

From Heartbroken Wives to Working Mothers: The Malay Melodrama of the Early 1980s

Norman Yusoff

This essay examines the Malay melodrama produced in the early 1980s by focusing upon the representation and (re)construction of gender and its extent to which the genre subverts its conventionality in relation to the gender subjectivity and relativity. Since cinematic texts, as forms of representation, are polysemic, my argument is that the depiction of women in the melodramas does not perpetuate them as “commodified” and stereotyped into the binary images of “good” and “bad” due to the films’ renegotiation of the ambiguities of representation. On the other hand, the portrayal of men, which seems negative, resonates in ways that contest and question their masculinity. My analysis will go on to trace the social, economic and political implications in Malaysia during the early 1980s as the country was on the verge of modernization and how they reflect and shape the defining features of the Malay melodrama of the early 1980s. In a way, the essay aims to map and frame the notion of genres “as a form of collective cultural expression” (Schatz, 1981), by underlining the socio-cultural and ideological functions which the Malay melodrama of the early 1980s performs.

As is known, melodrama is one of the few film genres which has been subject to critical derision and, employed in a pejorative sense, normally by critics, to imply domesticity, femininity, heightened emotionalism and sentimentality.¹ By the same token, a smorgasbord of alternative names has been invented for the melodramatic films, found in the English-language reviews and publicities surrounding them; amongst the names are “women’s pictures,” “tearjerkers,” “weepies,” and “soap operas” (Singer, 1990). Nevertheless, when scholars and critics attempt to provide a clear-cut definition for the widely used and negatively charged term “melodrama,” they point to other general features. In addition, its wide-ranging generic compositions and amorphous iconography further

problematize any discourse on the genre. Since genres are notoriously flexible, pliable constructs, the very definition of “melodrama” may render an ambiguous site of contestation. Whilst on the one hand, melodrama is generally regarded “a particular, if mobile and fragmentary, genre, specializing in heterosexual and family relations;” on the other, it may be construed as the founding mode of Hollywood cinema that has pervasively influenced many national (and transnational) cinemas worldwide, with no exception for Malaysia. In a strictly denotative sense, melodrama refers to “a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects” (Elsaesser, 1972). But, the definition cannot be merely circumscribed to such a denotative meaning, as the connotations associated with the genre are numerous and quite varied. Brooks (1985) provides a partial list of some of the connotative meanings cognate with melodrama: “the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue ...” Brooks further delineates the so-called melodramatic imagination, which is a transhistorical and transmedia configuration, as a “narrative voice, with its grandiose questions and hypotheses, [which] leads us in a movement through and beyond the surface of things to what lies behind ... which is the true scene of the highly colored drama.” The melodramatic imagination is a means of seeing and understanding the world, and particularly the social relations therein, that focuses on, to quote Woodward (1984), “the primacy of emotion.”²²

In the context of Malaysian cinema, what has been traditionally known and billed as melodrama films seems to have fallen out of favour. Indeed, the genre reached its pinnacle some twenty years ago (in the early 1980s). It is tempting to note that all the melodramas produced during that era can be identified with the notion of female sentimentality; as a matter of fact, the genre, according to many (Western) scholars and critics, has often been associated with the term “the woman’s film.”²³ Indeed, in more recent feminist discourses, according to Gledhill (1992), the melodrama is considered a “feminine” film genre, “where film theory saw in melodrama’s exposure of masculinity’s contradictions a threat to unity of the (patriarchal) realist / narrative text,” feminists found a genre distinguished by the large space it opened to female protagonist, the domestic sphere and socially mandated “feminine” concerns. Neale (2000) in his work on Hollywood genre states that: “... and the identification of melodrama with the family and domesticity in order not only pose and to

insist upon the importance of issues of gender, but also to identify melodrama with women and the woman's film." In a similar vein, Buckland (2003) writes that: "The genre of the film melodrama is frequently defined as a woman's genre, because it represents the questions, problems, anxieties, difficulties and worries of women living in a male-dominated, or patriarchal, society. The first and most prevalent property, or common attribute, of melodrama is that it is dominated by an active female character." In this respect, genre can be genderized, for example, melodramas, musicals and romantic comedies which can be associated with femininity, whereas Westerns, war films, actions, action-adventure dramas can be considered male-oriented (or masculine) generic forms.

Many Malay melodramas in the early 1980s accentuate the centrality of their female protagonists, attempting to deal with issues deemed important to women and their address to female audiences. Among them are *Detik 12 Malam* (dir. S. Sudarmaji, 1980), *Esok Masih Ada* (dir. Jins Shamsuddin, 1980), *Potret Maria* (dir. Yassin Salleh, 1981), *Dia Ibuku* (dir. Yassin Salleh, 1981), *Gelombang* (dir. Rahman B., 1981), *Sesujuk Airmata Ibu* (dir. A. Rahim, 1981), *Langit Tidak Selalu Cerah* (dir. S. Sudarmaji, 1981), *Bintang Pujaan* (dir. Shahrom Md. Dom, 1981), *Jejak Bertapak* (dir. Jamil Sulong, 1981), *Kabus Tengahari* (dir. S. Sudarmaji / Sarimah, 1982), *Mama Oh Mama* (dir. Ahmad Mahmood, 1982), *Penentuan* (dir. Aziz Jaafar, 1982), *Esok Untuk Siapa* (dir. Jins Shamsuddin, 1982), *Langit Petang* (dir. Shahrom Md. Dom, 1982), *Pertentangan* (dir. Salleh Ghani, 1983), *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (dir. Rahman B., 1983), *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (dir. Jamil Sulong, 1983), *Melati Putih* (dir. M. Raj, 1984), *Jauh di Sudut Hati* (dir. Z. Lokman, 1984), *Azura* (dir. Deddy M. Borhan, 1984), and *Di Ambang Kasih* (dir. M. Amin, 1984), and a few more.⁴ What interests me are those melodramas which can be characterized as "the independent woman film," believed to have been influenced by Western (Hollywood) woman's films, beginning in the late 1970s.⁵ The independent woman film, represented most notably by *Detik 12 Malam*, *Dia Ibuku*, *Jejak Bertapak*, *Kabus Tengahari*, *Esok Untuk Siapa*, *Pertentangan*, *Penentuan* and *Bila Hati Telah Retak* was a rather short-lived cycle focusing upon the trials and tribulations of a traditional wife and mother as she struggles to establish her independence and make it on her own after a divorce or the death of her spouse. The emphasis upon women and emotion, as I shall discuss in this essay, is a natural development in

the 1980s since it is seen as an imperative adjunct to the sense of achievements in terms of career, matrimony and family. In the early 1980s, women were becoming major players in Malaysian society as the country was on the verge of modernization, as well as the Malaysian government announced its policy of “privatization,” that is “... transfer to the private sector of activities and functions which have traditionally rested with the public sector” (Phua & Soo, 2004).

A relatively recent direction in both literary and film studies, however, takes the melodrama as a cultural form that has been significant in shaping public sensibilities and focuses on the melodrama’s political significance. In tandem with the identification of melodrama as an indispensable form in cinema and a fundamental mode of expression in modern society, this essay affirms that the melodrama as a modern mode is a recognizable cultural sign. In this essay, my primary aim is to examine the melodrama genre in relation to the representation and (re)construction of gender, specifically women, due to the genre’s putative prioritization of them; on the other hand, I would also dwell upon the representation of men. By this, I shall argue as to whether the genre in the context of Malaysian cinema, which enjoyed a degree of popularity in the early 1980s, can be considered a contributory factor in perpetuating a narrow range of stereotyped images of both women and men. I would argue that although some of the films rather succinctly fit the notions of “family melodrama” or “impossible love melodrama,”⁶ the issue of the subjugation or victimization of women has been the cornerstone in the melodrama genre. Indeed, how women are represented in the film may encourage particular expectations of women which are extremely circumscribed. As Dyer (1993) notes, the way a socially disadvantage group is (re)presented in the media is part and parcel of how they are treated in reality. As I shall indicate in my analysis in due course, though these melodramas still place women at the periphery and men are dominating the scenario with images reinforcing the patriarchal order of society, discursive readings of the melodrama may advocate the genre’s paradox in terms of its gender representation. Another strand of my analysis will trace the socio-economic and political scenario in Malaysia during the era in which any attempt at development (or modernization) can be said, as I will indicate, to have impacted upon gender (as well as the Malay) agenda in Malaysia in general, and upon the construction of gender in local films in particular. This can also be seen in line with gender planning in Malaysia which has always responded to national development plans, in particular, the New

Economic Policy (1970).⁷ In this essay, my focus will be upon four Malay melodramas produced in the early 1980s, namely, *Dia Ibuku* (lit. Mother of Mine), *Kabus Tengahari* (lit. Midday Mist), *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (lit. When the Heart Breaks), and *Pertentangan* (lit. Conflict) will be examined by means of close readings. Although I attempt to incorporate the methodologies of the Western scholars (and critics) pertaining to genre and melodrama in dealing with the social inscriptions of the Malay melodramatic text, my approach is to envision melodrama as an art form that articulates a specific mode of experience (Elsaesser, 1972) or an aesthetic ideology (Rodowick, 1987) over-determined by a set of social, psychic and formal factors.⁸

Representation and (Re)construction of Gender

The Paradoxical Portrayal of Women?

As stated earlier, melodrama films are conventionally understood to have targeted a female audience. Whilst Neale (2000) agrees that the “trade press has derived its understanding of melodrama from a distinct and particular tradition,” the films described as melodrama in the trade press appeal more in gender terms to male audiences. Neale finds that female-centred narratives are a minority to the bulk of the films analysed. He consequently contends that these films offer a womanly “version of the tension and thrills offered putatively to men by more conventional action melodramas and thrillers.” Many Malay melodramas in the early 1980s have conspicuously focused upon the dilemma or conflict normally faced by women. A closer look at the social status of the major male and female characters represented in the films reveal that gender difference is an important indicator of access to power. While the males are represented as authorities of the family, the females function basically as the labour force within the family or without. Soh Geok Choon (in Fuziah & Faridah, 2004), analyzing Jins Shamsuddin’s melodramas of the *Esok* series of the 1970s and early 1980s (*Menanti Hari Esok*, *Tiada Esok Bagimu*, *Esok Masih Ada*, *Esok Untuk Siapa*), points out that women are mainly depicted in a rather negative light, in that they are peripheralized, dependent upon and subservient to men. Generally, as Soh contends, they are relegated to “second-class” citizens trapped within a patriarchal system which degrades their very existence.⁹

On the other hand, as I would argue later, the genre is paradoxical in that the notion of the woman's victimization is often accompanied by its portrayal of female power. This is in contrast with the melodrama made during the golden era of Malay cinema and the late 1970s of which axiomatic principles are the male's identification with outside spaces and the female's with domesticity. Whilst often highlighting incompetent women who cannot cope with adversity and extremity whilst living in the patriarchal society, the effect is to reinforce, through opposition, the construction of the assured and competent male hero. As Singer (2001) argues, the genre as a whole is thus animated by an oscillation between contradictory extremes of female prowess and distress, empowerment and imperilment. Singer goes on to contend that the paradox focuses on the genre's function not only as an index of female emancipation, and as a wish-fulfillment fantasy of power betraying how tentative and incomplete that social emancipation actually was, but also as an index of the anxieties that such social transformations and aspirations created in a society experiencing the sociological and ideological upheavals of modernity. Having mentioned this, as I shall discuss later, these melodramas advocate the idea that the release of women from the confinement of the home – the private sphere – would create the conditions to alter power arrangements. As a number of studies carried out in the West indicate that the ideology of male dominance has continued into this century even though large numbers of women have entered the labour force. Though, generally, a common feature characterizing most women's jobs is that they provide *support* rather than competition for male organization members. This perhaps echoes the greatest single achievement of the feminist movement in the West (from a liberal stance) when it reappeared in the 1970s which has been the opening up of formerly male professions to women (Ehrenreich, 1990). This can be seen in the context of the Malay melodramas produced in the early 1980s which represent women liberating themselves from the confinement of the home (the private sphere). In *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, the character Rohana who is divorced embarks on a public healthcare service in a remote, rural area by becoming a nurse; in *Jejak Bertapak*, the female protagonist, Liza, is an "independent woman," a dedicated crime journalist who manages to topple one of the country's highest-ranked criminals who happens to be her biological father; in *Pertentangan*, the female protagonist, Zainab, after being divorced, has to shoulder responsibility to raise her son on her own and pursue her career in religious education; in *Jauh di Sudut Hati*, the female protagonist, Hazira who runs an estate finds out that

her sexually-impotent husband turns out to be a suspected rapist and murderer. Thus, it seems clear that the melodrama's text serves as an attestation to the paradoxical representation of women in the era which foregrounds an exaltation of female empowerment in the public arena, on the one hand, and concurs with the notion of their victimization, on the other.

