

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**MAHATHIRISM AS DISCOURSE
AND HEGEMONIC EFFECT
IN MALAYSIAN CINEMA,
1980S AND 1990S**

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BIN MOHAMAD SUHARTO**

PhD

July 2026

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Artistic and Creative Technology)

Faculty of Film, Theatre and Animation

July 2026

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that Malaysian films of the 1980s and 1990s contain and reflect specific discourses described as Mahathirism, an ideology formulated by Malaysian scholar Khoo Boo Teik. This central thesis is derived from Khoo Boo Teik's argument in *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad* (1995), which focuses on the presence of paradoxes among the components of Mahathirism that include capitalism, nationalism, Islam, authoritarianism, and populism. This study suggests that Malaysian films of the 1980s and 1990s should not be viewed as a hegemonic apparatus/medium of Mahathirism; instead, these films should be examined as products or effects of the Mahathirist hegemony. Gramsci illuminated hegemony as the domination of the ruling class towards the dominated class through consensus, although, at the same time, force co-existed. The effects of the hegemony of Mahathirism in the cinematic texts are the existence of contradictory standpoints between approving and disapproving Mahathirism in the same film. I then argue this contradictory standpoint towards Mahathirism as a "contradictory consciousness" referring to Antonio Gramsci's argument. For Gramsci, "contradictory consciousness" refers to the contradiction between "implicit consciousness" and "explicit consciousness" of the subordinate (in the case of this study, the filmmaker). To reveal the projection and reflection of "contradictory consciousness" in the cinematic texts, I use Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as a method of analysis to reveal the competing discourses within one film. For this study, I select films from the eras of the 1980s and 1990s because those were the decades of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's premiership as Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister and longest serving Prime Minister of the country.

Keywords: Malaysian cinema, Mahathirism, hegemony, contradictory consciousness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and support of several individuals. First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Norman Yusoff, who not only meticulously helped in constructing the proposal from its preliminary stage but also encouraged and believed in me to pursue my studies and write this doctoral thesis. His meticulous supervision and critical feedback have significantly improved my writing and thinking. He has also been invaluable due to his unrelenting commitment and unwavering support over the years. Therefore, I am hugely indebted to him for guiding me into enlightenment and wisdom. Additionally, I would like to thank my co-supervisor, Dr Mohd. Erman Maharam, for providing valuable insights, comments and inspiration during our supervision sessions.

Deep appreciation is extended to my friends for their genuine support and insightful contributions to my studies, as well as their valuable opinions on the subject matter of this thesis. I am grateful to Eirsyad Qawiem, Syahira Raszaily, Haziq Alias, Azfar Ayauf, Amirul Rahman, Mohd. Sazni, Isyraqi Yahya, Ani Aziz, Laqman Al-Jefri, Ali Aiman Mazwin, Saat Omar, Faris Zulfaqar, Alee Isa, Yvonne Chew, Api Husien, Chong Lee Yow, Zikri Rahman, all members of Pecah Pala Photo Club (PPPC) and of the other photography collective, Monkeys In KL. Without their presence, this journey might not be as enjoyable as it is perceived.

Most notably, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my siblings, Hawa Nur Hidayah, Adam Muhammad Danial, and Adam Muhammad Danish, for their unwavering support, limitless love, and nurturing care throughout this academic journey. This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Mohamad Suharto Bakri and _____ who have not only broadened my intellectual horizons but also instilled in me a profound love for art and taught me the beauty of life within it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (1994), Krishna Sen employs a ‘reading against the grain’ approach, effectively revealing alternative interpretations of New Order cinema. Although this research was conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Politics, the author emphasises the distinct characteristics of the medium—such as shot composition and editing—to uncover the underlying power dynamics of the New Order within the cinematic text. During the New Order era, Indonesian films were subjected to regulatory constraints imposed by repressive state apparatuses, including censorship occurring at every phase: pre-production (script approval), production, and prior to public release. In numerous instances, such as the film *Perawan Desa*, this resulted in alterations to the narrative, including changes to the ending.

Sen (1994) used the term ‘archetypal text’ to refer to the structure of ‘order-chaos-order’ in Indonesian New Order films, which also manifested the regime's obsession with the ‘restoration of order’. This archetypal text exists due to draconian policies and censorship in the Indonesian film industry during Suharto’s presidency (also known as the New Order era). However, the ‘archetypal’ New Order cinema texts and the ‘coherent’ Reaganite cinema narratives resemble traditional ‘three-act structures’ characterised by clear resolutions, poetic justice, and happy endings. This structure has become the mainstream, while the other type is regarded as ‘experimental’ and is less favoured by mainstream audiences and possibly film studios. What I am trying to argue here is that the three-act structure and the concept of poetic justice in films, which have been considered as the conventional style of filmmaking, are not as natural as many people believe. Instead, they are deeply rooted in political and ideological contexts. Sen (1994) demonstrated how the Suharto (or New Order) regime shaped the structure of Indonesian cinema through laws governing filmmaking and film censorship. On the other hand, if the New Order exerted control over cinema through repressive state censorship, Hollywood during the Reagan era transitioned into a more nuanced system, mainly driven by market forces and ideological influences. Given the points discussed above, Needham (2016) elaborates on how Ronald Reagan's

presidency influenced Hollywood's aesthetic style and operational systems by integrating Reaganist values. This aligns with Comolli and Narboni's (cited in Needham, 2016) conclusion that 'every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it' (p. 312). In addition to that, Wood (cited in Needham, 2016), described the 1970s Hollywood films—prior to the Reagan era—as 'incoherent texts'. These films are characterised by an existentialist stance and a deliberate refusal to make it 'easy for the audience (p. 317). In contrast, films from the Reagan era of the 1980s are considered 'coherent texts.' According to Needham (2016), the structure of Reagan-era films was 'organized by their opening thematic distillations: here's the problem and a firm closure: here's how we fixed it' (p. 313).

Reading about the New Order cinema and Reaganite cinema prompted an academic inquiry: could Mahathir's cinema have been utilized to transmit his ideologies, Mahathirism? At a certain point, is it possible for films to oppose Mahathirism? This question prompted my academic exploration into cinematic works—seeking texts that either embody Mahathir's ideology or oppose it encountered several films that either superficially or explicitly engage with Mahathir's ideologies. However, midway through my cinematic exploration, I encountered a challenge: I struggled to determine each film's stance in this ideological feud. When I initially watched these films from the 1980s and 1990s, I believed their messages opposed Mahathirism. However, upon repeated viewings, I began to notice elements within the texts that appeared to support Mahathir's ideology. These apparent contradictions have left me confused. Since then, I have been caught in a recurring cycle of uncertainty.

However, this confusion appears to be clarified upon revisiting Khoo's (2003) argument in *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and Its Discontents*:

'If some disapproved of Mahathir's nationalism, they could find solace in his commitment to capitalism. If some considered his shrill nationalist refrains to be 'out of sync' with globalization, they might admire instead his futurist dedication to technology. Some frowned on his nurture of capitalist developmentalism and yet they could not deny the nationalist impulses behind it. There were those who hated his politics – meaning the Anwar affair, for example – but took Mahathir's imposition of capital controls to brave refusal to surrender to the bullying of the Washington consensus...One can continue with observing people half-disliking Mahathir but finding enough in him to support.'

(p. 172)

This statement by Khoo (2003) appears quite similar to the themes I observed in selected films from the 1980s and 1990s. For example, *Abang* critiques moral decay and greed within the New Rich Malay family—represented by Din’s household—but the critique remains individualised rather than extending to a systemic critique of capitalism itself. In doing so, it also sanitises capitalism by romanticising the figure of the morally upright capitalist, embodied in Faud Din (*Abang*), whose “saviour complex” frames his attempt to redeem his family from corruption before his death. This contradictory stance recurs quite frequently when I watch Malaysian films from the 1980s and 1990s.

After reviewing Khoo (2003) and Hilley (2000), it has become evident that Mahathir, akin to other political figures, employs a form of hegemony comparable to Antonio Gramsci’s theoretical framework to legitimise his authority. Gramsci described hegemony as the dominance of the ruling class over the subordinate classes achieved through consensus, while acknowledging that coercion can also coexist in this process (Lears, 1985). In this context, hegemony results in the subordinate being subjected to a ‘contradictory consciousness’, a state characterised by the tension between ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ awareness, as exemplified by the filmmakers in this study.

To present these explanations and discussions on hegemony, particularly Mahathir’s hegemony characterised by ‘contradictory consciousness’, I would like to highlight Khoo’s (2003) argument, which is,

‘There were contradictions in each and tensions among these parts, as Paradoxes of Mahathirism has tried to explain. But over the years, the co-existence of these different ideological components of Mahathirism gained Mahathir a wide, effective, and surprisingly, balanced appeal among the populace (and foreign audiences). There were Mahathir devotees, of course, for whom Mahathir could do no wrong. But it was not necessary to like everything about Mahathir to back him.’

(p. 172)

The last two sentences of the paragraph seem important because they provide a foreshadowing of what Gramsci (1980) called ‘contradictory consciousness’. As an ideologue, Mahathir produced a paradoxical ideology named Mahathirism; the effect of his power and hegemony was reflected in how others would at times approve and at times disapprove of him. Khoo (2003) also provides a few more examples:

‘If some disapproved of Mahathir’s nationalism, they could find solace in his commitment to capitalism. If some considered his shrill nationalist refrains to be ‘out of sync’ with globalization, they might admire instead his futurist dedication to technology. Some frowned on his nurture of capitalist developmentalism and yet they could not deny the nationalist impulses behind it. There were those who hated his politics – meaning the Anwar affair, for example – but took Mahathir’s imposition of capital controls to brave refusal to surrender to the bullying of the Washington consensus...One can continue with observing people half-disliking Mahathir but finding enough in him to support.’

