Malay worldview. Instead of the more conciliatory approach of learning through selection and negotiation, these women completely opposed some issues in the soap opera as being incompatible with Malay culture and society altogether. However, these Malay women do not completely stop watching these soap operas, but rather reject certain programs or episodes that they find objectionable. This stance is reflected in a set of tactics, still under the rubric of moral capability, that we shall call oppositional viewing. Malay women resist certain cultural trends propagated in these soap operas, which they rationalize as being averse to their individual understandings of *adat* and Islam. A habitual viewer of Indonesian religious soap operas, Zaiton also claimed that some of these Indonesian soap operas misrepresent true Islamic teachings and beliefs. Although she is not well educated in terms of Islam as a religion, Zaiton still realizes that some elements of Islam in Indonesian soap operas are intolerable and even mislead her as an audience member and a Muslim. She complained that the Indonesian religious soap opera *Hikmah* presented elements that were either contrary or alien to her understanding of Islamic practice in Malaysia. She said:

I wouldn't mind such scenes if it was a romance story because I am a very open-minded person. However, if you produce an Islamic story, you have to understand that Islam as a religion is not for fun and games. I will not tolerate inappropriate elements in an Islamic story, even if it is only a scene with a boy and a girl holding hands. We are very strict about things concerning the integrity of Islam. I think our cultural restrictions help us to avoid such negative elements in our life (Zaiton, 41, Grocery Owner).

Although Zaiton positions herself as being quite tolerant of the genre of Asian soap operas, she instantly rejects even a minor disruptive element in an Islamic soap opera. Another habitual viewer of Korean soap opera, Siti identifies many depictions in the soaps as “inappropriate,” some of which are obviously against Islamic morality and values. She also clearly demonstrates watching competencies by rejecting the depiction of sexual activities in Asian soap operas because she finds that unacceptable, irritating, and against her Islamic principles. She said:

If you watch Korean soaps very carefully, when a couple kisses, it looks very artificial. There is no sexual desire at all and I don't think this can influence us. However, it is still wrong in our culture and religion (Siti, 38, Information System Officer).

It is somewhat surprising that Siti considered kissing scenes in Asian soap operas as artificial and not corruptive to her social fabric as a Malay woman, as they are not too excessive, unlike the same type of scene she has seen in American soap operas. However, such scenes still connote inappropriateness in terms of the Malay cultural environment. As urban Malay women tend to be associated with the challenge of resisting involvement in immoral activities, they still maintain their cultural values, including *adat* and Islam, as appropriate guidance for their everyday lives.

While the above respondent objected to the inappropriate practice of Islam, another respondent, Rosmah takes a broader perspective in terms of authorities' control over women's habits and questions of their status in Malay society. Having lived in Kuala Lumpur for the last 20 years, Rosmah has been a habitual follower of soap operas since the 1990s. Criticizing the recent denouncement of Asian soap operas for propagating immoral sexual conduct, she said:

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, 35, Government officer).

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 these soap operas, as is the case in this example of criticizing romance scenes as being *haram* (forbidden) by Islamic law. She rejects such a denunciation from the authorities as a hypocritical stance 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.

Malay women in my research also question the stance of local authorities like UMNO for their constant criticism of this television genre and their paternalistic approach towards Malay women in general. When we mentioned the controversy over the soap operas to my respondents, a viewer of Thai and Indonesian soap operas, Rahimah, unequivocally rejected the stance of the authorities as an obtrusive control over her life. She said:

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, 35, Human Resource Officer, Urban).

Rahimah is not sympathetic to the overtly paternalistic attitude of the authorities, rejecting it as an infringement of her personal liberties and

an insult to her abilities as an adult. Further, she perceives such negative attitudes as half-baked pronouncements that have no concrete evidence. She 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.

In contrast to the leniency shown during selective viewing, respondents completely reject the misrepresentation of Islamic faith and moral impropriety in these Islamic soap operas through a stance of oppositional viewing. For example, urban Malay women unanimously value the inviolable sanctity of Islam and reject Indonesian soap operas when they mix Islamic tenets with inappropriate elements. Interestingly, they also cite the very parameters of cultural knowledge, life experience, and age, which accord them the status of mature adults, to question the authorities that constantly undermine their ability to judge through their demeaning and patronizing manner.

### Conclusion

The engagement of the Malay women with the depiction of what many perceive of as inappropriate morality in Asian soap operas involves fluid and subtle negotiation. It is clear that they used many elements of their cultural resources, particularly their knowledge about *adat*, and Islam, to establish watching competencies for interrogating and rejecting depictions that clearly go against their Islamic values and contribute to a misrepresentation of how the Malay conceive Islamic values. It is also important to notice that urban Malay women reject these elements not only because they are irrelevant to their Islamic beliefs and socio-cultural background, but also because they serve no practical purpose in their everyday lives.

To some extent, this contestation over the meanings of modernity in Asian soap opera viewing also highlights the tension between the patriarchal order of the Malay state and its female subjects. From the responses in the field, we can see that Malay women struggle for their voice, but also accept the fact that they cannot cross the cultural boundaries of Malay society. Malay women's adherence to what they understand as the foundations of Malay cultural life illustrates that these

women have a desire to engage with a modern space without necessarily transgressing the patriarchal boundaries set by their cultural order. Malay women at the grassroots level of urban areas still strongly adhere to the cultural norms of Malay *adat* and Islamic values. Instead of categorically labelling audiences as submissive or resistive we need to stress the modes of negotiation that overlap into different categories. Their strong attachment to these elements has highlighted the complexity of media consumption, requiring a framework like watching competencies to explain the engagement of Malay women with modernity.



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