Bila Hati Telah Retak (1983), directed by Rahman B and produced by Filem Negara Malaysia,¹⁰ revolves around Rohana (played by Rubiah Suparman) who is divorced after having to confront her hostile husband who tends to humiliate and patronize her due to her *kampung* unsophistication, old-fashioned-ness and de-modernization (This is the point to which I shall refer once I discuss melodrama in relation to modernity in due course). This is saliently indicated in the scene in which Rohana accompanies her husband to a party held in a club where Rohana, while dancing with one of her husband's acquaintances, accidentally breaks her leg; the husband, who feels truly embarrassed before his friends and acquaintances, looks at her with disdain, going on to scorn and patronize her. Prior to their divorce, in a sequence told by means of flashback, Rohana visits her husband in Kuala Lumpur, and finds out about her husband's infidelity. Whilst confronting him, she once again is humiliated. Though being expelled from the domestic space of the family, she does not undergo a protracted decline, as some women do. Instead, she is depicted as a rather resilient woman, going on with her life by serving as a nurse in a rural area (*kampung*). Along the way, Rohana becomes the envy of many (including a traditional midwife whose popularity among the *kampung* folks is on the wane).

Though the endings to melodrama are arguably happy ones, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* conveys "happiness" as being rather fragile. Though this does not resort to the conventions of the genre, it, by no means, disavows its status as a melodrama. The film, at least, attempts to negotiate a wish-fulfillment denouement as Rohana's former husband wishes to reconcile with her and "patch up" their failing relationship. Although Rohana eventually reveals that her love for her former husband remains unshaken, she refuses to accept him back. In a way, this situates at the centre of its universe a (female) character (Rohana) who comes to terms with emotional, social and psychological problems that are (specifically) cognate with the fact that she is a woman. This ascribes to the positioning of the character Rohana within the moral parameter. She has become the source of the *kampung* social prejudice due to the stigmatization of her status as a single woman and her beauty which

throws the *kampong* into physical and moral disarray. The scene in which Rohana invites Rashid, a fisherman in the village who gets her fresh fish from his fishing endeavours, into her house, may illustrate this point. Mak Lijah, who envies Rohana, pries into Rohana's private affairs, specifically into Rohana's platonic relationship with Rashid which is erroneously perceived by the *kampong* folks. The inquisitive Mak Lijah slanders Rohana by imparting the news to Rashid's wife that Rohana and Rashid are having an illicit love affair, and instigates Rashid's wife to attack them. This angers Rashid's wife and she goes on to attack them. In the mean time, Mak Lijah busily disseminates the rumour to the whole *kampong* and urges some *kampong* folks to be "spectators" to the "drama" initially and actually "staged" by her. Upon the wife's attack, Rashid, unable to hold his emotions much longer, bursts into a fit of uncontrolled anger and runs amok, reacting rigorously and violently towards his wife. This points to the genre in general which makes moral conflict its main theme or subject matter, particularly the moral conflicts experienced by women within a patriarchal society. In this respect, Rohana-Rashid's "troubled" friendship which is considered "anomaly," becomes an indictment of the social mores that make it troubled, existing outside the central figures, in the ways that others treat them. Thus, the lesson postulated with regard to this issue makes the audience realize that the way in which Rohana, as a single woman, ought to live her life and organize her practical conduct is by obeying the dictates of social praxis. Pertaining to this and to the relation between gender and melodrama as a genre, I would like to draw attention to the socio-cultural functions which *Bila Hati Telah Retak* as a melodrama (a genre film) performs. Along with the close examination of other Malay melodramas of the period, the film appears as a familiar experience, "built upon audience expectations that are satisfied ... through imaginative repetition of known stories. These stories express sacred cultural values, perpetuate moral norms, and practically and painlessly instruct each of us in the viewing audience in the rules that govern ideal social behaviour" (Sobchack, 1982).

Another film that foregrounds the issue of morality is *Kabus Tengahari* (S. Sudarmaji, 1982), albeit its attempt at valorizing the image of women.¹¹ The film centres on Junaidah (played by Sarimah), after being released from the prison (due to her attempt at inflicting injury on her former husband, Badli), meeting a wealthy man, Baharuddin (a widower) [played by Aziz Jaafar]. Upon her parents' insistence, they get married. In this respect, due to parental and societal pressures, she

has to resume the position of “socially sanctioned femininity” – a position that prescribes motherhood and integration into the family, considering her status as a former prisoner, which can easily be identified as or associated with her being “morally transgressive.” At this stage, the film invokes the idea of how a (Malay / Muslim) woman should conduct or lead her life accordingly, conforming to social conventions. In this regard, it is instructive to draw a comparison between the character Junaidah and Rohana in *Bila Hati Telah Retak*; Rohana does not succumb to the “socially sanctioned femininity”¹² position due to the destabilization of her marriage. In other words, she seemingly refuses to fall into unthinking conformity with conventional values and the expectations around her, as for her, it is no more a ratification that matrimony can and will culminate in happiness and contentment. This being the case, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* implicitly poses a challenge to and subverts patriarchy and espouses the infiltration of feminism within our society, instead. In *Kabus Tengahari* the issue of morality imbricate with the familial conflict is grounded in the narrative trajectory. Though questions of retaining or disintegrating the family unit are clearly posited in the story, I would argue that women still occupy the centre of the narrative. The dramatization of the domestic conflict produces a series of displacements that identify Junaidah as the source of family discord. Junaidah’s attempts at being accepted by her stepson, Johari and integrated into the new family often fail. After getting married, Junaidah not only has to look after her own daughter, Shakila (with her former husband) but has to take care of her intransigent stepson who refuses to assent to her existence in the family because of her dreaded past as a prisoner. This also precipitates a conflict between her stepson and the father. The conflict is further exacerbated by the fact that Junaidah’s daughter, Shakila begins to fall in love with her stepbrother, after forging an intimate relationship with him.

Pertentangan (1983), directed by Salleh Ghani, focuses on a tempestuous relationship between Zainab (played by Rubiah Suparman), an *ustazah* (religious teacher) and her husband, Zabidi (played by Mokhtaruddin) a newly-promoted yuppie. Crisis erupts in their relationship because of the clash of idealisms between them. Zabidi is a worldly, “secular” husband who claims that his wife, a devout Muslim, fails to live up to his expectations by becoming a sophisticated “modern” woman. While Zainab disapproves of her husband’s worldly pursuits because he totally neglects the religion and indulges in a decadent lifestyle instead. Though the film can be succinctly categorized as a family melodrama, it cannot be denied that the film situates the character Zainab at the heart

of its narrative; she is anchored with such traits as resilience, phlegm and perseverance, which might understatedly hint at a kind of feminism, specifically whilst dealing with her husband. At home, the angry husband, sick and tired, for having to listen to his wife's harangues in regard to religion, invariably argues with her and threatens her with divorce. As a woman, we understand that Zainab does not easily capitulate to her husband's threat; neither does she fear that a divorce will deprive her of everything she has since she is portrayed as "independent" and autonomous. The incessant quarrels between them enable an inevitable split; to avert further conflicts, they get divorced and the husband marries a night club singer, Farah (played by Fadillah Wanda); one of the two sons follows the husband while another follows the wife. Intertextually, the new wife renders a rather negative (or "bad woman") image, very reminiscent of those "bad women" characters appeared in the melodramas of the 50s and 60s (notably played by the late Siput Sarawak) during the golden era of Malaysian cinema. In the film, the new wife is a seductress, "gold-digger" and avaricious and this provides an antithesis to the character Zainab, who is endowed with "clean," demure and angelic attributes; this rhetorically propagates the conceptual metaphor of the desirable female as "pure, white and innocent" where as the most undesirable one is "defiled, black and sinful" (Fuziah & Faridah, 2004). This certainly affirms one of the entrenched features of melodrama in general: the portrayal of characters in two extreme poles. And the mention of the melodrama of the golden era of Malaysian cinema should have alerted us to the fact that the director himself (Salleh Ghani) is a well-known director of the era whose forte was making melodramatic films.¹³ The new marriage lasts ephemerally, as Zabidi eventually finds out that the wife has eloped with her former fiance to Singapore. He tracks them down, and a vicious fight between them ensues. This leads to the murder of the former fiance and Zabidi, convicted of the crime, is thrown into jail. Zabidi places his son in the care of his employer, OKB (played by Yusof Latif). As we can see, the dramatic conflict in *Pertentangan* unfolds in a series of conflicted relationships among family members, especially the females (in this film, Zainab and the new wife) as sources of conflicts.

It is interesting to note that the genre's address to a female audience lies in its sustained fantasy of female power. Most of the melodramas discussed place an overt polemic about female independence and mastery at the centre of its thematic terrain. It seems clear that the melodrama seemingly reverses traditional gender positions as the heroine appropriates

an array of “masculine” qualities, competencies and privileges. It should be stressed that the films vary considerably in their precise balance between the heroine’s “masculine” assertiveness and self-reliance, on the other hand, and her “feminine” emotionalism and sensibility. Look at the ending of *Bila Hati Telah Retak* when Rohana is confronting her former husband, Aziz, his colleagues and father-in-law (Rohana’s father) where Aziz, devoured by remorse, proposes to reconcile with her. The sequence is of crucial significance, if looking from the melodrama point-of-view. The confined setting within the frame dramatizes a relationship between characters, visualizing meanings of dominance and submission. Here, the audience (especially the female) will easily align with the character Rohana; this is also reinforced by the mise-en-scene, in particular, several shots in which Rohana, who dominates the frame with her melancholy face in the foreground, sits by the window and faces the camera, conveying a sense of proximity to the audience; whilst her husband, Aziz, seen in the background, looks rather pathetic (and sympathetic). The composition diminishes the husband’s presence and this certainly resonates with the idea of him being “paralyzed” physically and emotionally. Rohana and Aziz are framed together, occupying the centre of the frame and this reinforces their ongoing limitations, locking them into a confined world apropos their relationship. The whole sequence is entitled to a more melodramatic undertone especially in terms of the sluggishness of its pace and momentum; the melodramatic modes are further evinced by Rubiah Suparman’s performances, adding to the pathos of the drama, where her reticence can be sensed and her nuanced expressions are articulated through the words she utters whilst bursting into tears. Indeed, the long sequence ends with the accompaniment of the mawkish theme song, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (rendered by the late Saloma) replicative of traditional Malay tunes, which constitutes a strong emotional appeal implicated in the genre. The scene conveys a sense of crucial irony in the characterization of Rohana. Although at the moment Rohana asserts her firmness and stance by not giving her husband a second chance, she, through her facial expression, cannot hide her “feminine” sensibility whereby her eyes brim with tears, later trickling down her cheeks. Here, the orchestration of tears as one of the symbolic acts of affective expression, as I would suggest, cannot be construed as something “degraded,” often condemned as a token of feminine manipulation. Naturally, Rohana’s tears are a sign of her *inability* to be firm and heartless, and at the same time can render an ambivalent significance, both as symbols of sacrifice and affection.