(p. 173)

From a Gramscian lens, I argue that the ‘dilemmas’ surrounding the approval and disapproval of Mahathirism among adherents of the Mahathirist ideology are manifestations of hegemony, specifically the concept of ‘contradictory consciousness’ introduced by Antonio Gramsci. As previously discussed, Gramsci (1980) emphasised that consent and coercion often coexist, even if one tends to be more dominant than the other

In light of the above, in this thesis I argue that the contrasting perspectives on Mahathirism in the selected films reflect the hegemony (in Gramscian terms) of Mahathirism. Therefore, it suggests that Malaysian films from the 1980s and 1990s should not be viewed as hegemonic instruments of Mahathirism. Mahathirism is a term introduced by Khoo Boo Teik in his 1995 book, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*. The term refers to the ideology and ideas that Mahathir Mohamad integrated into Malaysia's administrative system and societal structure. Khoo (2003) identified five key elements of Mahathirism: capitalism, nationalism, authoritarianism, populism, and Islamism. Besides theorising Mahathirism, Khoo (1995) had extended his argument about Mahathirism by identifying its paradoxes (which will be elaborated more in the next chapter). Instead, these films should be understood as products or manifestations of Mahathir's hegemony. To add, I also wish to emphasize that, in discussing the five core elements of Mahathirism, I will integrate perspectives from various authors and researchers, rather than relying solely on Khoo Boo Teik to make it more robust. Farish (2002) contends that ‘The merit of Khoo’s book is the fact that he differentiates between Mahathir, the man, and Mahathirism as an ideology and belief system (p. 120). Conversely, Farish

(2002) also emphasizes that ‘because the ideology of Mahathirism was intimately linked to the man himself, Mahathir became the embodiment of his own ideology’ (p. 120). In essence, the purpose of this study is to examine these films as outcomes of Mahathirist hegemony rather than as tools employed by Mahathir’s regime. In this study, I aim to integrate my central theoretical framework, Mahathirism, alongside concepts of ideological criticism and hegemony (these theoretical frameworks will be elaborated upon in the next chapter). However, this integration should not be perceived as a simple merging of distinct theoretical perspectives. Instead, I argue that the analysis of Mahathirism and hegemony should be situated within the broader context of ideological criticism, as all these frameworks are interconnected within the broader discourse of ideology or ideological criticism.

1.2 Methodology

‘...I think it is fair to say that genuinely autonomous and truthful research will always be subversive. Why? Because power, even the most benign power, always has something to hide, aspects of reality left unexamined, concepts unquestioned. No autonomous or honest research will fail to stumble across findings or contradictions that are unwelcome and inconvenient for officialdom.

-James C. Scott (2001, p. 105-106)

This study employs a qualitative approach using textual analysis as its primary tool. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) state ‘Methodology focuses on how we gain knowledge about the world’ (p. 185). In light of that, Brennen (2013) explains that the qualitative method does not offer clear-cut answers, simple truths, or exact measurements, as it is inherently interdisciplinary, interpretive, political, and theoretical; it seeks to capture the broader scope of human relationships. In addition to that, for Hamilton (1998), the tradition of qualitative research is ‘a messy social movement, one that is structured as much by recombination of different activities as by their differentiation, divergence and continuity’ (p. 113). Henceforth, Denzin & Lincoln stress that the quantitative method is a ‘causal relationships between variables’ (p. 8), while the qualitative method is an attack on reason and truth’ (p. 7). In researching media (which applies to films as well), Brennen (2013) points out that qualitative researchers focus on the various meanings and values shaped by the medium. Instead

of examining media (or film) effects or influence, they aim to explore the relationships between media and society (Brennen, 2013).

Regarding textual analysis, it usually involves examining visual, written, or recorded materials to explore the meanings and messages conveyed in media, literature, public discourse, and other sources, such as personal interviews. Data will be systematically collected and interpreted to gain a deeper understanding and critical insight into the meanings within a text or across multiple texts. ‘Texts’ are not limited to books or documents, but also include photographs, advertisements, interviews, performances, social media content, films, television programs, and historical artifacts (Hawkins, 2017). Hawkins states ‘Each researcher, audience, or viewer brings understandings of the world, which shape the interpretation of the text’ (para. 6). Jason Bainbridge (in Hawkins, 2017) discusses using primary and secondary texts during textual analysis. In this study, the primary texts are the selected films, while secondary texts may include books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, and other sources that support or verify information in the primary texts.

McKee (2002) argues that while some disciplines, especially in the physical and social sciences, are very strict about their research methods—following long-established and accepted procedures, Media Studies and Cultural Studies are more flexible (McKee, 2002). In fact, one of the key insights of Cultural Studies is that strict methodologies can sometimes limit research; asking the same questions in the same ways tends to yield similar answers (McKee, 2002).

For McKee (2002), as reality does not lend itself to a single, definitive interpretation, it becomes crucial to analyse how media texts can be constructed and utilised to interpret our world. Alan (2002) also argues that collecting factual data about society—such as statistical information—does not constitute understanding, because these facts also serve as texts. McKee (2002) argues that in order to achieve a genuine comprehension of the world around us, we must examine how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to it.

Since this study aims to interpret films in relation to the discourse of Mahathirism and relevant historical texts, it is appropriate to consider textual analysis as the most suitable methodological approach. In addition, the mechanics of textual analysis in this study will not be limited to the selected films; it involves contextualising the texts. For example, when discussing certain films, I will contextualise them by relating them to their historical background and considering the discourse embedded in them. The

contextualisation involves extracting and synthesising information from various secondary sources, including books, newspapers, magazines, articles and many more. Since this study focuses on films as its primary subject, the analysis will take into account medium-specific features such as cinematography, sound design, editing, dialogue, and other cinematic elements.

Additionally, this study incorporates ideological criticism as an analytical method alongside textual analysis. Ideological criticism, as the name implies, originates in the Marxist critical tradition and focuses on how ideology influences cultural texts (Berger, 2014). It highlights that all cultural works carry biases, interests, and embedded values that reflect their producers' perspectives and often align with the dominant social groups (Durham & Kellner, 2006). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels first introduced the term 'ideology' in the 1840s to describe the prevailing ideas and representations within a society (Durham & Kellner, 2006). Moreover, Marx and Engels initiated a critique of ideology aimed at demonstrating how ruling ideas perpetuate dominant social interests by naturalising, idealising, and legitimising the current society, its institutions, and values (Durham & Kernell, 2006). Berger (2014) explains that, within Marxist criticism, the goal is frequently to reveal concealed ideological discourse in mediated and various communication forms. Taken together, Mannheim (1936) perceives that,

‘...ideology reflects the one discovery which has emerged from political conflict, namely, that ruling groups can in their thinking become so intensively interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination’.

(p.40)

On that note, the term 'ideology' implicitly suggests that, in some cases, the collective unconscious of specific groups conceals society's true state from both them and others, thereby helping to maintain stability (Mannheim, 1936). In Marx and Engels analysis, during the feudal period, the prevailing ideological framework of the hegemonic aristocratic classes centred on notions of piety, honour, valour, and military chivalry (Durham & Kellner, 2001). In contrast, the capitalist era was characterised by the prominence of values such as individualism, profit motivation, competition, and market forces, which collectively shaped the ideology of the emerging bourgeois class as it solidified its social and economic dominance (Durham & Kellner, 2006). It is also important to note Althusser's (1971) argument, which states that 'all ideology hails or

interpellates concrete individuals as a concrete subject, by the functioning of the category of the subject' (p.85) and 'there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subjects' (p. 84).

In his seminal essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser (1971) argues that ideology 'interpellates' individuals through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Unlike Repressive State Apparatuses (RPAs), which Marx described as State Apparatuses, ISAs primarily function through ideological means and only secondarily through violence, whereas RPAs are in contrast to ISAs. This leads to Althusser's argument that, '...ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief' (p. 84).

In my analysis, I observe a possible correlation between Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' of ideology and Francis Bacon's Four Idols, as Ramirez (2014) argues that Bacon delineates four idols or false notions that could obstruct human understanding and impede the pursuit of truth. In other words, Francis Bacon's concept of the Four Idols and Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation address different levels of the same fundamental issue: how external forces influence human understanding and subjectivity. Bacon's Idols, particularly those of the Marketplace and the Theatre, demonstrate how language and inherited systems of thought systematically distort perception, leading individuals to mistake illusion for reality (Ramirez, 2014). Similarly, Althusser (1971) argues that ideology 'interpellates' individuals as subjects, positioning them within social structures that shape their sense of self and perceptions of reality. While Bacon regards these distortions as epistemological errors that can be corrected through empirical investigation (Ramirez, 2014), Althusser asserts that such misrecognition is inherently rooted in the fabric of society—individuals are always already incorporated into ideological structures. Therefore, Bacon's Idols can be understood as an early, foundational description of systemic distortion, which Althusser later develops into a comprehensive theory of ideological subject formation grounded in material and institutional practices.