Bila Hati Telah Retak portrays the emancipated woman out in the masculine world, seizing new experiences and defying the ideology of feminine domesticity; this further proves the film's negotiation in contesting the essentialism of gender identity. The character Rohana as a young career / working woman serving as a nurse in a rural area in such a melodrama celebrates the pleasures and perils of a woman's interaction with a public sphere traditionally restricted to men. Here, the characterization of Rohana has to be seen within the domain of a "traditional," repressive *kampong* community. Prior to her arrival, the person in charge in the *kampong* was the traditional midwife, Mak Lijah, who is a middle-aged woman and her service is normally circumscribed to female patients. In the melodrama *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, the protagonist, Rohana is an intrepid heroine who exhibits a variety of traditionally "masculine" qualities: physical strength and endurance, self-reliance, courage, social authority, and freedom to explore novel experiences outside the domestic sphere. This can be witnessed through the nature of her career as a nurse. I would argue that although a nurse is traditionally considered a "feminine" job, the designation of the character as a nurse, and the nature of the job, does foreground the performance aspect of cultural practices and can complicate gender identity, as ostensibly articulated by the film's mise-en-scene. Pertaining to this, many sociologists explicate that gender is not only in part a status ascribed by biology but also achieved through "performances" (Caplan, 1997). Even physically, in the film, Rohana spends two-thirds of her time on screen in the disguise of a "man's bike" (she rides a bike while serving the *kampong* folks and giving them treatments) and her "tomboyish" nurse uniform. Her job and its nature somehow symbolize the potentiality for subversion of and liberation from restrictive binary gender categories, though not in an extreme manner. In this respect, the character Rohana only slightly transgresses the conventional boundaries of female experience. This prefigures that her aspiration to be "independent" in the end indeed contests the traditional concept of both the domestic division of labour and Malay-Muslim values in respect of women and their roles in society. Besides, Rohana's "feminist" convictions can be examined in light of her resilience and firmness when she rejects her former husband's proposal for reconciliation. Rohana's abnegation thus implies her quest for autonomy or emancipation (as symbolized by the inclusion of a shot of birds flying in the air at the end of the film) in order for her to be an "independent woman." In a way, this is concomitant with her act of preserving her pride and dignity as a woman. Inasmuch as this is the

case, Schatz (1981), whilst labeling some genres (such as melodrama) as genres of "indeterminate space," asserts:

... genres of indeterminate space incorporate a civilized, ideologically stable milieu, which depends less upon a heavily coded place than on a highly conventionalized value system. Here conflicts derive not from a struggle for control of the environment, but rather from the struggle of the principal characters to bring their own views into line either with one another or, more often, in line with that of the larger community ... these genres use iconographic conventions to establish a social setting ... for example ... the repressive small-town community and family home in the melodrama. But because the generic conflicts arise from attitudinal, (generally male-female) oppositions rather than from a physical conflict, the coding in these films tends to be less visual and more ideological and abstract.

In *Dia Ibuku*, the protagonist, Rohani (played by Sarimah), a single parent and a widow, is endowed with courage, self-reliance, endurance and physical strength. Rohani works diligently so as to raise her two children, Jamal and Jamil, amidst a series of crippling trials. Her husband died in a tragic manner after going through deep depression due to the casting of aspersions towards him. Rohani also has to confront the *kampong* malevolent moneylender (played by Ahmad B.), epitomizing "capitalist greed," who cheats them out of their land and lusts after Rohani. Rohani has to struggle to earn money when her eldest son Jamal who is studying in England invariably requests for money from her. When Jamal returns from abroad with a bachelor's degree, things are not as smooth as they should be. Jamal's future father-in-law, Kudin (who once knew Rohani) accuses Rohani of being a prostitute, and this prompts Jamal to believe in such slander and refuse to acknowledge as his mother. In this maternal melodrama, Rohani, a single mother and a widow, is shown toiling all day and night: tapping rubber, working in the paddy fields and preparing and selling traditional *kuih* (cakes) and delicacies. Just as Rohana in *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, Rohani also displays a myriad of traditional "masculine" qualities: physical strength, stoicism, self-reliance, and moral fortitude. For example, Rohani does not easily give in when she is seduced by the lascivious moneylender. On the other hand, she has a warm maternal side by being a sacrificial, selfless mother figure; however victimized, she always sacrifices herself for her children. Indeed, the sentimentalization of poverty and its positioning with the mother figure does mark the characteristic of the Malay melodrama

through which the traditional Hindi melodrama influence is filtered. The configuration of the female protagonist Rohani as a breadwinner in the family does not in any way violate the paradigm of traditional gender allocation of roles (in society), since all the works performed by her in rural areas in Malaysia normally engage female labours too. Besides, she has been taking over her husband's role since he died.

The representation of the female protagonist, Rohani, as a middle-aged single parent and a widow, concerns the film's usage of the image of its star, the beautiful Sarimah. To a certain extent, the film indeed exalts her as a spectacle.¹⁴ *Dia Ibuku* is typical of the melodramas, produced by and featuring Sarimah as female protagonist between 1980 and 1991 (other Sarimah melodramas include *Detik 12 Malam*, *Jejak Bertapak*, *Kabus Tengahari*, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* and *Warna-Warna Hati*). *Dia Ibuku* entirely centres upon a female protagonist, played by Sarimah; as a protagonist, Sarimah naturally predominates: she simply has more screen time and is the locus of the narrative. The character Rohani is designated as a "heroine" and someone who is beautiful and attractive, albeit *kampong* and traditional, has become the object of enticement. Certainly, the film's director, uses Sarimah as spectacle, a visual treat for the audience's consumption. This is particularly so when Rohani makes a regular visit to the city (Kuala Lumpur) to meet her son, Jamal and his future in-laws. Metamorphosing herself into a middle-class woman, she is dressed beautifully in her alluring *kebaya* (considered national garments that emphasize her feminine curves), emblazoned with the *selendang* placed upon her right shoulder, aligning her more completely with Hollywood standards of "to-be-looked-at-ness." However, Laura Mulvey's (1975) influential, inaugurated essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" which theorizes "woman-as-spectacle" in narrative cinema proves irrelevant in understanding how the female image functions in this film due to different cultural, social, historical, and political codes. Indeed, the notion of the gaze and the structure of the look have been amongst the most significant elements in Western feminist film criticism. Relying on Freud's theories of voyeurism and fetishism, Mulvey expatiates that the system of the look as a basic cinematic structure of active / male as bearer and passive / female as object of the look. As the active male gaze dominates both the narrative and the woman, the male figure occupies a position through which a sadistic voyeurism or fetishistic scopophilia is satisfied. Whilst the passive female image associates itself with spectacle and space, the female

character is represented as the erotic fulfillment of male sexual desire. I would argue that the emphasis upon a male protagonist becomes problematic when *Dia Ibuku* has a female protagonist who does not even fit the schematization mentioned above. I would further argue that since the melodrama renders its story, its actions drive the story, the female protagonist is *both* spectacle and narrative.

It is clear that Malay melodramas like *Dia Ibuku* and *Bila Hati Telah Retak* do not offer “the West gazing at the spectacle of the feminized East.” Neither do they make it to appease foreigners’ tastes for the exotic, say, as many Chinese melodramas in the 1990s do, in particular, Zhang Yimou’s oeuvres. I shall delineate that the films do not deploy any stylistic devices influenced by Western / Hollywood cinema which are indicative of the patriarchal point-of-view; such as the deployment of close-up shots or camera movement. In *Dia Ibuku*, when Rohani has to confront the lecherous moneylender who attempts to sexually harass her, the film refrains from making any close-ups revealing her body. It is evident that the scopophilia (pleasure in looking) hardly arises as the film abandons the point-of-view and shots / reverse shots which direct the voyeuristic gazes of the male character to the image of the female body. So too does *Bila Hati Telah Retak*; in the scene depicting Rohana besieged by Jusoh and his friends who attempt to rape her, the selection of shots used ranges from long to medium shots. Although in both films the female protagonists become erotic objects to the male characters in the films, they do not appeal to and satiate the appetite of the (male) audience as erotic objects. Rendering an antithesis to the Western approach of spectatorship theorization, the audience simply is discouraged to engage in any scopophilic gaze at those female characters as sexual objects. It can be discerned that the Malay melodramas of the 1980s discussed in this essay, managed to distinguish themselves from Western / Hollywood cinema, and this certainly sanctions the validity of a distinguished feature of Malay melodrama.

Masculinity In Crisis?

Neale (2000), writing of the Hollywood melodrama, notes that many scholars and critics see melodrama as one of the few generic areas in Hollywood in which masculinity in general, and “virile” masculinity in particular, has been consistently qualified, questioned, impaired or castrated – unable to realize or express itself in action. In a similar vein, I would

like to discuss the representation of the male(s) and reconstruct the stereotyped, typical image in the Malay melodramas of the early 1980s which perpetuates a narrow range of image; in many cases, men are portrayed as bad, dominant, powerful and (hyper) masculine. In a way, these melodramas can be read as “male-bashing.” I shall argue and indicate later that the representation of these “bad” males in the 80s Malay melodramas can only contest and challenge the “masculinity” because many male characters appear forceful, violent and despicable. In as much as this is the case, the Malay melodrama can be seen as an indictment of the portrayal of Malay masculinity in trouble and crisis. These films offer the viewer spectacles of polygamy (*Esok Masih Ada, Esok Untuk Siapa, Penentuan*), impotence (*Jauh di Sudut Hati, Esok Untuk Siapa*), adultery / handicap (*Bila Hati Telah Retak*), the inability of men to save their spouses and children (*Penentuan, Pertentangan, Kabus Tengahari*).

Rohana’s husband in *Bila Hati Telah Retak* is an exemplary case in point. The husband, portrayed as a philanderer, succumbs to a debauched lifestyle, indulging in fornication and alcohol, and treats Rohana viciously due to her self-effacing, *kampong* un-sophistication. Zakaria Ariffin (1983), in his review of the film during the year in which the film was released, offers a harsh criticism in terms of the very “bad” representation of the male characters to the extent that he questions the logical paucity of the construction of the characters and their motivations, by ascribing to the contrivance and flimsiness of the film’s script. Here, Zakaria fails to view the film from the perspective of the male subjectivity and relativity, let alone to appraise it as a “melodrama” (Indeed, Zakaria, throughout the review, does not even mention the term “melodrama”). Towards the end, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* saturates the husband with a sense of atonement and remorse (after meeting an accident and being paralyzed) and wishes to reconcile with Rohana. There is indeed a significant change in the husband’s attitude towards the wife after he is paralyzed. The sense of remorse also emanates from his realization that he has neglected his duty towards the welfare of his wife in return for her sacrifice and loyalty. Indeed, as the audience understands, Rohana has sacrificed for her husband during his studying years in the university. The physical handicap experienced by the character signifies that he is emasculated and this certainly undermines his masculinity. Another male character emasculated in the film is Jusoh (played by Abu Bakar Omar), a *ne’er-do-well kampong* folk who, conspired with his other friends, attempt at

seducing and raping Rohana. His moral depravity, for instance, can be seen in the context of men's problematic attitudes which are rooted in low self-esteem, in itself an outcome of family life and cultural expectations about masculinity; being jobless means that he has failed to meet the social (and cultural) demands of what it means to be a man. Furthermore, as we understand, Jusoh, as a married man, is in a period of sexual dormancy, for his wife is in a delicate condition. In the end, Jusoh displays a sense of remorse when his pregnant wife is in dire need of help from Rohana when she is about to deliver; Jusoh, who is ashamed of what he had done, faces her for an apology. In fact, earlier in the film, many scenes verify that Jusoh's masculinity and dignity are contested and questioned when it comes to traditional gender roles, considering he is a breadwinner and head of the household, according to the patriarchal and socio-cultural norm. Jusoh is depicted as a lazy, *ne'er-do-well* husband and at home, his wife deprecates his behaviour and keeps questioning his role as a husband. Another male character, the irascible Rashid, who is mistakenly perceived as having a romantic affair with Rohana, is constructed in an ambiguous way, appearing "hyper-masculine," particularly when he reacts to his jealous wife. The acts of violence Rashid commits can be read as a form of self-medication, an attempted defense, achieved through "merging" or self-elevation, against covert depression stemming from the ignominy caused by his wife.

In *Dia Ibuku*, Rohani's son Jamal and his future father-in-law, Kudin are oft-times "emasculated" by the female characters. For example, take the scene, in which a staggering incident occurs when Rohani is invited to Kudin's place for the first time and confronts him (without knowing Rosie's father is Kudin). Rohani has to vehemently defend herself when Kudin denigrates her by claiming her as a prostitute. Kudin is execrated as *bacul* (a coward) by Rohani (and later in the subsequent scene by Rohani's brother who comes to confront him), as he attained success at the expense of other's misfortunes. In the scene, Rohani, while vigorously vindicating herself, reveals that Kudin's attempts at indicting and associating her with *pelacur* (a prostitute) is due to his dismal failure in the past whilst trying to seduce her. In the scene, we also witness that Kudin is "punished" when he is simultaneously confronting a heart attack. Later, Rohani's son Jamal is inclined to believe in such an accusation hurled at his mother. His girlfriend, Rosie, who favours Rohani instead of her father, also claims Jamal a coward, as he dares not face reality, by acting accordingly to defend his poor mother.

In regard to the representation of the male (the new Malay), the character Jamal can be read as a symbol of emasculation by Western culture. Here, I would like to draw attention to Khoo Gaik Cheng's (2005) argument that the representation of the Malay masculinity in the films of the 80s and 90s is "an indication of the discomfort with the resultant new image of the Malay masculinity formed under the NEP's get-rich-quick philosophy and political expediency." By quoting Mahathir's *The Malay Dilemma* that the Malays "will become softer and less able to overcome difficulties on their own," Khoo further contends that the idea of Malay masculinity in crisis is due to the privileges granted to them (the Malays). In this respect, *Dia Ibuku*, through the character Jamal, puts the authentic masculinity in crisis. This is evident when Jamal, upon returning home from England, is shown having to rely on Rosie and her father, Kudin, as he is showered with privileges: Rosie's father tentatively grants Jamal a terrace house and also pledges to bequeath to him and Rosie his business and wealth. Rosie's family's socio-economic status, and as a daughter of a wealthy industrialist, further reflects the "female / feminist" ascendancy because, as I would argue, she is seen exerting a control (and power) over Jamal; and this somehow has "disempowered" Jamal who will become her husband. Enraged and humiliated by Rosie who claims that he is a *bacul* (coward), he slaps her in the face. I would contend, though, his reliance or dependence on others (his poor mother, Rosie and her father) and his susceptibility engender an internalized anxiety and fears, as feeling "feminized" and powerless.

In *Kabus Tengahari*, Junaidah's former husband, Badli a yuppie is depicted as someone hostile, violent and inhuman. In several scenes, we are shown with his attempts at behaving violently and abusing Junaidah as well as threatening her new family (where in the beginning, Junaidah becomes the "victim" of his brutality and inhumanness and because of her attempt to retaliate against him, she is accused of injuring him, leading to her imprisonment). The film also unfolds a subplot involving the former husband's new wife (played by Asmahani Hussein) who becomes victimized; this is shown in a scene in which the new wife comes to confide in Junaidah about her predicament being with a man who is fond of "using" women and treating them condescendingly. But, the film manages to counterbalance the representation of men by depicting another male character (Junaidah's new husband), an amiable corporate figure who is willing to take Junaidah as his spouse and accept her as who she is (and regard Junaidah's daughter as his own). He is also depicted as a man, a breadwinner who protects women (Junaidah and

the daughter) from any unwanted forces. This being the case, *Kabus Tengahari* attempts to present an equipoise in terms of the representation of males, as advocating that although the male leads to the victimization of women, but the male too who protects and exonerates them from their predicaments. But, as I argued earlier, the men who subjugate and victimize women in the films can be regarded as contesting and challenging their masculinity or patriarchal system, as they seem to misuse the power and control they exert as men. In *Kabus Tengahari*, Junaidah's former husband actually relegates his masculine status when he acts violently towards Junaidah and treats other women badly. Later, when he forcefully attempts to reconcile with Junaidah or to get closer to his daughter, he can thus be read as re-asserting and reclaiming his wounded sense of manhood.

In *Pertentangan*, the male character, Zabidi leads a "hedonistic" lifestyle, as he incessantly disregards his wife's advice pertaining to religious matters, and he, instead, often advises Zainab as to be cognizant of matters related to "the condition of being a modern individual living in a modern society." Flirting with Farah, a night-club singer whom later he weds, alcoholic drinks, gambling, amongst others, mark Zabidi's decadence. Here, Zabidi serves as a counterpoint to his obedient, pious wife, Zainab. Zabidi's atrocious behaviour leads to the dismantlement of the family, as they are later divorced. Zabidi's manhood is indeed undermined by the fact that he is not able to save his family from disintegration; Zabidi feels exasperated and finally gives in, as his wife continuously preaches her *dakwah* and exhorts him to change to a better Muslim. Zabidi's decision to divorce has much to do with his wife's "preaching" which makes him deprived of his role as a male as well as a husband; in fact, Zabidi, in many ways, treats and perceives women as "sexual objects." The new wife's infidelity, as she elopes with her former fiancé, further insults his manhood which eventuates in the murder of the former fiancé.

The melodramas of this period entail the rule of compensating moral values, which assert that all immoral actions must be compensated for in the films by means of the punishment of the immoral character or through the redemption of the character's immoral ways.¹⁵ However, in the conventionality of the genre in general, this affects the female characters (notably in the female-centred melodrama), but most of the films discussed in this essay invert the pattern by compensating immoral actions committed by the male characters. In *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, Rohana's former husband, Aziz is eventually "punished" for what he did to Rohana

in the past; he is “paralyzed” physically (due to an accident) and emotionally (when Rohana repudiates his proposal to reconcile). While another character Jusoh and his immoral actions are compensated through redemption, as Rohana is still willing to help out with his parturient wife having difficulties of delivery, by forgetting the iniquity of his conducts towards her in the past. In *Dia Ibuku*, Rohani’s eldest son, Jamal, who believes the slander that his mother is a prostitute, realizes in the end that his mother has immensely sacrificed, to the extent that she is encumbered with debt, whilst bringing up his brother and himself; in the finale, Jamal, makes an effort to go back to the *kampong* looking for the anguished mother to seek her forgiveness. Jamal’s future father-in-law, Kudin who accuses his mother, Rohani of being a prostitute, purges his sin towards the end when Jamal’s uncle comes to confront and make him realize the enormity of his wrongdoings. Having to make a full restitution, Kudin guarantees Jamal’s uncle that he will hand down his wealth to Jamal. In *Pertentangan*, the film “punishes” the immoral males: the new wife’s former fiancé who is still having an affair with her is murdered after being found out by the husband; Zabidi, who traces their whereabouts and goes on to murder the new wife’s former fiancé, is thrown into jail after being found guilty. The denouement of the film asserts his further punishment when he is shown paralyzed after being released from the prison. Zabidi repents and wishes to reconcile with his family; his wish comes true when one day he is approached by one of his sons who is now an adult whilst stepping out of the mosque after attending his prayer. After reuniting with his son and the mother (Zabidi’s wife), they embark upon a search for the other son who was given away to Zabidi’s employer when he was imprisoned; to their utter disappointment, they discover that the former employer was not a Muslim and the son had been raised as a non-Muslim.

Melodrama and Modernity

Many melodramas produced in the early 1980s seem to posit and reflect the emerging modernizing culture experienced by Malaysia. I would argue and demonstrate that the melodramas not only celebrate the advent of modernization, but also explore the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the process of modernity.¹⁶ As is known, many theorists and scholars (including from the West) continuously harp on the notion of “modernity.” Before I go further to discuss the melodrama and its relation to modernity,

I would like to stress that perhaps the notion of “modernity” discussed in this essay is merely concerned with the idea of Westernization. By the same token, it would be useful to consider the notion of “modernity as loss” (Baker, 2000) for the purpose of analyzing the Malay melodrama in relation to modernity. Tomlinson (1991) makes the case for seeing the spread of Western modernity as cultural *loss* in that it provides inadequate qualitative, meaningful and moral points of reference and experience. Tomlinson further suggests that the Western concept of development stresses “more of everything,” particularly more material goods, without offering significant cultural values which might suggest where more is undesirable or where growth might mean personal and meaningful experience. Indeed, the term “modernity” conjures up a gamut of diverse meanings and interpretations. According to Khoo (1999),¹⁷ if the Malaysian media tends to identify it with Westernization, it is due to the fact that most theorists generally agree that modernity derives primarily from a European Enlightenment rationalist philosophy and an emphasis on individual liberties which were “the institutions and modes of behaviour established first of all in post-feudal Europe but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world-historical in their impact” (Giddens, 1990). By citing Giddens, Khoo further states that “modernity is also ‘roughly equivalent to the industrialized world, so long as it be recognized that industrialism is not its only institutional dimension.’” By “industrialism” Giddens means “the social relations implied in the widespread use of material power and machinery in production processes.” In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens delineates four inter-related dimensions of globalization: world capitalist economy, the nation-state system, world military order and the international division of labour. In a more paradoxical manner, Stevens writes that the “new” Malaysian “modernity” is positively regarded as synonymous with “progress,” with economic development, and negatively with encroaching, colonizing “Westernization” or “Westoxification.” In the course of my discussion, it is also useful to note that her definition leads to a dichotomization between “social modernity” (the systematic imperatives of the state and the economy) and “cultural modernity.” According to Khoo, this is too easy a dichotomization propagated by the Malaysian state ideology as well as by the neo-conservative mainstream, of accepting economic imperatives (capitalism) as “good” modernity and rejecting its cultural effects (Westoxification) as “bad” modernity, making it seem as if these two spheres are mutually exclusive of each other and not, as they are in reality, conjoined. For example, as Gaik Cheng writes,

moralists decry the teenage pastime of loafing in shopping malls (*lepak*), regarding it as a bad habit of cultural modernity without making connections to the state capitalist ideology of encouraging and exhorting consumption and accumulation of wealth. The labeling of cultural modernity as “colonizing Westernization” or “Westoxification” indicates the reaction resulting from what Giddens calls “the reflexivity of modernity,” that which “turns out to confound the expectations of Enlightenment thought – although it is the very product of that thought.”