Building on the above discourses, it is important to note that the significant riot in France after 1968 served as a catalyst for the incorporation of political and ideological critique into cinema and filmmaking (Needham, 2016). Ideological Criticism is an academic methodology in film studies that seeks to systematically uncover and analyze the ways in which films both shape and are shaped by ideological constructs (Kuhn &

Westwell, 2012). Rooted in Marxist theory, ideology in this context refers to a complex network of ideas, beliefs, and values that underpin a political framework (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012).

Kuhn and Westwell (2012) regard early genre criticism in film studies, which analyses how cinema mirrors the social trends of its time, as the foundation of ideological criticism in cinema studies. Similarly, approaches that view film as a reflection of a collective social psyche are also highly influential (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). For instance, Siegfried Kracauer's (in Kuhn & Westwell, 2012) 1947 publication, 'From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film,' pointed out that German cinema in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrated a markedly authoritarian character. He linked this to the cultural and political conditions that facilitated the rise of Nazism.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the ideological criticism within film studies was grounded in the ideas of the French philosopher Louis Althusser (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). By integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis and structuralism, Althusser redefined the role of culture in relation to traditional Marxist concepts of ideology (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). According to Kuhn & Westwell (2012), his framework aimed to elucidate how ideological apparatuses—such as education, religion, and popular culture, including cinema—shape consciousness and subjectivity. This scholarly influence prompted Cahiers du Cinéma editors to shift from a focus on auteurs to a more overtly political perspective (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012).

Among the pioneering texts were Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, piece titled *Cinema/Ideology/Criticism* in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where they assert (as cited in Needham, 2016), every film is political, insofar as it is determined by the ideology that produces it' (p. 312). According to Berger (2014), the term 'Ideological Criticism' encompasses analyses that evaluate texts or phenomena through a political or socioeconomic lens, often aligned with specific group interests (p. 104).

Within this domain, critics are tasked with elucidating the implicit ideological messages embedded in mediated and other communicative forms (p. 106); however, many practitioners in the media and film industries are unaware of the ideological dimensions inherent in their work (Berger, 2014). Berger (2014) identifies Marxist criticism, hegemonic studies, and feminist critique as prominent examples of ideological analysis. Qi (2012) notes that ideology, or ideological criticism, remains a

contentious subject within film and television discourse, and early research on Hollywood cinema frequently engaged with these perspectives (Qi, 2012).

As with literature and the arts, cinema reflects the influence of prevailing ideologies and societal constructs shaping human consciousness. Works such as Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan's *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988) exemplify the application of ideological critique; they analyze how Hollywood films of the 1960s through 1980s depict the rise and decline of radicalism, liberal failures, and the dominance of conservative hegemony (Qi, 2012). My research, which centers on the ideology of Mahathirism, aligns with similar ideological studies such as Needham's (2016) examination of Reaganite cinema and the analysis of Reaganism's influence on Hollywood from the 1980s to the 2010s. Both studies explore how Reaganism's ideological framework permeated cinematic texts. In my case, the focus is on how Mahathirism's hegemony is reflected in Malaysian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, emphasizing a more complex form of influence involving hegemony and 'contradictory consciousness'.

In light of the above-mentioned, to reveal the hegemonic ideology of Mahathirism in the selected texts, I apply Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. According to Mills (2003), discourse is among the most frequently employed terms in Foucault's work; simultaneously, it remains one of the most contradictory because Foucault himself defines it in a number of different ways throughout his work. In light of that, I want to clarify that, in this study, the Foucauldian discourse analysis primarily uses Mark and Sarah's (2013) method for analyzing films without compromising Foucault's core ideas on discourse. Therefore, the discourse utilised in language, history, and other disciplines will not be predominantly applied in this study. Since the core ideas of discourse by Foucault are still being utilised, I would also provide a brief explanation of what Michel Foucault means by 'discourse' or 'discourse analysis', as it has been applied in many other fields.

According to Foucault (1972), discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* refers to 'the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements' (p. 80). In *History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1), Foucault (1978) argued:

We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

(pp. 100- 101)

One of the seminal works employing Foucault's discourse analysis is Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism*. Edward Said (1979) employs Michel Foucault's idea of 'discourse', as outlined in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*, to analyse Orientalism as a structured knowledge system. By "discourse," Said (1979) means a framework that not only governs how people discuss a topic but also shapes power dynamics and practices. Said (1979) contends that understanding Orientalism as a discourse is essential for grasping how European culture systematically controlled and even created the 'Orient' across political, sociological, military, ideological, scientific, and imaginative realms, especially in the post-Enlightenment era (Said, 1979).

Said (1979) emphasises that these texts do not merely describe the Orient; they actively shape the reality they describe. Over time, this body of knowledge forms a lasting tradition or discourse with real power. The strength of Orientalism stems less from individual originality and more from the repeated circulation of existing ideas (Said, 1979). These 'units of information', including contributions from writers such as Flaubert, become embedded in an established knowledge base that continually influences perceptions of the Orient (Said, 1979).

To extend, Mills (2003) states, 'Foucault is arguing that discourse is both the means of oppressing and the means of resistance' (p. 56), further contending that discourse is not simply an imposition of ideas towards an individual as the role of ideology from Marxist perspectives. Mills (2003) argues that discourse should be understood as a comprehensive concept encompassing all statements, the rules governing their formation, and the processes of circulation that include or exclude other statements. Foucault's theorization of discourse also involves several key terms—*épistèmè*, archive, discursive formation, and statement—that are vital for those engaging with his work and aid in outlining the structure of discourse (Mills, 2003). Foucault (1972) examines groups of discursive formations and the connections between discourses within a specific period, calling this collective of practices an *épistèmé*.

Foucault (1972) describes the *épistème* of a period not just as the collection of its knowledge or the overall style of research, but as comprising differences, oppositions, and interactions among various discourses. Perhaps this is how the study will be utilised: not only interpreting the text as fully supportive of and transmissive of Mahathirism, but also taking into account what the text opposes.

Based on the aforementioned points, Mark and Sarah (2013) posit that the application of discourse analysis in film critique necessitates an understanding of the various discourses that intersect beyond the cinematic text itself. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of discourse, they illustrate how a film can embody multiple layers of conflicting narratives simultaneously. For instance, in their analysis of *Pretty Woman* (1990), they highlight the inherent contradictions in the film's portrayal of gender roles. At certain moments, women are depicted as passive and submissive, while other scenes suggest an endorsement of feminist ideals. This duality exemplifies the complex interplay of gender discourses, allowing for a multifaceted interpretation of the film's narrative and themes. Mark and Sara (2013) emphasise that when using discourse, there is no singular discourse produced within a text; instead, there is always a competition among multiple discourses. This aligns with Mills (2003), who describes discourse, also known as 'discursive formations,' as groups of statements addressing similar topics. These groups of statements tend to generate similar effects and may be grouped due to institutional pressures, associations, similar origins, or shared purposes or functions (Mills, 2003). Nevertheless, one section of Mills's (2003) book highlights issues with Foucault's work, emphasising that the focus on power leads to repetitive interpretations, as if all cultural phenomena were merely reducible to power relations. In addition to that, she also stressed,

What is essential is to use Foucault's methods in your reading of Foucault: be sceptical about the value of Foucault; do not accept any of his sometimes bold but often unjustified generalisations, and do not assume that he is telling you the 'truth' of the situation.

(p. 125)

On that note, the integration of Gramscian hegemony could address the lacuna in Foucault's 'truth' and the reductionist perspective on power. According to Daldal (2014), Foucault's fundamental distinction from Gramsci is that the latter viewed power

relations as binary oppositions (such as leaders versus followers, rulers versus subjects). In contrast, Foucault believed that power, along with the resistance it prompts, is dispersed rather than confined to specific points (Daldal, 2014).

On the other hand, I also suggest that Mills's (2003) arguments on discourse are interconnected with the hegemony of Mahathirism and the notion of 'contradictory consciousness' in selected Malaysian films from the 1980s and 1990s. This relationship is influenced by institutional pressures, such as censorship, which often lead filmmakers to practice self-censorship. To analyse and interpret these films effectively, it is important to consider their multimodal features, including camera movement, editing, and the construction of time and space, as these elements serve as narrative strategies. As a cinephile with a keen interest in the film medium, I will incorporate this perspective to enhance the interpretive process.

1.3 Problem Statement and Research Gap

My study aims to explore the domain of politics and ideological perspectives in Malaysian cinema, fields that are often overlooked in academic research despite numerous explorations from industrial, cultural, identity, and gender viewpoints. I intend to fill this gap by analysing Malaysian cinema not only through various ideological lenses but also from a personalised ideological perspective, specifically Mahathirism. Khoo Boo Teik (2003) described this as personalised hegemony.

To support my statement, I provide the argument from Khoo (2006), who argues that less focus (in general) has been given to the academic study of Malaysian cinema. Khoo (2006) states 'A few books about its general history have been published, some in more detail than others (Baharuddin, 1983; Naim, 1995; Hatta, 1997; Hamzah, 1997; Van der Heide, 2002), as well as articles (Lent, 1990; Fuziah Kartini & Raja Ahmad, 1995) and dissertations (Kueh, 1997; Gray, 2002)' (p. 16). However, in the new millennium, numerous scholarly articles have emerged, providing an analysis from a sociological perspective of Malaysian cinema and Malay identity (Hassan & Wong, 2002; Khoo, 2001a, 2002b; Zawawi, 2003) (p. 16). According to Khoo (2006), Van der Heide's book, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Cinema*, 'deals only very superficially with Malay Culture and identity' (p. 16).