Now I would like to turn to Felski’s (1995) analysis of the aporias and ambiguities of “modernity,” as cited by Wong (2001), which invites us to ruminate the paradoxes inherent in the project of modernity and the anomalies generated both in the West and in its former colonies as that project impacts social, political and cultural spheres. Central to this is the need to reexamine if the project of modernity is emancipatory or disenfranchising. Certain questions remain unanswered; for example, as to whether the project of modernity liberates or evokes new hybrid forms of hegemony and control both nationally and transnationally. However, in this essay, it is not my intention to embark profoundly upon the notion of modernity and the paradoxes it evokes, as textualized in the Malay melodrama in the early 1980s. As a matter of fact, the Malay melodrama of the period does not exhibit much social change experienced by the characters, as the proliferation of information and rapid internalization was evident after Japanese industrial culture in the government’s “Look East” policy. The early 1980s is a period of transition from agrarian to industrial economy. Only in the mid and late 1980s, with Japanese investment, for instance, did heavy industries flourish and Malaysian exports became the country’s primary growth engine (Mahathir, 1999). According to Felski, as heir to Enlightenment positivism, Western modernity is associated with another term, that is “modernization” which can be defined as “the complex constellation of socio-economic phenomena which originated in the context of Western development and which have since manifested themselves around the globe in various forms: scientific and technological innovation, the industrialization of production, rapid urbanization, and ever-expanding capitalist market, the development of the nation state and so on.” (Wong, 2001). Furthermore, my discussion of modernity as the pivotal issue to which the Malay melodrama gives rise will encompass and restrict itself to the Malays, as the melodrama primarily textualizes and revolves around the Malay society.

I would suggest that these melodramas mediate a serious contemplation upon the loss of traditional values, for all of them are set

in scenarios where the emerging modernization of the “West” is in direct conflict with “traditional” (Malay / Muslim) values. As I shall show, the dichotomization of *kampong* and city, tradition and modernization as symbols for contradictory characteristics of modernity is a prominent feature of Malay melodramas made in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ *Dia Ibuku* is punctuated with visuals of *kampongs*, rivers and the lush paddy fields which recur throughout the film. In contrast, the film occasionally captures the city, the traffic-ridden Kuala Lumpur as a social space characterized by tall buildings, cars and bikes moving in different directions which become metaphors for the country’s imminent modernization. The film’s juxtaposition of the “city” and “*kampong*” is threaded with contradiction. This can be witnessed in the sequence in which Jamil, Rohani’s younger son brings home the electrical table lamp which is accidentally broken while he rushes towards his mother to embrace her in the paddy field, as he falls down while carrying the lamp; in the following scene, Rohani whilst scrutinizing the broken lamp asserts that the accident does not make any difference as their home is not equipped with electricity. The sequence can be read metaphorically as having a sense of contradiction, as it tells much about Malaysia (particularly the rural area) of the early 1980s, a transitional period replete with contradictions. A symptomatic reading of the scene implies that, in this transitional period, the rural family, as portrayed in the film, like other social institutions, is in a process of restructuring (as we can see, Rohani’s family is going through the process, as her children receive proper, formal education; the eldest, in particular, studies abroad, returns home to become a professional, and supposedly is hoped to elevate their socio-economic status, as part of filial piety). And this process can be understood as a response to economic problems. Another sequence which further amplifies the contradiction takes place in the capital of Kuala Lumpur when Sohor, the *kampong* folk follows Jamil to visit his uncle. One of the film’s thematic preoccupations pertinent to the contradiction mentioned above is reinforced by means of the visual lexicon of food; for example, this is witnessed in the scene which depicts Jamil and Sohor waiting at a burger stall to buy burgers, using close-ups of burgers being grilled. The scatterbrained Sohor has not a clue about them, and to satisfy his curiosity he asks Jamil as to whether they are *halal* (kosher) or not. Here, the film highlights not only the rural-urban polarity, but also the generation gap by juxtaposing the younger generation’s embrace of the “new values” with the older generation’s cultural anachronism; Jamil manifests himself as the younger, “new” generation, whilst Sohor represents the traditional,

kampong older generation incapable of keeping abreast with the contemporary lifestyle and the world's emerging modernization. Indeed, Sohor's antediluvian attitudes and sense of rural idiocy can be seen prior to the burger sequence when he seems lost at the junction of the road, being anxious and uneasy to cross the road, as he is illiterate about the traffic lights. The close-ups of burgers being grilled are indeed analogous to the traffic-ridden Kuala Lumpur, as shown prior to the burger sequence in the sense that they serve as the film's visual metonymy for Malaysian modernization. Here, the consumption of American popular culture can be seen as a means for identity construction; Jamil identifies himself with being a "youth" – urban, educated and modern. The burger sequence also parallels that of the film's underlying statement about the infusion of Western (American?) cultures into modern-day Malaysia. In a similar fashion of Zawawi Ibrahim's writings on Rahim Razali's films of the 1980s, I would also highlight that the consistent representation of the Malay rural society's landmark and cultural scape as unchanging is evident in the Malay melodramas of the early 1980s. Most of the films depict that in the end, the educated / hybridized / Westernized / modernized Malays will revert to and rekindle their roots. This is despite the existence of numerous writings and research by anthropologists pointing to the processes of social change which have already impinged on the Malay *kampong* (countryside) as a result of colonialism and the impact of capitalist penetration on the agrarian structure (Zawawi, 2006). Ideally, as we can see, these melodramas confer with the dichotomization of the city and *kampong*, as represented by the characters, settings and social milieu. Nonetheless, these films do not circumscribe themselves into strict binary opposites, as the *kampong*, as depicted, is still inhabited by those with immoral dispositions; it can be argued though that this must resort to the "denigrated site of Malay conservatism, backwardness, lassitude and rural idiocy" (Bunnell, 2002; Parkaran, 2005; Lim, 2006).¹⁹

Since the genre is concerned with the representation of gender, particularly the female, the gender construction in melodrama can be seen in relation to modernization which has inevitably brought with it a value system. I would argue, caught up in the conflict between tradition and modernization, the institution of (Malay) family, as mentioned earlier, is undergoing a process of restructuring. From these melodramas, we can assess the impact upon the family and gender relations of the changes in social and economic circumstances accompanying modernization. In *Dia Ibuku*, the agrarian activity is metonymically represented in feminine

and domestic terms (partly due to the fact that rural Malay women in the 1970s and 1980s were largely engaged in self-employed economic activities), which allows it to appropriate a set of connotations vital to the pathos of the text: productivity and victimization. Indeed, these connotations are traditionally associated with the image of the maternal in Malay melodrama (other films include *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan*, *Warna-Warna Hati*, *Sayang Ibu*, *Hapuslah Air Matamu*). In *Dia Ibuku*, the opening montage ostensibly dramatizes Rohani's struggle by showing the self-employed economic activities performed daily through a concatenation of shots of Rohani slogging; this includes Rohani tapping the rubber tree during the dawn, her processing the latex traditionally, her working in the paddy fields, and her preparing the traditional *kuih* and delicacies before going on to sell them at the morning market. When she fails to pay back her debts, she is left destitute. The valorization of women's sacrifice, one major convention of the Malay melodrama, can be seen as critiquing and contesting both the males and patriarchal system. In terms of the victimization of the female protagonist, the ending of *Dia Ibuku* negotiates the materialization of Rohani's wish, as her elder son, Jamal returns and asks for forgiveness, and Kudin repents and is willing to hand down his wealth to Jamal; this certainly endorses that all the differences are finally overcome, and the two families from different socio-economic status will be integrated. This indeed echoes the genre, in both literary and film studies, which has been said to side with the "powerless" as an entertainment for the working class, while evil is associated with "social power and station" (Vicinus, 1981): "melodrama constantly attempts to give material existence to the repressed" (Byars, 1991); and "has been historically a major site of the political struggles for the disempowered" (Shattuc, 1994). *Dia Ibuku* esoterically indicates that the contradictions of capitalism are negotiated through such "moral touchstones:" the apparently powerless Rohani who by her persevering endurance win through, defeats the logic of capitalism, for reward comes through "wholly noncompetitive virtues and interests." As we can see in the context of Rohani-Kudin's relationship, innocence and villainy that construct each other: "while the villainy is necessary to the production and revelation of innocence, innocence defines the boundaries of the forbidden which the villain breaks. In this way melodrama's affective and epistemological structures were deployed, within the constraints of dominant socio-economic frameworks, to embody the forces and desires set loose by, or resisting, the drives of capitalism" (Gledhill, 1992). In

fact, Marx's conceptualization of classes as polar entities, "the villain" (the exploiter) and "the victim" (the exploited), resembles the moral polarities typical of melodramas. In a broader scope, Elsaesser (1987) writes that:

One of the characteristic features of melodrama in general is that they concentrate on the point of the victim: what makes the films ... exceptional is the way they manage to present all the characters convincingly as victims. The critique – the questions of "evil," of responsibility – is firmly placed on a social and existential level, away from the arbitrary and finally obtuse logic of private motives and individualized psychology. This is why the melodrama, at its most accomplished, seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society, especially the relation between psychology, morality, and class-consciousness, by emphasizing so clearly an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces directed oppressingly inward, and with which the characters themselves unwittingly collude to become their agents.

As has been discussed by scholars and theorists, one of the major criticisms of melodrama as a genre in the 1970s addresses its embeddedness in the bourgeois ideology (Gledhill, 1992). In the West, melodramatic film is believed to have stemmed from Victorian ethics and sentimentality, and the "welfare ethic of redistribution," (Siomopoulos, 1999), making use of stylistic "excess" in both gestures and visual clues (Brooks, 1995). In addition, among English-speaking scholars, specifically earlier feminists, melodrama was construed as confirming White, masculine, bourgeois ideology. Recent assessments of the genre, however, analyze it as an amalgam of pleasure, fantasy and ideology. The Malay melodrama of the early 1980s can also be examined in terms of its bourgeois ideology as its textualization correlates with the state ideology. Here, I attempt to show that the males (men) depicted in the melodrama represent the larger group of (young) middle-class Malays who have gone through the national education system, which was reconstituted by the postcolonial Malaysian New Economic Policy or NEP (1970-1990). As an economic measure, the NEP was launched in 1970 in order to reduce the economic discrepancy between the non-Bumiputeras and the Bumiputeras for the next twenty years with the double-pronged objectives of creating a Bumiputera capitalist class and to eradicate poverty regardless of race

(Halim, 2000; Loh, 2002; Zawawi, 2003). Films like *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, *Dia Ibuku*, *Kabus Tengahari*, *Pertentangan*, *Ribut Barat*, and several more represent the middle-class / bourgeois Malays – normally males – in the wake of NEP, with their dilemmas and problems, portraying them as “ungrateful,” “morally-decadent,” “avaricious” (in the sense of “capitalist greed”), “ruthless,” and a few more negative attributes. Here, a parallelism can be drawn between melodrama as a mode and Marx’s writing, as Kemple (1995) asserts: “Marx’s text can ... be read as a catastrophic melodrama that not only depicts the annihilation of capitalism but also expresses his own revolutionary impatience to see this system as the victim of its own self-destruction.” The representation of the Malay males in these melodramas, as I would argue, indicts the NEP, since its inception, has reconstituted the Malay society into different social classes and “modern” (Western?) values, represented by the presence of diverse Malay “cultures” or sub-cultural forms, which in the upper and middle echelons range from the corporate (*budaya korporat*), the “New Malay” (*Melayu Baru*), to the middle classes (*kelas menengah Melayu*) [Abdul Rahman, 1977; Rustam, 1992; Zawawi, 2003]. This being the case, the Malay melodrama of this period offers a subtle criticism of such a policy which authenticates the ramifications attributed to it. Moreover, the melodramas can also be read didactically, as they correspond indirectly to the socio-economic-political policies introduced by the government; they may serve as a (moral) guidance or reminder (to the Malays), as the early 1980s is the period in which the country was just about to churn out and construct the “new Malays.” Though it can be considered imaginary (in the early 1980s), the negative traits (in the form of moral laxity) ingrained in those characters discussed earlier can remind and teach us about the idealization of the “(new) Malay,” to which the nation aspires (in particular, in the context of the Mahathirist policy);²⁰ at this stage, the Malay melodrama emerges as forms of both fantasy and ideology.

Bila Hati Telah Retak indicates that among the Malay lower classes, new sub-cultural variants are also emerging, both in rural / urban settings and cutting across gender differences. Rohana, a nurse serves in a rural enclave can be conceived of as an agent of modernity; this is in line with the government’s efforts in expanding and developing public healthcare (especially in rural areas). The narrative makes evident the social change (with regard to the modern healthcare and the receptivity amongst the society) people are experiencing, and the portrayal of Rohana as a

“working woman” offers a social commentary on the changing nature of work and gender relations. Furthermore, the film renders Rohana as an embodiment of modernization in the early 1980s in Malaysia (notably when Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad had just held the post of Prime Minister in 1981) as she brings about some changes to the underdeveloped *kampong* community. In the meantime, she, as a nurse, has to confront the villainous traditional midwife in the *kampong*, the rumour-mongering Mak Lijah (played by Rokiah Shafie) who begrudges her for everything she has. Besides, Rohana not only serves as a nurse in the *kampong*, but she also initiates the women in the *kampong* to progress by getting involved in various economic activities and to elevate their socio-economic status; this includes her support and initiation in a variety of activities, ranging from baking to sewing. On the contrary, Mak Lijah, as a midwife, appears very obsolete and so much adheres to traditional medicine and practice. In order to outstrip Rohana, she even launches a campaign to reduce Rohana’s popularity in the *kampong* by slandering her. Implicitly, the film offers an underlying critique of the Malays who are reluctant to embrace change, considering change can part way from previous ways of living. The character Mak Lijah and some *kampong* folks are imbued with the habit of clinging steadfastly to *adat* (custom) which is made evident in the film. Another character Jusoh, a negative portrayal of a *kampong* Malay man who is without a proper job, as discussed earlier, can be seen in the context of Mahathir politics where he has lamented the subservient, indeed “lazy,” traits of Malays. In both *The Malay Dilemma* (1970) and *The Challenge* (1986), Mahathir bemoans what he perceives as Malay fatalism, a disinclination for competition which he argued were partly attributed to the structurally weak socio-economic position of the Malays (Khuo, 1999). Thus characters such as Mak Lijah and Jusoh only serve to stymie development and necessary changes along which modernity brings. Towards the end, the conflicts between Rohana and the *kampong* folks who renounce her, are resolved, after being temporarily ostracized by them; for example, Mak Lijah who fails miserably to assist Jusoh’s wife in her childbirth has to relinquish her practice of traditional medicine. In a similar scene, Rohana also declares her willingness to learn and explore traditional medicine from Mak Lijah; here, Rohana’s acquiescence is an attempt to win Mak Lijah’s heart as well as to reconcile them, regardless of their differences. This tacitly endorses that melodrama, as a film genre, celebrates, as Schatz (1977) puts it, “both individualism and social integration within the very play of their conflict.”

As discussed earlier, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* features an autonomous and career-oriented woman, thus fostering more liberal and broad-minded images of women in society during that era. On the one hand, it focuses almost on the exclusivity of women, women's space and women's problems and, more importantly, the story underscores the working life of a *single* woman which indicates that Rohana is deliberately established as the heroine of her own life rather than defined by the presence of a man. Indeed, as I touched earlier, the film's denouement canvasses the idea of Rohana's autonomy and latent feminism when she rejects her former husband's proposal to get back together. Perhaps, in a way, Rohana takes her former husband's condemnation that she is old-fashioned, traditional and *kampong* as a challenge, as she is now transforming herself into a more liberal, "modern" woman. By this, I would suggest, the form of "liberalization" adopted by her signifies and celebrates the woman's attainment of unprecedented mobility outside the confines of the home, not as parochially and superficially understood by the husband. Perhaps this echoes the notion of Malaysian "modernity" (in the form of "social modernity") which is synonymous with "progress" and economic development. The change she brings about to the *kampong*, especially in terms of the reception of the modern healthcare by the *kampong* folks and the active participations by the women in the self-employed economic activities underlines one of the film's thematic preoccupations concerning the "transition" (from "traditional" to "modernity") discussed earlier. Here, *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, as a melodrama, captures the basically paradoxical nature of female experience at a pivotal phase of Malaysian modernity, with its repudiation of domesticity.

In *Dia Ibuku*, Rohani's sons, Jamal and Jamil are the educated Malays, as part of the post-1969 affirmative action policies for Malays received a tertiary education (often abroad); in this case, Jamal, in particular, who pursues his studies in England, returns home to become an oil engineer. Jamal indeed reflects the rising Western-educated Malay middle-class or bourgeoisie, children of NEP. Upon returning, Jamal meets his future father-in-law, Kudin, a *nouveau-riche* Malay (a creation of a Malay capitalist class) who promises Jamal to hand down his wealth and business once Jamal marries his daughter, Rosie. Later, Jamal discovers the ugly truth that Kudin becomes rich due to others' efforts, not his own. Pickowica (1993) outlines the traits of the melodramatic mode as "rhetorical excess, grossly exaggerated representations, and extreme moral bipolarity." Consistent with the melodramatic mode, the film

implicitly critiques the capitalist, wealthy industrialist (the *nouveau-riche* Malay man, Kudin) and in many ways, the traits of “capitalist greed” are imbibed in his character. But Rohani’s struggles, threading her way through obstacles to raise her children, reflect and symbolize the country which is on the brink of widespread social and economic change. In such a thematization of the rural-urban shift, *Dia Ibuku* metaphorically enunciates the country’s transition from being reliant on mining and agriculture to an economy that emphasizes manufacturing. The character Rohani, an impoverished peasant as well as other *kampung* characters, Sohor and Itam, represent the traditional economy attributed to the structurally weak socio-economic position of the Malays. Rohani’s eldest son, Jamal and his future father-in-law, Kudin, represent the “new Malays” who have supposedly undergone the “decolonization of the mind” before and during the Mahathir era implicated in the New Economic Policy (1970). The characterization of Kudin, for example, the *nouveau-riche* Malay with big businesses and projects, reflects the early attempts of modernization of the economy, modernization of rural life, a rapid and balanced growth of urban activities, and the creation of a Malay commercial and industrial community in all categories so that “Malays and other indigenous people will become full partners in all aspects of the economic life of the nation” (Malaysia, 1971, 1). Greed, ruthlessness, among others, are the characters’ traits (in the case of *Dia Ibuku*, this refers to Kudin and the *kampung* moneylender), which signify the dangerous repercussions of increasing industrialization and wealth acquisition, bearing a testimony to the period in which NEP is being implemented. In regard to this, it can be said that many conflicts triggered in this story, through the characterization of the capitalists, allude to the film’s unambiguous portrayal of the moral decay of capitalism. Here, the film examines the viability of Malay values in a “globalized” world; thus, the city / *kampung* contrast constitutes the wider traditional-modernity paradigm that underscores the whole film, thematically and culturally.

In this essay, I would also reflect the contradictions and paradoxes that can be detected through the economic restructuring in the 1970s under the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the challenge of resurgent Islam to the socio-economic culture which can be seen as encouraging decadent Westernization and the possible blurring of demarcation between genders. In *Pertentangan*, the female protagonist Zainab is designated as a religious teacher and a pious wife whose faith in Allah remains sturdy, despite having to confront her secular, hedonist husband. Here, the film discreetly negotiates the potentiality of “feminism” within Islam.

This could be due to her firmness, audacity and resilience while enshrining her rights as a Muslim woman (and wife) and preserving her dignity. In fact, in Malaysia, the early 1970s could be seen as the beginning of “Islamic resurgence” through the rise of the *dakwah* movement which was viewed primarily as a religious ideology, in response to the triple challenge of multiculturalism within Malaysia, Western values and modernity (the generic term *dakwah* is defined as “call” or “invitation” to the faith; its goal is to revive the spirit, zeal and devotion of its members).²¹ Indeed, the *dakwah* movement correlates with the Islamic resurgence worldwide which had influenced Malaysia and imposed “Islamization of the mainstream society” (Esposito, 1980). Events in the Muslim world such as the Arab-Israeli War (1967), the Arab oil embargo (1973), the Islamization program in Pakistan (1977-1988), and Iran’s Islamic revolution (1978-1979) brought an outpouring of popular Islamic sentiment all over the world (Verma, 2004). In the course of the film, the *dakwah* movement is manifested in the characterization of Zainab, an epitome of the idealized notion of Malay Muslim woman, and in the dress worn by her – a *telekung* (a mini veil) and *hijab* (long, loose robe) worn over the Malay *baju* (dress / shirt). This can be examined in light of the rarity and inadequacy of the representations of “Islamic” characterization (especially featuring women in veils [*tudung*] as opposed to today’s representation) found in the Malay films during the period. The representation of the character proves that in Malaysia (then and today), visible indicators such as the phenomenon of veiling and the return to the more modest forms of dress among Muslim women cannot correlate with the notion that women have retrogressed or have reverted to religious atavism. I would suggest that the version of feminism embraced by Zainab will force new and unexpected transformations;²² as evident in the film, she demonstrates that the veils that she wears and the whole “Islamization” upheld by her do facilitate her entry into public life, as well as her “emancipation;” she not only restricts herself to feminine domestication and homebound realm, but also manoeuvres herself into a broader social space. Prior to her divorce, she is portrayed as an active *dakwah* speaker who gives religious talks upon invitation, albeit her undivided commitment as a housewife; after the divorce, she reconsiders her former job as a religious teacher and serves in her *kampong*.