In my study, I drew extensively on the works of Hatta Azad Khan (1993) and Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006), both of which provide a thorough textual and cultural analysis of cinema from the 1980s and 1990s and offer critical insights into the subject

matter. Conversely, Hatta's somewhat reductive perspective on the absence of national crises—such as poverty, abuse of power, high-level corruption, and issues of national identity—has been effectively challenged by Khoo (2006) in her seminal work, *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. On that note, Khoo (2006) contends that this phenomenon of 'self-censorship' arises from the repressive state apparatus, which encompasses censorship practices and the Internal Security Act (ISA). Khoo (2006) argues that Malaysian cinema can indeed be viewed as part of the framework termed 'Cinema in Denials,' as follows: 'multi-ethnic diversity is not typically shown in Malay cinema' (p. 104), 'the issue of representing non-Malay ethnic was not broached' (p. 105), and 'the censorship board perceives itself to be the moral and national guardian' (p. 108) where these arguments suggest that she interprets these crises primarily as a top-down issue.

Nonetheless, Khoo (2006) offers supporting evidence for Hatta, reinforcing his claims. Furthermore, to counter Hatta's assertions, Khoo (2006) references several films that she argues tackle significant issues, such as *Matinya Seorang Patriot* by Rahim Razali. In contrast, this thesis argues that films from the 1980s and 1990s reveal a more complex stance, particularly regarding socio-political themes and Mahathirism. Consequently, my perspective aligns with Khoo's (2006) critique of Hatta Azad Khan's oversimplified interpretation of (Malay)sian cinema during that era. However, Khoo (2006) neglects to assert that these so-called 'critical issues' are often addressed superficially and remain limited to the hegemony of the ruling elite. In other words, as an antithesis to the problem statements mentioned, I also argue that this 'de-radicalised' and 'de-politicised' Malaysian cinema should not be perceived merely as a top-down phenomenon.

In light of the aforementioned concern, Chomsky's Propaganda Model serves as a vital framework for understanding the complexities of modern propaganda, which is significantly more sophisticated than traditional notions of 'propaganda.' In his seminal work, Chomsky (1994) argues that modern propaganda bears little resemblance to that of the Soviet era. Rather, it operates fluidly, often critiquing corporations and government authorities in a manner that suggests neutrality towards the ruling class and the government. Chomsky (2012) further elaborates that modern civilisation is confronted with an advanced 'propaganda system' in which 'the actors know what exactly they're doing' (p. 102). The complexity intensifies as this system suggests that

propaganda mechanisms have shifted from governmental apparatuses to private entities representing substantial interests.

Although Khoo (2006) claims that her reading of Malaysian literature and films is ‘deeply political insofar as I regard the study of material culture as embedded within larger consciousness and process’ (p. 16), the gap here concerning Khoo’s (2006) study is still confined to gender perspectives and Malay identity. Khoo (2006) highlights the filmmakers, intellectuals, and writers who reclaimed adat to counter the homogenising aspects of both Islamic discourse and globalisation. This reclaiming of *adat* presented a return to traditional magic and healing, as well as through sexuality. In addition, Khoo’s (2006) studies are limited to the 1990s films and do not fully cover or frame the entire era of Mahathir’s premiership. Hence, this study offers a new contribution to the understanding of Malaysian cinema during the Mahathir era, albeit not comprehensively.

To conclude, in response to the gaps and problem statement outlined above, this study seeks to examine the intersection of politics, ideology, and, more specifically, Mahathirism within Malaysian cinema. It aims to address a gap in previous research by examining how selected films portray or critique Mahathirism, highlighting the contradictions as expressions of a complex, contradictory consciousness. Unlike earlier studies that focus on the impact of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and modernization on gender and Malay identity in cinema (Khoo, 2002; Khoo, 2006; Khoo, 2009; Zawawi, 2003; Zawawi, 2004; Zawawi, 2007), this research contextualises Mahathirism as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing nationalism, capitalism, Islamism, authoritarianism, and populism. Consequently, it offers a novel perspective by framing Malaysian cinema through the lens of Mahathirism, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of its cultural and political dimensions.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study argues that Malaysian films of the 1980s and 1990s contain and reflect specific discourses of Mahathirism, an ideology formulated by Malaysian scholar Khoo Boo Teik. This central thesis is derived from Khoo Boo Teik’s argument in *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*, which focuses on the presence of paradoxes among the components of Mahathirism that include capitalism, nationalism, Islam, authoritarianism, and populism. This research suggests that Malaysian films of the 1980s and 1990s should not be viewed as a hegemonic

apparatus of Mahathirism; instead, these films should be examined as products or effects of the Mahathirist hegemony. This research examines the impact of hegemonic influence on subordinate consciousness, which often gives rise to contradictory perceptions. Specifically, it analyses film texts to explore the reflection of Mahathir's hegemony, characterised by a 'contradictory consciousness' toward the dominant ideology of Mahathirism. Hence, the objectives of this research are:

- i. to identify and analyse the underlying Mahathirism ideology in Malaysian films of the 1980s and 1990s.
- ii. to contextualise the hegemonic influence/dominance of Mahathirism and to interpret contradictory perspectives within selected Malaysian films from the 1980s and 1990s.

1.5 Research Significance

The importance of scholarly research needs to extend to society. One effective way to make film studies more inclusive is by integrating them with political and ideological studies through an interdisciplinary approach. Thus, the significance of this research lies in:

- i. This research is significant because it offers an academic analysis of hegemony in Malaysian cinema, a topic that has been largely overlooked in previous studies.
- ii. This research is academically significant as it cultivates an interdisciplinary approach merging film studies with Malaysian politics, aiming to enhance the body of knowledge in film studies to be more comprehensive, rigorous, and adaptable.

1.6 Research Scope and Limitations

Besides ideological criticism, Mahathirism, and hegemony, I employ Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to examine the contradictions within Malaysian cinema, as these texts appear to both support and oppose Mahathirism simultaneously. While Khoo Boo Teik coined the term 'Mahathirism' in his work *Paradoxes of Mahathirism*, my discussion will not be confined solely to this source. Instead, I would refer to various sources. Khoo (1995) states that Mahathirism was born out of Mahathir's policies, speeches, interviews, and writings. Additionally, other sources

such as documentaries and videos related to Mahathir will also be considered. I have opted to analyse fiction films rather than documentaries, as they better capture the subtle transmission of ideology through fictional narratives. The selected films for this research mainly consist of works from the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting the decades of Mahathir's tenure as Prime Minister.

The selected films include *Abang* (Rahim Razali, 1981), *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (Rahim Razali, 1984), *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (Rahman B., 1983), *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (Rahim Razali, 1986), *Ringgit Kasorrga* (Shuhaimi Baba, 1995), *Interlud* (Othman Haji Zainuddin, 1992), *Amok* (Adman Salleh, 1995), and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (Erma Fatima, 1999). This study aims to analyse films produced during Mahathir's premiership and examine how cinema during that period engaged with Mahathirism, despite filmmakers operating under specific regulations and directives.

The selection of films for this research encompasses various categories, including 'propaganda films' produced by Filem Negara Malaysia (formerly known as the Malayan Film Unit), as well as films directed by prominent directors from the post-studio era, such as Rahim Razali, Suhaimi Baba and others from the 1990s. The inclusion of diverse film types, ranging from propaganda and box-office hits to award-winning and subcultural films, aims to illustrate the presence of 'contradictory consciousness' toward Mahathirism across different cinematic expressions.

Bila Hati Telah Retak was produced as a propaganda film by the government to serve ideological purposes. However, it is noteworthy that the film reveals a 'contradictory consciousness,' as the filmmakers remain subordinate to the state. I selected three films by Rahim Razali due to his sensitivity to issues affecting the middle-class during Mahathir's era. According to Rahim (as cited in Zawawi, 2007), the film *Abang* was inspired by Mahathir's book, *The Malay Dilemma*. Furthermore, Rahim Razali's depiction of corruption in *Matinya Seorang Patriot* was rooted in his own knowledge and observations of real money-politics scandals (Zawawi, 2007). It is also relevant to consider Rahim Razali's background, as he was a key figure in Fleet Communication, a private company financed by the Ministry of Finance (Zawawi, 2007). Fleet Communication produced two of Razali's films, *Abang* and *Pemburu* (1982).

Ringgit Kasorrga and *Interlud* are selected because both films not only attempt to portray or centre their narratives around political figures but also incorporate or intersect politics with other layered themes within the films. For instance, *Ringgit*

Kasorrnga intersects politics with sexuality, while *Interlud* explores the intersection of politics with family hierarchy, which can also be interpreted as a politics of infantilism. *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* and *Amok* both incorporate quotations of Mahathir's statements and speeches. Specifically, in *Amok*, Mahathir's remarks from *The Malay Dilemma* are cited at the outset, addressing the phenomenon of amok among Malays. Conversely, *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* features Mahathir's speech, delivered during the UMNO annual assembly, as diegetic sound. Additionally, Erma Fatima's background as a member of Puteri UMNO (Women Youth of UMNO) (Khoo, 2009) constitutes a significant rationale for selecting this film and analysing a film created by an individual affiliated with the same political party as Mahathir underscores the presence of a discernible 'contradictory consciousness', despite shared political allegiance.