A closer look at both of the characters, Zainab and her husband Zabidi reveals that they symbolically represent the paradox and contradiction between the rise of “Islamization” and the growing of

“Westernization” and “secularization” which, I suppose, have arisen from the country’s rapid internationalization and economic development. Zainab who represents the “Islamized” Malay contradicts that of Zabidi, the husband, who from his characterization (an auspicious, promising corporate figure) reflects any attempt at ameliorating the Malays (in terms of socio-economic status and the state’s capitalist ideology), induced by the pro-Malay policies. Even, if there are various causes for “Islamization,” the facts remain that there was a strong proclivity among the Malays to consolidate Islam, as indicated by Zainab, since the growing of “Westernization” and “secularization” might threaten, undermine and challenge “Islamization.” This can also be seen in the context of the secularizing tendencies of the modern nation-state which were reflected after the riots of 1969, in an “increasing trend towards materialistic accumulation influenced by this-worldly orientation and premised on the development of power for social and political manipulation” (Lee, 1990; Verma, 2004). The film’s finale, in which the old Zabidi and his family are in search of his other son only to discover that Zabidi’s former employer, OKB to whom his son was given is a non-Muslim, says something about this (But the denouement of the film appears rather too abrupt and simplistic). The character OKB (and his family), the capitalist, can be seen as a substitute for the “enemy of Islam,” who initially disguises himself as to “dismantle” Zabidi’s family; esoterically, this is a form of “disguise as Islam,” in the wake of modernity, as to undermine and erode Islam. The scene towards the end in which Zabidi and his family encounter OKB, he asserts to OKB: “*Aku kira kau orang Melayu, OKB*” (“I thought you’re a Malay, OKB”); and OKB replies cynically perhaps in the film’s powerful lines: “*Kalau kepada Israel kau serahkan anak kau, Israel lah jadinya*” (“If your child were brought up by the Israeli, he would of course end up being Israeli”). Even his equivocal name OKB (perhaps an acronym for *Orang Kaya Baru* [the nouveau-riche]?) functionalizes as a form of fabrication, invented with deceitful intent. *Kabus Tengahari* is another film that configures and conflates one of the female characters, Junaidah’s daughter with Islamization, as towards the end, the disillusioned girl, after her love relationship with her stepbrother turns sour, as disapproved by her parents, disappears from her family. The denouement of the film reveals that she has traveled up north for some emotional and spiritual revitalization, by attending religious lessons, as realizing that her teenage life creates a spiritual vacuum that could be fulfilled only by religion; she indeed metamorphoses herself into a *tudung* (veiled), *dakwah* girl.

However, the process of Islamization inherent in *Kabus Tengahari* merely demarcates itself as to suggest the transformation in enabling the character to realize her identity which is an integral part of the process of self-discovery.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that the readings of the Malay melodramas of the early 1980s, particularly those of which accentuate the prioritization of women, can be envisaged as an allegory (in a providential sense) of the Mahathir era. The melodrama encapsulates that the socio-political and economic scenarios in the early 1980s had indeed impinged upon the cinematic representation and (re)construction of gender, both males and females, as well as upon gender relations, while celebrating and chastising Western “modernity.” Even though it remains compromised by dominant assumptions woven into the structure of its generic conventions and allusions, the Malay melodrama is inevitably marked by minor shifting attitudes towards gender, subjectivity and the place of women beyond the domain of domesticity. The depiction of the Malay women of the era, for example, seems to set standards for their predecessors (in the post-NEP era) by beginning to progress along the spectrum of modernity and liberalism. On the one hand, most of the melodramas examined in this essay can be said to serve as an underlying commentary and critique of the (Malay) males, as a result of having privileged from various government policies, in particular, the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in 1970. On the other hand, the melodrama negotiates new hopes and aspirations boosted by Mahathirism (as the period was Mahathir’s early years as Malaysian Prime Minister) and bodes well for the future modernizing endeavours undertaken by the government. This being the case, I hope to have shown that the genre, in the context of Malaysian cinema, entails fluidity and flexibility in terms of the inscription of the genre’s defining features, as the melodramatic mode, representation and text prove to subtly correspond to the socio-economic and political reverberations. In the more contemporary Malaysian cinema (in the 1990s and onwards [in the post-NEP era]), the genre has experienced some permutations, as the gender construction and the issue of Malay modernity, for instance, are mobilized in such new perspectives and discourses.²³ Such an evolution certainly certifies Neale’s explication that genres are not static and instead best understood

as “processes,” for the Malay melodrama itself, I believe, can and will survive by adapting to changing historical (and cultural) circumstances.

Notes

- ¹ Indeed, in the context of Malaysian cinema, film critics and reviewers tend to employ the term “melodrama” in a rather pejorative sense. For example, A. Wahab Hamzah, in his review of several films, used to state: “Azizah tidak seharusnya menjadi terlalu melodrama” (Azizah is not supposed to be too melodramatic) [“Mengapa kau Azizah, *Utusan Malaysia*, 1993, 13 February]; “Kejayaan hebat Sembilu yang terdahulu menyebabkan pengarahnya begitu yakin dengan formulanya iaitu kisah cinta, lagu dan dihiasi oleh pelakon / penyanyi popular dalam melodrama khayalan ala Bombay” (The enormous success of the previous Sembilu necessitates its director to be so certain with his formula, i.e. love story, songs and the casting of popular actors / singers in such an escapist melodrama a’ la Bombay) [“Masih guna formula lama ...”, *Utusan Malaysia*, 1995, 15 May].
- ² In this essay, the usage of the term “melodrama” is referred to those on offer in Film Studies, where as Singer points out, “‘Melodrama’ ... is all but synonymous with a set of subgenres that remain close to the hearth and emphasize a register of heightened emotionalism and sentimentality: the family melodrama, the woman’s film, the weepie, the soap opera, etc.’ (1990: 94). In order to clarify the problematic definitions of melodrama, it is useful to refer to what Steve Neale has written about this in the course of Film Studies: “A lineage, a provenance, an aesthetic, an institutional and critical status, a generic – or sub-generic – field of application, and a putatively gender-specific appeal or address to woman have all, since the mid-1970s, been attributed to melodrama in the cinema on this basis, thus helping to comprise both the framework and the substance of what might be termed the ‘standard’ or ‘orthodox’ Film Studies account. If only because there is such a discrepancy between the ways the term has been used and defined, it is clear that on the one hand the widespread use of ‘melodrama’ as a synonym for ‘thriller’ or ‘action-adventure’ needs to be explained, and on the other that the tenets of the standard

account need to be scrutinized much more closely. In both cases, the history of melodrama in the theatre needs to be addressed, as does the history of 'melodrama' in Film Studies since the early 1970s." (2000; 181).

- ³ Insofar as I am concerned, in the context of Malaysian cinema, the term "the woman's film" has never been employed by critics, writers, scholars, reviewers, and producers. Instead, the term "melodrama" is used even to refer to "woman-centered melodrama."
- ⁴ Even there is quite a number of what might be termed as "family melodrama" also concerns the centrality of female (woman) characters or issues. Those films include *Permintaan Terakhir* (dir. Jamil Sulong, 1975), *Bunga Padi Berdaun Lalang* (dir. Hussein Abu Hassan, 1975), *Menanti Hari Esok* (dir. Jins Shamsuddin, 1977), *Tiada Esok Bagimu* (dir. Jins Shamsuddin, 1979), *Antara Dua Hati* (dir. Rosnani Jamil, 1988), *Sayang Ibu* (dir. M. Rojik / N.T.Wong, 1989), *Mira Edora* (dir. Zulkifli M.Osman, 1990), *Warna-Warna Hati* (dir. A. R. Badul, 1991), *Nadia* (dir. Rahman Adam, 1992), *Penghujung Malam* (dir. Ahmadi Hassan, 1992), *Sayang Salmah* (dir. Mahadi J. Murat, 1995), *Maria Mariana* (dir. Yusoff Haslam, 1996), and many more.
- ⁵ I am borrowing the term "the independent woman film" from Karen Hollinger (2002), as employed in her essay, "From Female Friends to Literary Ladies: The Contemporary Woman's Film," in S. Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, London: British Film Institute. She writes: "If the 1950s and 1960s represent the dark ages of the woman's film, the 1970s can be characterized as a renaissance with the rise of what critics termed the 'New Woman's Film.' This group of films falls largely into two categories: the independent woman film and the female friendship film, both of which were unquestionably popular cultural byproducts of the 1960s women's movement." In the 1970s and 1980s, Malaysia hardly produced what we might term as "the female friendship film." In the 1980s, the only female friendship films I can think of are *Tujuh Biang Keladi* (dir. Aziz Satar, 1985), a comedy, and *Tempo 88* (dir. Megat Ramli/Halim Sabir), a musical-oriented film featuring largely unknown, amateur actors.

- 6 “Family melodrama” refers to ... while “impossible love melodrama” refers to ...
- 7 The New Economic Policy (NEP) was a twenty year policy plan implemented in 1970 which aimed at eradicating poverty and correcting the economic imbalances between the Malays and other ethnic groups. It has been replaced by the New Development Policy (NDP) in July 1991 which appears to place less emphasis on the ethnic redistribution goals of the NEP but focuses on the rapid development of an active *bumiputera* commercial and industrial community and relies on the private sector to be involved in the restructuring objective. The NEP which reorganized the economy in order to alleviate the economic backwardness of the Malays has had its impact upon the ways in which the gender and the race (Malays in particular) are represented and reconstructed in films. See Zawawi Ibrahim’s essays: “The Beginning of Neo-Realist Imaginings in Malaysian Cinema: A Critical Appraisal of Malay Modernity and Representation of Malayness in Rahim Razali’s Films,” *Sinema Malaysia*, 1(1), (Jan-April 2006); “On Erma Fatima’s ‘The Last Malay Woman’: Gendering Discourses on Reclaiming Malayness in the New Malaysian Cinema,” *Spectator*, 24(2); “The Search for a “New Cinema” in Postcolonial Malaysia: The Films of U-Wei Haji Saari as counter-narrations of national identity,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4(1). See also Khoo Gaik Cheng (2005), *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- 8 My discussion on melodrama will take into account the notion of “melodrama as a mode and as an expression as well; for example, my analysis will entail some aspects of mise-en-scene such as performance and figure expression, among others. This is affirmed by van der Heidi (2002) in his book, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), that the predominant genre in Malaysian cinema is melodrama. He further asserts: “Though perhaps its pervasiveness signals the inappropriateness of identifying melodrama as a genre; it might be more productive to suggest that melodrama is a supra-generic mode of address within which particular genres operate.” Besides, this essay will also attempt at revealing the genre’s socio-cultural and ideological functions.