However, although I provide the background of a few directors who may influence their stance on Mahathir or Mahathirism, this does not confirm that the films' reflection of hegemony accurately represents the directors' backgrounds. This is because discourse analysis allows me to identify the conflicting statements underlying the films. The exclusion of prominent directors of the era, such as Jins Shamsudin, Jamil Sulong, and U-Wei Haji Saari, from the analysis is not due to a lack of Mahathirism discourse in their films, but rather because these themes may not be a prominent discourse in their works. Perhaps this is also why Nasir Jani's films are not included in this research, as their subject matter does not prominently feature Mahathirism tropes. Although Nasir's attitude—both outside and within his films—indicates opposition to Mahathir, this does not mean that his films are suitable for detailed analysis in this research. In addition, the selection of films was based on how thoroughly their subject matter could be analysed, not merely because the subject matter exists within the film. Drawing from extensive viewing experience, I assert that Mahathirism is reflected in most films from the 1980s and 1990s. Films not analysed closely will be addressed in a broader context in Chapter Two, with those included clearly exemplifying the thesis that Mahathirism discourse is especially prominent and illustrative in the selected films.

1.6 Thesis Structure

In Chapter 1, which is the introduction, I want to present an overview of my research, which focuses on the discourse surrounding Mahathirism in Malaysian cinema. The chapter will analyse the contradictory perspectives on Mahathir,

conceptualised as ‘contradictory consciousness’ influenced by hegemonic forces. Additionally, the introduction will include the problem statement, research questions, significance, objectives, scope and limitations, methodology, and the overall thesis structure.

After that comes the next chapter, which will be Chapter 2 and titled In Search of Mahathirism in Malaysian Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, and will be addressed. This chapter will critically examine Mahathirism as articulated by Khoo (1995, 2003) and Hilley (2000), alongside the concept of Discourse informed by Foucault’s theoretical framework. Moreover, an extensive literature review on Mahathirism and Mahathir will be provided, encompassing various scholarly responses to the Mahathirist ideology, concluding books and references from Khoo Boo Teik (main reference), John Hilley, Farish A. Noor, Syed Hussein Alatas, Sven Schottmann and many others. Among the earliest counterarguments to Mahathirism is Syed Hussein Alatas’s *Siapa Yang Salah? Sekitar Revolusi Mental dan Keperibadian Melayu* (1972) and *The Myth of Lazy Natives* (1989), conceived as an antithesis to Mahathir’s *The Malay Dilemma* and sharing ideological parallels with *Revolusi Mental*. While other works address topics such as Islamisation, Malay identity, and Malaysian history, they inevitably engage with Mahathir and his ideological influence due to the profound impact of his administration on Malaysia’s grand narrative. This chapter will also analyse diverse research approaches concerning cinematic texts that intersect with Mahathir’s political agenda, identifying gaps in existing literature, such as those authored by Khoo Khoo Cheng and Wan Zawawi Ibrahim.

In Chapter 3 titled The History of Malaysian Cinema Through the Lens of Ideology and Politics, I will provide a brief history of Malaysian cinema starting from the arrival of films and cinema in British-Malaya to the establishment of film studios in Singapore, which had been dominated by a number of Chinese businessmen, either from Hong Kong (Shaw Brothers) or Malayan Chinese. I will also be reviewing Malaysian cinema beyond retelling history, and will try to argue certain ideologies or hegemonies that interplay with the development of the industry and society. For example, I will examine how, from the Studio Era onward, capitalism in the industry was implicit, leading to a series of strikes among studio artists and workers, which also relates to the emergence of workers’ unions in the 1950s and 1960s (Hamzah, 1997). Additionally, I will also highlight the 1980s and 1990s era of the Malaysian film industry. When Mahathir established the Malaysian National Development Corporation (Finas) in the

1980s, when he was the Minister of Trade and Industry, he intended to embrace Malay filmmakers, viewing films as an economic opportunity and a capitalist production (Hamzah, 1997). At a particular juncture, Malaysian films in the 1980s and 1990s aligned with Mahathir's Malay ethnonationalism and capitalist-corporatism. I developed this argument in response to the label assigned to this era, which was called the Bumiputera Era, the Malay Independent Era, or the Malay Era by several scholars and writers, with many collaborations and interventions by corporations and businessmen in film production and the film business. Additionally, a few production companies were funded by the government, for example, Fleet Communication (under the Ministry of Finance, led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah), which closely aligned with the aspirations of NEP and Mahathirist capitalism. Fleet Communication produced Rahim Razali's films, including *Abang* and *Pemburu*, while at the same time, Rahim Razali himself is one of the staff in Fleet Communication.

Therefore, despite recognising this era of Malaysian cinema as the Bumiputera Era or Malay Independent Era, I argue that this period should be termed the 'Mahathirist Era' of Malaysian cinema. I specify 'Mahathirist Era' instead of simply 'Mahathir Era' to reflect the nature of the film industry at that time — including the modes of production, representations, and operational approaches aligned with Mahathirist policies and ideology. Consequently, the term 'Mahathirist Era' accurately encapsulates the zeitgeist of Malaysian cinema during this period. The influence of Mahathir's regime—particularly in censorship, media, and cinema—corresponds with what Khoo (2006) describes as the Cinema of Denials, which aligns with Mahathir's authoritarian style.

In Chapter 4, titled Cultural Change or Moral Decay? Representation of Mahathir's Nouvea-Riche Malays in *Abang* (1981) and *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984), I want to analyse two acclaimed films directed by Rahim Razali. Both films highlight corruption among the Malay new rich who benefited from the New Economic Policy (NEP). These films have garnered significant attention among scholars examining the Malay nouveau riche and the dynamics of capitalism. However, I contend that each film embodies inherent paradoxes related to capitalism. For example, while *Abang* critiques the corruption of wealth and morality within Din's family through the character of Fuad, Fuad simultaneously endorses corporatism and capitalism. This contradiction is evident in numerous scenes (detailed analysis to follow in a subsequent chapter). Additionally, many researchers and film critics argue that the

kampung scenes serve as an antithesis to the modernisation propelled by the NEP and Mahathir's policies. However, that kind of reading is relatively simple because of what is obscured in the previous discussion, highlighting how the kampung people praise Fuad with grandiose ceremonies (kenduri) for his services and help (*jasa*) to the people. In the film *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, the narrative illustrates how political corporatism and capitalism, especially those dependent on government or political parties, shape the characters' actions and motivations. Despite the themes of revenge against corrupt politicians, all characters operate within a capitalist logic, emphasising the pervasive influence of Mahathirist hegemony in these cultural narratives.

Chapter 5, 'A Doctor in a Kampung': Mahathirism, Modernity and Medicine in *Bila Hati Telah Retak* and *Tsu Feh Sofiah*, argues that the medical character in both films personifies and reaffirms Mahathirism, portraying the medical figure as a saviour to communities in rural or alienated areas (kampung). This is further reinforced through motifs of 'treating' and 'nursing'. In *Tsu Feh Sofiah*, I interpret this 'treating' as addressing issues of takfir (kafir-mengkafir). At the same time, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* can be seen as 'treating' Malay backwardness within the framework of Mahathir's modernisation discourse. The medical characters arguably personify Mahathir, considering his medical background, which has influenced his authoritarian style and his scientific, empirical, and modern outlook. This aligns with Khoo's (1995) assertion that Mahathir left medicine for politics only to practice politics as medicine (p. 10). However, from different perspectives, these characters also challenge Mahathirism. Dr. Tsu Feh's role in *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (1986) criticises Mahathir's Malay ethnonationalism and the racial tensions with China, while the nurse in *Bila Hati Telah Retak* critiques capitalism through her depiction of immoral urbanite behaviour. Interestingly, *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, a public service announcement or 'propaganda' film produced by Mahathir's government, ironically critiques Mahathirist capitalism. Conversely, *Tsu Feh Sofiah*, produced by a private entity and directed by Rahim Razali, subtly incorporates themes aligned with Mahathir's Islamisation policies, thereby functioning as an indirect public service message or 'propaganda'.

In Chapter 6, titled 'Politics is Sensitive': Representation of Politics and Politicians in Ringgit *Kasorrga* (1995) and *Interlud* (1992), I want to emphasise that the central argument revolves around the portrayal of politicians in Malaysian films during the Mahathir premiership era, characterised by complexity and sophistication. It is crucial to note that the terms 'complex' and 'sophisticated' do not refer to the inherent

traits of the politicians themselves; rather, they pertain to the intricate and nuanced manner in which their characteristics are represented politically. Although the selected films, namely *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud*, depict politicians as antagonists associated with moral degradation and corruption, it is essential to acknowledge that such portrayals are limited to an individual level, rather than addressing systemic or party-related issues. Consequently, the negative depiction of politicians redirects attention from the broader, more pressing problems within Malaysian politics toward a more localised narrative. This supports Chomsky's arguments regarding the Propaganda Model, which posits that the state may project an image of championing free speech through the mediation of news or media productions that appear to criticise the government. However, such criticisms often serve to distract from underlying structural issues. For instance, in the portrayal of politicians in Malaysian films during the Mahathir premiership, particularly in the selected works *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud*, while issues such as sexual scandals and dysfunctional father figures are highlighted, there is a notable absence of constructive and structural critique of the political systems, with the focus instead shifting to individual concerns.

Next, the title of Chapter 7, The Malay Dilemma or Reclaiming Malayness? The Discourse of Mahathirist Malay Nationalism in *Amok* (1995) and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999) is based on Khoo's (1995) argument that 'Anxious to secure the survival of the Malays, Mahathir seemed prepared to see the end of Malayness' (p. 9). This prompts me to distinguish between Malay nationalism (specifically the Mahathirist element) and Malayness itself, as certain aspects of Malayness do not align with Malay nationalism within the Mahathirist framework. Regarding *Amok*, I will highlight Khoo's (2006) assertion that 'Concurring with the ideology of Malay nationalism and the objectives of cultural policy, the film implies that there is no place for 'foreigners' implicitly referring to non-Malay Malaysians, who do not culturally assimilate into Malayness' (p. 194). I contend this as a paradox of *Amok*, where ethnonationalism and anti-Western sentiments align with Mahathirism, yet superstition (*semangat*) challenges the modernisation principles of Mahathirism. I also argue that the film counters Mahathir's view of the Amok phenomenon, portraying it as a conscious act (*sedar diri*) rather than an unconscious impulse, as Mahathir (1970) suggested in *The Malay Dilemma*. Additionally, *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* is discussed as a reflection of the dilemma faced by the New Malay identity. I disagree with Khoo's (2009) characterisation of the main character, Mustika (Vanidah Imran), as an ideal

representation of Mahathirist Malay women, asserting instead that Mustika embodies a paradox—exhibiting both Mahathirist and counter-Mahathirist elements. However, the film is bigger than Mustika. I will also provide a close analysis of other characters, narrative, and cinematic aspects through a Mahathirism framework.

In Chapter 8, which is the conclusion, I will synthesise the findings of my research on the selected films. This chapter aims to analyse the outcomes of the discussion critically, address the challenges encountered, and reflect on the research process both during and after its execution. It is my aspiration that this concluding chapter will underscore the significance of this study and enhance readers' understanding of Malaysian cinema. Furthermore, I will note that, following Mahathir's premiership, few films engaged explicitly with Mahathirism.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I began with an introduction that articulated how my theoretical framework, Mahathirism, integrates with other prominent frameworks, including Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Foucault's discourse analysis, and ideological criticism. The introduction also thoroughly detailed key components, including the theoretical framework, problem statement, research objectives, research significance, scope and limitations, literature review, and thesis structure.

As previously mentioned, the effects of Mahathirism's hegemony in cinematic texts manifest as the presence of contradictory standpoints within the same film, both endorsing and criticising Mahathirism. I interpret this phenomenon as a form of 'contradictory consciousness', drawing on Antonio Gramsci's (1980) concept. According to Gramsci (1980), 'contradictory consciousness' denotes the tension between 'implicit' and 'explicit' consciousness among subordinates—in this context, the filmmakers.

Besides arguing that Mahathirism is evident in cinematic texts, this study also attempts to demonstrate that the Malaysian film industry during the 1980s and 1990s—the era of Mahathir's premiership—was influenced and constrained by Mahathirism. This influence is evident in aspects such as the mode of production, industry operations, government intervention through the film board and censorship, and the themes portrayed in the texts. Recognising these factors is essential to supporting the central thesis of this research.

Hence, based on the focus of this study, I emphasise that it is a form of ideological criticism research aimed at deconstructing hegemonic ideologies present in film texts. The interdisciplinary approach, combining film studies and politics, transforms our perception of films and highlights that, as art and entertainment media, films are not merely channels for conveying ideology but also reflections of dominant, captivating ideological constructs. In the next chapter, I will academically review the discourse of Mahathirism, starting with a chronological analysis of Khoo Boo Teik's *Paradoxes of Mahathirism* and incorporating additional research on the subject. Additionally, I will examine previous studies that explore elements of Mahathirism within cinematic texts, although these will not be the primary focus.

CHAPTER 2

IN SEARCH OF MAHATHIRISM IN MALAYSIAN CINEMA

2.1 Introduction

As an individual born in 1996 and having experienced the latter part of Mahathir's premiership, I have not been able to observe his premiership with critical awareness, as I was still a child at the time. Mahathir officially retired in 2003, coinciding with my first year in primary school. Nonetheless, I retain vivid memories of my friend and I singing the *Wawasan 2020* ('Vision 2020') song during our weekly assemblies. There is little doubt that during these formative years, we, as children, harboured a utopian vision of the future, believing in the prospect of flying cars by 2020, in alignment with the aspiration of Malaysia to achieve fully developed nation status by that year. This reflects Mahathir's notable success in instilling his legacy and fostering a utopian ideology within Malaysian society. Such a phenomenon correlates with Hilley's (2000) assertion that 'Vision 2020' should be regarded as a national-popular initiative that served to sustain Mahathir's hegemony.

Many Malaysians view the Mahathir era as a historical period, so several of my peers question the importance of studying past cinema, specifically Malaysian cinema from the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with Mahathir's premiership. This period marks events from two decades ago, and now Mahathir has reached 100 years old. In essence, people suggest to me, 'Let bygones be bygones.' I recall William Faulkner's quote, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past,' which may perfectly capture the 'long shadow' cast by Mahathir and Mahathirism. That being said, we are still contending with the legacy of Mahathir and Mahathirism. Regardless of whether it is positive or negative, it remains subjective and open to debate; objectively speaking, we are inheriting the administration and system of Mahathirism. It is also significant to note that the hyper-realism of Mahathir's long shadow manifested in 2018 when he was (re)elected as the Prime Minister of Malaysia after 15 years of retirement.

The fundamental response to my friends' inquiries regarding the relevance of this study is that existing literature inadequately addresses the relationship between Mahathirism and Malaysian cinema. This gap is particularly evident when juxtaposed

with analyses of other national cinemas, such as Reaganism in American cinema (Needham [2016], Wood [2003]), Thatcherism in British cinema (Hill [1999], Lester [2006]), and Suharto's New Order in Indonesian cinema (Sen, 1994). Furthermore, it is imperative to note that most of these films do not feature prominent leaders like Reagan and Thatcher, except for the New Order cinema, which, according to Sen (1994), tends to portray Suharto (the President during the New Order era) as integral to the independence movement while simultaneously undermining Sukarno and Hatta. These films emphasise their respective 'isms' rather than the individual leaders themselves. I underscore this distinction to clarify the difference between tracing Mahathir's presence in Malaysian films and examining Mahathirism within them. The focus of this research is to investigate the latter, the 'ism', rather than the individual figure.

Given the previously mentioned concern, a comparative analysis of Thatcher, Reagan, Suharto, and Mahathir reveals that, to a certain degree, Mahathir exceeds the other three in tenure and crisis management. When examining the duration of governance, Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as Prime Minister of Malaysia spanned 22 years, from 1981 to 2003. In contrast, both Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom served only 10 years in their respective roles. Notably, in 1990, Margaret Thatcher was unsuccessful in securing the Conservative Party leadership (History.com editors, 2010). Conversely, at that same time in Malaysia, Mahathir celebrated significant electoral victories and the advancement of his ambitious national initiative, Vision 2020 (Hilley, 2000). Moreover, when comparing Mahathir's leadership with Suharto's in Indonesia, it is important to note that although Suharto's rule lasted 30 years—exceeding Mahathir's tenure—Mahathir managed the 1997 economic recession adeptly. In stark contrast, Suharto's regime faced considerable upheaval as the 1997 economic crisis precipitated the Reformasi movement, culminating in the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998. In Malaysia, during the same time frame, the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, who served as Deputy Prime Minister under Mahathir Mohamad, catalysed considerable political dissent, known as the Reformasi movement. Despite the implications of Anwar's arrest resonating with democratic dissent within the Malaysian political landscape, Mahathir retained his position and only voluntarily resigned in 2003. Notably, Mahathir made a significant announcement at UMNO's annual assembly, which was perceived as a melodramatic moment in Malaysian politics. There were even instances in which UMNO council members urged Mahathir to retract his resignation from both his roles as UMNO

president and Prime Minister (Khoo, 2003). These developments may provide essential insights into the study of Mahathirism in Malaysian cinema, a topic that has yet to be explored by researchers.

This chapter aims to analyse the domain of Mahathirism, highlighting the necessity of exploring the genealogy of this ideology due to its significant impact on Malaysia and Malaysian cinema. Additionally, this chapter will review the relevant literature for the study at hand. I have selected several previous studies that examine the influence of politics and power on the functioning of the film industry and on the discourse present within cinematic texts. To structure the literature review systematically, I will commence with studies on foreign cinema, including analyses of hegemony, before progressing to research focused on Malaysian cinema and its interrelations with political and power dynamics.

2.2 Mahathirism

‘One way of demonising an opponent, particularly a political opponent, is to give him a derogatory label.’