- ⁹ Many researches and writings on Malay(sian) films only gear towards the representation of gender, or on the image of women in particular, rather than on the melodrama genre. See Asiah Sarji (1985), *Film and Change: The Portrayal of Women in Films* (Paper presented at Symposium and Social Change, East-West Centre, Hawaii, 26-30 September; Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri & Faridah Ibrahim (2000), "Racun dan Penawar: Pertentangan Citra Wanita dalam Filem Melayu Zaman 1950-an," In Fuziah Kartini, Zaharah Hassan & Bahiyah Abdul Hamid (eds.), *Antara Kebaya dan Gaun: Pengalaman dan Citra Wanita Melayu Zaman Pra-Merdeka*, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia; Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri (2003), "Filem sebagai Wahana Komunikasi Pembangunan: Konstruksi Gender dalam Filem Melayu Kontemporari," Technical Report of a Research Sponsored by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, SK/7/2003; Khoo Gaik Cheng (2003), "Shuhaimi Baba and the Malaysian New Wave: Negotiating the Recuperation of Malay Custom (Adat)," In J. Levitin, J. Plessis & V. Raoul (eds.), *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, Vancouver: UBC Press; Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri & Faridah Ibrahim (2004). "Metaphors of the 'Female' in Malay Movies," *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 1(1); Zawawi Ibrahim (2004), "On Erma Fatima's 'Last Malay Woman: Gendering Discourses on Reclaiming Malayness in the New Malaysian Cinema," *Spectator*, 24(2); Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri & Faridah Ibrahim (2005), "'Pasrah' and 'KL Menjerit': The Rhetoric of Tears in Men-Women Relationship," *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 2(1); Mohd. Ghazali Ibrahim (2005), "Feminisme dalam Filem Melayu Kontemporari," *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 2(1). However, there are a handful of writings which have focused on the representation of masculinity: See Khoo Gaik Cheng (2000), "What is it to be a Man? Hypermasculinity in Malaysian Cinema," *West Coast Line*, 32/34(2); David C.L.Lim (2006), "Cruising Mat Motor: Malay Biker Masculinity and Queer Desire in/through 'KL Menjerit,'" *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7(1).
- ¹⁰ Filem Negara Malaysia (National Film of Malaysia) is a governmental agency that oversees commercial motion picture production in Malaysia. During the independent era (starting from the late 1970s), Filem Negara Malaysia used to produce feature films (besides a plethora of documentaries and some short animated films) [particularly in the early 1980s all of which were indeed melodramas].

The melodramas are *Dayang Suhana* (dir. A.Aziz Abas, 1978), *Gelombang* (dir. Rahman B., 1981), *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (dir. Rahman B., 1983) and *Ke Medan Jaya* (dir. A.Aziz Wok / Raja Rozaimie Raja Dalnish Shah, 1984). In the mid-1980s, Filem Negara Malaysia came up with a couple of melodramas, namely *Sindrom Mana Anakku* and *Cempaka Biru*. Unfortunately, both films were never released for general screening due to their “old-fashion” treatment and paucity of commercial values (As I remember, *Sindrom Mana Anakku* used to be aired on Malaysian televisyen [RTM]) many years back). 2002 marked a kind of revival for Filem Negara Malaysia when it embarked on producing a couple of feature films: a feminist-inflected period piece called *Embun*, directed by Erma Fatima, and the following year with another period piece, a historical epic called *Paloh*, directed by Adnan Salleh.

- ¹¹ During the era, all the woman-centred melodramas produced and acted by actress Sarimah, seemed to have valorized the image of women, though women at certain extent are depicted as being oppressed; this includes Sarimah films like *Detik 12 Malam*, *Dia Ibuku*, *Jejak Bertapak*, *Kabus Tengahari*, *Ranjau Sepanjang*, and *Warna-Warna Hati*.
- ¹² I employ the phrase “socially sanctioned femininity” by borrowing it from Susan Hayward whilst discussing melodrama in relation to gender. See Susan Hayward (2000), *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, London and New York: Routledge.
- ¹³ Salleh Ghani is a well-known director of the Studio era (during the golden age of Malay cinema) whose forte was making melodramatic films; among his well-known, much talked-about melodrama is *Sri Mersing*. The enormous popularity of *Sri Mersing* had necessitated a sort of sequel as television series more than twenty years later (1985) called *Tragedi Sri Mersing*. During the Independent era of Malaysian cinema (starting from the late 1970s), Salleh Ghani managed to direct two films, both of which were melodramas: *Ribut Barat* (1981) and *Pertentangan* (1983).
- ¹⁴ This is especially true, in all films produced and acted by Sarimah, as mentioned earlier, Sarimah (as a “star”) can be conceived of as

“spectacle” and subjected to “male gaze.” Though relevant, the application of Mulvey’s conception, for instance, seems problematic. My discussion on this point is in the similar fashion of many scholars who write extensively on Chinese melodrama and point out the irrelevancy between some Western theories and their application to Chinese Cinema. See E. Ann Kaplan (1993), “Melodrama / Subjectivity / Ideology: Western Melodrama Theories and their Relevance to Recent Chinese Cinema,” in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Chris Berry (1994), “Neither One Thing nor Another: Toward a Study of the Viewing Subject and Chinese Cinema in the 1980s,” in Nick Browne (ed.), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ma Ning (1993), “Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese Family Melodrama of the Early 1980s,” in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 15 The notion of “rule of compensating moral values” which characterizes melodrama is discussed by Warren Buckland (2001) in his book, *Film Studies*, (London: Hodder Headline), while referring to the “Fallen Woman Film.”
- 16 I regard modernity as a condition linked with ideas of capitalism, industrialism, and globalization which parallel the emergence of new sensibilities, cultural differentiation, identity struggles and the blurring of demarcations between the “modern” and the “traditional.” In addition, modernity can also refer to the condition of being a modern individual living in a modern society. Simply put, it differentiates between the living conditions and mental perspectives of an urban city-dweller and a rural farmer, both of whom have diverse experiences of life, work, entertainment, and material consumption.
- 17 Perhaps Khoo Gaik Cheng’s Ph.D. dissertation in which she dwells on Malay films of the 1990s (particularly those of which directed by Shuhaimi Baba, Adman Salleh and U-Wei Haji Saari) in relation to the notion of modernity proves relevant and insightful, and the work remains the first text to have investigated local films in detail, in the context of politics of representation and nation. The dissertation is

now published: Khoo Gaik Cheng (2005), *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. Vancouver: British Columbia University Press.

- ¹⁸ Such a dichotomization can be seen as part of “modernity” or as another way of understanding “modernity.” As Terence Chong (2005) writes: “Another way of understanding modernity is the difference in human relationships in premodern and modern societies – or the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* dichotomy. *Gemeinschaft*, or community, refers to relationships based on kinship, ethnicity, or clans that are characteristic of rural or premodern societies. As society modernizes, human relationships become increasingly based on professional membership, contractual obligations, and civic norms, all of which are highly impersonal and public in nature. These latter types of relationships are referred to as *Gesellschaft*, or association. Invariably, the nature of our relations with fellow human beings determines how we view the world and ourselves.” Indeed, the *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* dichotomy can be illustrated in the Malay melodramas discussed in this essay; it could be the transition from the Malay *kampong* (village) in Malaysia to its capital, Kuala Lumpur. See Terence Chong (2005), *Modernization Trends in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- ¹⁹ Of this point, I am indebted to David C.L. Lim for conjuring this in his compelling essay, “Cruising Mat Motor: Malay Biker Masculinity and Queer Desire in / through *KL Menjerit*,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7(1). Lim eloquently explores the idea of the rural-urban divide as to delineate the characteristic features of Malay masculinities, in particular, among the *Mat Motor* as depicted in the film *KL Menjerit*. The notion of dichotomization, as I suppose, can be examined in the context of modernity and the urbanization process, as explored in the melodrama discussed. As Lim puts it: “Within this discursive framework, *kampong* and city are split from within, both figuring as internally incommensurable imaginaries. The *kampong*, popularly conceived as the traditional domicile of “real Malays,” is constructed on the one hand as the very essence of “Malayness,” a nostalgic space inhabited by the “salt-of-the-earth” type of Malay men and women, for whom traditional virtues of decency, modesty, chastity, and fear of Allah still matter. On the other hand, the *kampong*

figures as the denigrated site of Malay conservatism, backwardness, lassitude and rural idiocy (Mahathir, 1970; Bunnell, 2002; Parkaran, 2005). In the same manner, the city imaginary is split, bifurcated on the one side as the site of immorality, alienation and anomie, where guileless *kampong* folks are at risk of being led astray, manipulated and morally compromised. On the other side, the city stands as a potential “remedy” for the pathological social practices and values of the *kampong* “old Malay,” as an incubator for the modern, “de-pathologised” Malay (Bunnell, 2002). The rural-urban divide is a common trope across cultures, but is nonetheless central to the discourse on the identity of the Malay ‘race,’ as essentialist category first invented during colonial times.”

- ²⁰ Mahathir Mohamad has been very much accredited with the popularization of the term “*Melayu Baru*.” The term refers to a community of Malays who have experienced both mental and cultural reformation and “now possess a culture suitable to the modern period, capable of meeting all challenges, able to compete without assistance, learned and knowledgeable [sic], sophisticated, honest, disciplined, trustworthy and competent;” See Shamsul A.B. (1995), “Orang Kaya Baru: Origin, Construction and Predicament of Malay Nouveaux Riche,” Working Paper for Workshop on Cultural Constructions of Asia’s Rich, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Australia, 8-10 July.
- ²¹ Indeed, the term *dakwah* refers to a desire to help other believers enhance their knowledge about Islam and is not to be equated with the proselytizing bent of certain Christian denominations. In the 1970s, the ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, intensified its *dakwah* activities among Islamic youths in the wake of world-wide Islamic resurgence. Secular and spiritual concerns, religious and political aims are quite often blurred at such historical moments (Wong Soak Koon, 2001).
- ²² I am simply borrowing this idea from Maznah Mohamad (2001) when she discusses the potential of feminism within Islam in her essay, “Women in the UMNO / PAS Labyrinth,” in Maznah Mohamad and Wong Soak Koon (eds.), *Risking Malaysia: Culture, Politics and Identity*, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

- ²³ Indeed, starting from the 1990s (the post-NEP era), the melodrama produced has been harnessing issues of gender and Malay modernity from diverse perspectives. In the woman-centred melodrama, in particular, the women have hardly been depicted as “traditional, heartbroken wives” or “single, struggling, working (class) mothers.” This is evident in a number of melodramas: *Warna-Warna Hati* (dir. A.R. Badul, 1991) revolves around Rohani, a widow who has to take over and manage her husband’s company after his demise; *Nadia* (dir. Rahman Adam, 1992) deals entirely with issues of mixed marriage and culture clash revolving around a daughter’s attempt at reuniting her English mother who is in England, and her Malay father who runs a resort business in Malaysia; *Mira Edora* (dir. Zulkiflie M. Osman, 1991) focuses on a tempestuous relationship between a single mother, a successful corporate-figure and her lonely teenage daughter, as they fall in love with the same man; *Selubung* (dir. Shuhaimi Baba, 1992) centres on Mastura, an overseas graduate who becomes an oil engineer, becoming a good Samaritan by helping Palestinian refugees, though having to deal with love, hardships and prejudice; *Amelia: Mawar Berduri* (dir. Rosnani Jamil, 1996) revolves around a strong, stoic lady, Amelia, trapped in a love triangle, is married off to a relative from whom she contracts HIV; *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (dir. Erma Fatima, 1999) tells about Mustika, a Western-educated Malay lady whose love is divided between her Islamic fundamentalist fiancé and a Westernized, liberal-thinking playwright, attempts at preserving traditional values in the wake of Malaysian modernization.

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NORMAN YUSOFF is attached with the Screen Programme, Faculty of Artistic and Creative Technology, UiTM, Shah Alam where he teaches Film Criticism. His academic interests include film theory, history and criticism.