- Mahathir Mohamad (2009, para. 1)

The term ‘Mahathirism’ was first introduced by Khoo Boo Teik in his 1995 work, *The Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*. In his analysis, Khoo (2003) identifies five core elements of Mahathirism: capitalism, nationalism, authoritarianism, populism, and Islamism. It is essential to examine these components individually, as they are intricately connected both directly and indirectly. Schottmann (2018) also stresses that ‘these five components were not disparate elements’ (p. 48). Furthermore, Khoo (1995) assesses these five facets through a comprehensive study of Mahathir’s policies, interviews, speeches, political practices, and leadership decisions (Khoo, 2018). To add, I also wish to emphasize that, in discussing the five core elements of Mahathirism, I will integrate perspectives from various authors and researchers, rather than relying solely on Khoo Boo Teik to make it more robust. Farish (2002) contends that ‘The merit of Khoo’s book is the fact that he differentiates between Mahathir, the man, and Mahathirism as an ideology and belief system (p. 120). Conversely, Farish (2002) also emphasizes that ‘because the ideology

of Mahathirism was intimately linked to the man himself, Mahathir became the embodiment of his own ideology' (p. 120). In *Beyond Mahathir*, Khoo (2003) expands his discussion on Mahathirism, including an exploration of Mahathir's actions and principles following his premiership, while his most recent evaluation appears in the 2018 research article titled *Mahathir Mohamad Returns, but What of Mahathirism?*

As previously noted, Mahathirism comprises five fundamental elements. The first component is Mahathir's nationalist perspective towards both Malays and Malaysia as a whole. His ethno-nationalist political ideology has roots in his formative years, during which he witnessed the diminishing socio-economic position of the Malays in both business and public sectors, a decline attributed to the impacts of colonialism and war (Khoo, 1995). During his medical studies in Singapore, Mahathir actively engaged in discourse on socio-political issues affecting the Malay community through his column, *Che Det*, in the *New Straits Times*. His book, *Malay Dilemma*, was initially banned by the government in 1970, but the ban was lifted in 1981. In this work, he addresses the so-called 'Malay problem' and expresses his aspiration for Malays to advance while moving away from their perceived ethnic identity (Khoo, 1995). This includes Mahathir's controversial assertion that Malay underdevelopment is attributable to genetic and environmental factors (Mahathir, 1970).

According to Khoo (1995), Mahathir subscribes to the notion of 'the survival of the fittest', aligning him with a Social Darwinist perspective. He compares the historical development of the Chinese in terms of hereditary and environmental factors with that of the Malays, whom he claims are inherently indolent due to the lack of inter-marriage among Malays and the stability of the environment in the Malay Peninsula, positioning them apart from the principle of 'survival of the fittest' (Khoo, 1995). In contrast to his ethnonationalist views, Mahathir subsequently proposed the concept of 'Bangsa Malaysia' (or Malaysian Nation) to garner support from non-Bumiputras, while simultaneously extending his Malay nationalism and addressing the imperative of survival in an open global market. On the other note, Mahathir (2009) himself states in his blog, *thechedet.com*, with the title of Mahathirism and emphasised, 'At one time Lee Kuan Yew labelled me as a Malay ultra. After that caught on, I could do nothing that would not be labeled as extreme' (para. 2), but Mahathir states, 'by the time I stepped down, I had managed to believe that description. In the 1999 Election, Chinese votes helped give me the 2/3 majority in Parliament (para. 4). On that note, it

emphasised the interconnectedness between Malay nationalism and Malaysian nationalism of Mahathirism.

The second element of Mahathirism is populism, which is significant as it relates to Mahathir's concept of Malay nationalism or '... his ability to connect with the Malay zeitgeist' (Schottmann, 2018). Schottmann (2018) argues that he oftenly refer as 'undiplomatic, intemperate, and oftentimes irreverent' (p. 50) and His emphasis on Malay nationalism has shaped his populist stance, given that most Malays reside in the *kampung* (rural) areas (Khoo, 1995). According to Khoo (1995), Mahathir's nationalism has led to his reputation as a leader who cares for the *kampung* people; however, the contradiction prevailed in *The Malay Dilemma*, where Mahathir links *kampung* to backwardness, contrasting it with the more progressive and sophisticated towns, including in the understanding of Islam (Mahathir, 1970). Additionally, his commoner background is often referenced as a point of distinction for his populist style. (Schottmann, 2018). Mahathir's populism is further linked to his 'tortured relationship with Malay aristocracy' (p. 51). His initiative to amend Article 66(4A) of the Constitution in 1983, which pertains to the power vested in the Yang Dipertuan Agong over parliamentary decisions, illustrates his commitment to being anti-royalist and, consequently, aligned with ordinary people.

His constitutional amendments faced opposition from the nine Malay Rulers, who perceived them not only as unconstitutional but also as a limitation on their power (Syed Husin Ali, 2013). Mahathir was actively orchestrating a campaign to communicate a new narrative to the *rakyat*. He contends that historically, the *rakyat* opposed the Malayan Union, while he accuses the Malay Monarchy of having 'sold' Malaya to colonialists (Khoo, 1995). I observe a series of antagonisms between Mahathir and the royalists. Mahathir began voicing his grievances against the royalists through his writings in the Che Det column, continued with his polemic against Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first Prime Minister and a prince of the Kedah Sultanate, and subsequently engaged in a rivalry with UMNO leader Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Ku Li), who also hails from the Kelantan royal family. Following Ku Li's defeat by Mahathir in the UMNO Presidential election, Ku Li established the Semangat 46 party and the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah coalition in opposition to UMNO during the election (Khoo, 1995).

The third element of Mahathirism is Islam. Farish (2002) contends that the strong reputation of Mahathirism in its early years of premiership arose from the success of

uniting several essential ideas into a coherent vision for Malaysia, especially for the Malay Muslim community. Following the resurgence of Islam during his premiership, Mahathir selectively referenced Islamic teachings to encourage the Malay population—who are predominantly Muslim—to pursue hard work and embrace modernisation and progressiveness (Khoo, 1995). This approach stems from his notion of capitalistic nationalism. On the other note, according to Schottmann (2018), the Mahathir years saw a gradual increase in the influence of Islam in political discourse and the public sphere overall. During this period, the importance of Islam in shaping and defining Malay cultural identity is increasing (Schottmann, 2018). According to Schottmann (2018), ‘The Islamization processes that had begun under his predecessors thus continued under Mahathir, including through a further expansion of the religious bureaucracy and the upgrading of the Islamic Affairs Divisions..’ (p. 54-55).

Several Islamization initiatives implemented by Mahathir warrant consideration, including the establishment of the *Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam*, the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), Bank Islam Malaysia Berhad, and the integration of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) into UMNO, notably with Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim as his protégé (Farish A. Noor, 2014). This strategy appears to be Mahathir’s response to managing the Islamic-oriented parties within Malaysian politics, particularly the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and ABIM, as they increasingly gained influence within the political landscape. However, according to Farish A. Noor (2014), leaders of PAS, such as Yusof Rawa, contend that ‘the state-sponsored Islamization programme of the UMNO-led state could only be perceived as superficial, taking place within a Malaysian economy ingrained in the framework of global (Western) capital’ (p. 131). The campaign to discredit and delegitimise Mahathir’s government unfolded during Yusof Rawa’s leadership in the 1980s, characterised by accusations from PAS of UMNO leaders being *kafir* (infidels), *munaḥḥikin* (hypocrites), and traitors to Islam (Farish A. Noor, 2014, p. 131). This conflict presented numerous complexities and, at its zenith, culminated in the tragic events of Memali (Farish A. Noor, 2014).

In 2001, Mahathir’s premiership reached its peak of Islamization efforts, as he declared that Malaysia had already met the criteria of an Islamic state and emphasized that a multireligious nation should not be considered a secular state (Schottmann, 2018). According to Farish (2002), the removal of Anwar Ibrahim, who was then Deputy Prime Minister and a key figure in the Mahathirism-Islam grand narrative, not only vacated a cabinet position but also left an ideological void. In light of that, Farish (2002) argues

that ‘This sudden break or rupture in the discourse of Mahathirism robbed it of its internal cohesion and unity’ (p.133).

The fourth element of Mahathirism is capitalism. In discussing this component, it is crucial to emphasise the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), announced following the general election of 1969. According to Syed Husin Ali (2013), ‘..this election entailed intense campaigns that incited profound ethnic sentiments, ultimately culminating in the tragic 13th May Incident’ (p. 21). Various incentives and forms of assistance were allocated to the Malays to enhance their economic standing (Syed Husin Ali, 2013). The NEP shared considerable similarities with proposals put forth by Mahathir in his work, *The Malay Dilemma* (Khoo, 1995). During the second term of the NEP, which coincided with the early years of Mahathir’s premiership, a contentious debate arose regarding the NEP’s continuity. This discourse highlighted the complexities of the NEP as a dual-faceted strategy for poverty alleviation, as it predominantly benefitted Malay capitalists and the emerging elite rather than the impoverished Bumiputera populace.

Concurrently, Mahathir expressed concerns regarding the insufficient financial literacy among Malays, noting that some were still engaged in barter trade practices at that time. Mahathir’s capitalist undertaking, reflective of neoliberal principles, reached its zenith with the introduction of privatisation policies and new industrial initiatives, epitomised by the establishment of corporations such as PROTON, HICOM, and PERWAJA. By 1984, the Malaysian Incorporated initiative was launched, which accompanied privatisation efforts for entities such as Malaysian Airlines (MAS), Petroleum Nasional (PETRONAS), and Pos Malaysia, among others, in the commercial sphere (Khoo, 2003). Ironically, Mahathir, in his capacity as Prime Minister, posited that privatisation served as a remedy for the entrenched mentalities of dependency on subsidies and get-rich-quick schemes cultivated by the NEP he previously endorsed. He aimed to promote the emergence of Malay entrepreneurs, whom he referred to as the ‘New Malays’ or *Melayu Baru* (Khoo, 2003).

The final aspect of Mahathirism is authoritarianism. His lengthy premiership spanned 22 years, comparable to other authoritarian figures in the Southeast Asian region, including Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew and Indonesia’s Suharto. Events such as the internal politics of UMNO in 1987, which resulted in the split between Team A and Team B, along with the banning of UMNO, which led to the establishment of UMNO Baru (New UMNO), have prompted many scholars (Khoo, 1995) to characterise

Mahathir's leadership as an authoritarian regime. Khoo (1995) notes that Mahathir's demeanour markedly differed from that of his predecessor, emphasising, "he has courted unpopularity with civil servants, and might openly demand performance when Hussein simply expected it" (p. 272). The mass arrests during the Lalang Operation marked the end of Mahathir's populism, revealing his authoritarian tendencies (Khoo, 1995). Khoo Boo Teik (1995) also examines Mahathir's ethos as a 'doctor politician' or 'Dr. UMNO' to understand his authoritarianism. Ironically, Mahathir's medical approach to governance initially endeared him to the public as a populist leader. Mahathir (as quoted by Khoo, 1995) remarked, 'The practice of medicine came easily to me. I discovered I was naturally sympathetic to people and their problems. It was very satisfying to be able to cure a sick person' (p. 296).

He perceives politics through a medical lens (Khoo, 1995). Musa Hitam (as quoted by Khoo, 1995) interpreted Mahathir's 'medical' and 'surgical' style with the analogy that 'a good doctor wanted to push things down your throat' (p. 298). An anonymous UMNO member described Mahathir's decision to expel Ku Li's faction from the party as 'a medical solution...to cut out the cancer' (p. 298). Khoo (1995) supports this viewpoint, referencing Mahathir's claim that 'as a doctor, I know how to choose a good medicine' (p. 298), also linking it with Mahathir's writing of *The Malay Dilemma*, which was shaped by a medical perspective. This discourse connects Mahathir's authoritarian traits with Foucault's ideas regarding the medical profession, which 'exercises an uncontrolled power over people's bodies, their health, and their life and death' (p. 330). In conclusion, Mahathir's paradoxes significantly contributed to shaping his dual identity as both a populist and an authoritarian leader.

2.2.1 Paradoxes of Mahathirism

Khoo (1990) points out that the ideological framework of Mahathirism remains underdeveloped and has not yet reached its full potential. In contrast, Cheah Boon Kheng (2002) highlights that proponents of Mahathirism encounter inherent paradoxes, stating, 'They suffer from the paradoxes which he is at pains to point out' (p. 201). Further discussing the intellectual engagement with Mahathirism, Khoo (1995) concedes that Mahathir lacks the stature of a theorist. Cheah (2002) elaborates on this by asserting, 'The coherence of Dr Mahathir's views lies really in the sum of its paradoxes, ambiguities and inconsistencies' (p. 202). In addition to theorising

Mahathirism, Khoo (1995) enhances his discourse by delineating its paradoxes, which are:

- ‘Anxious to secure the survival of the Malays, Mahathir seemed prepared to see the end of Malay.’
- ‘The foremost Malay nationalist of his generation, he transformed himself into a new Malaysian nationalist.’
- ‘His Social Darwinism accentuated his Malay nationalism. His Malay nationalism checked his Social Darwinism.’
- ‘Temperamentally undiplomatic, he fashioned a diplomacy to suit his temperament.’
- ‘The ideologue of state-sponsored constructive protection, he became the advocate of capitalist competition.’
- ‘In the name of work, he extols Islam. In the name of Islam, he casts work as an imperative. This is the religiosity of the self-made man.
- ‘He would ‘Look East’ to catch up with the West.’
- ‘He personifies his class by personifying his race.’
- ‘He praised enterprise in an age of money politics.’
- ‘He left medicine for politics only to practice politics as medicine.’
- ‘Because he did not simply turn to the bureaucracy to realise his plans, but practically turned upon it, he turned the sceptical public perception of the bureaucracy into a mood more receptive to his vision.’
- ‘A rebel in 1969, he beautified loyalty in 1988.’
- ‘His frankness is his people’s catharsis: that is the quality of his populism.’
- ‘His aspirations may not be those of his people: that is the character of his leadership.’
- ‘It was never quite clear where his populism dissolved, and his authoritarianism congealed.’
- ‘He believes History but is ‘terrified’ by it. ’

(p. 10)

Cheah (2002) provides an insightful analysis of the paradoxes associated with Mahathirism, noting a distinct evolution in Mahathir’s thought throughout his initial two works, *The Malay Dilemma* and *The Challenge*. In *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir proposes strategies aimed at the comprehensive rehabilitation of the Malay community

(Cheah, 2002). However, an important shift occurs as articulated in *The Challenge*, where the focus transitions from a direct engagement with the Chinese community to a reorientation towards ‘...the Islamic core of the Malay community, and, simultaneously, outward onto the West’ (p. 202).

Mahathir demonstrates a willingness to navigate the essential twists and turns dictated by the evolving local and international political landscape, highlighting his astuteness as a politician (Cheah, 2002). This policy flexibility and shifting of positions serves as a recurring theme in Mahathirism; for instance, ‘In 1968, he had supported the Malay rulers and the Malay feudal system, but in 1983 and again in 1993 he had denounced them when they opposed his policies’ (p. 204). As Minister of Education in 1975, he championed the Malay language within the school and university curricula. Yet, as Prime Minister, he introduced English as the primary medium of instruction for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in educational institutions by 1993. Therefore, Mahathirism can be characterized by its inherent ambiguity and inconsistency (Cheah, 2002).

2.2.2 Mahathirism as Hegemony

Before addressing the hegemony of Mahathirism, it is pertinent to discuss the Malay classical text, *Sulalatus Salatin* (the Malay Annals), particularly the section concerning the *waadat* (agreement) between the pre-Islamic King, Sri Tri Buana, and the minor king, Demang Lebar Daun. Cheah (2001) posits that this constitutes the earliest form of a ‘social contract’. In this mythical social contract, Demang Lebar Daun submits to the demands of Sri Tri Buana, stipulating that the subjects of Demang Lebar Daun (the Malays) shall remain loyal to the Majesty, Sri Tri Buana, under the condition that ‘they (the subjects) must be treated well by your descendants’ (p. 74). In response, King Sri Tri Buana consents but asserts that ‘the Malays should not rebel against him or his descendants, regardless of how tyrannical or evil they (the rulers) may be’ (p. 74).

Cheah (2001) posits that the *Waadat* exemplifies the advocacy of human rights grounded in *hukum syarak* (Islamic Law) concerning the relationship between the ruler and the subjects. However, this ‘social contract’ significantly shapes and impacts the Malay psyche, fostering a sense of obedience toward authority and governance. Consequently, I contend that this represents a form of hegemony, as it has been internalised by the populace as what Gramsci (1980) refers to as ‘common sense.’ Furthermore, Cheah (2001) highlights that the agreements between Sri Tri Buana and

Demang Lebar Daun predate the advent of Islam in the Melaka Kingdom; nonetheless, their interactions were influenced by principles derived from the Quran and Hadith. This analysis indicates that, although the author of the *Sulalatus Salatin* remains unknown, they had a profound understanding of the Islamic sentiments prevalent among the Malay community at the time of composition and subsequently sought to manipulate these sentiments. While this agreement or contract ostensibly affords certain human rights to the subjects, it does not negate the King's authority or the prescribed expectation that subjects refrain from rebellion against their ruler. Therefore, the narrative purpose of the *Sulalatus Salatin* appears to be the reinforcement of the existing hierarchical structure between the ruler and the subjects within the Malay society. This *Waadat* can be construed as one of the earliest manifestations of hegemony between the sovereign and the populace, articulated through a mythical literary framework. It is perhaps unsurprising that elements of hegemony persist in contemporary Malaysia, given their deep entrenchment in Malay culture. In relation to this research, during the Malacca Sultanate era, subjects were said to derive their social, cultural, and religious identities from the Sultan (Khoo, 2006, p. 33); however, in modern Malaysia, citizens increasingly seek political guidance and the safeguarding of their socio-economic and cultural rights from the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) (Khoo, 2006).

Mahathir's paradoxes can be effectively elucidated through Hilley's (2000) doctoral dissertation, titled *Contesting the Vision: Mahathirism, the Power Bloc, and the Crisis of Hegemony*. Hilley utilises Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to analyse the 'power bloc' in Malaysia and to explore the development of the 'Mahathir project' as a strategy for legitimisation (p. i). Hilley (2000) categorises the interrelated components of the economy, politics, and ideology as a 'hegemony trinity'. He subsequently identifies that the framework governing both intellectual and popular discourse is characterised by the 'shifting nature' inherent in 'state-class arrangements, the organic capacities of the UMNO network, and the application of Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020)' (p. i). This 'shifting nature' elucidates the paradoxes of Mahathirism, which are further attributed to the length of Mahathir's premiership. Hilley (2000) articulates that Gramsci's notion of hegemony exemplifies the challenges of the 'national-popular' and 'ethical-moral' dimensions that confront the dominant class in their endeavour to utilise state and civil institutions for the construction of a developmental ideology.

Hilley (2000) draws inspiration from Stuart Hall's Gramscian analysis of Thatcherism, positioning Thatcherism as a hegemonic project. Thatcherism refers to the ideological framework established by Margaret Thatcher during her tenure as British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990. A significant aspect of Hall's analysis, which holds relevance for Hilley's perspective, is the similarity between Mahathir Mohamad and Thatcher, particularly in their shared support for economic privatisation. This privatisation is indicative of the 'neo-liberal/monetarist orthodoxy that first took hold in the West' (Hilley, 2000, p. 103). While Tory elites reaped considerable benefits from privatisation under Thatcher's government, the UMNO elites during Mahathir's administration cultivated a corporate network within the private sector, exemplified by entities such as Hatibudi Holding and Fleet Holding, a manifestation of 'crony capitalism' (Hilley, 2000, p. 103). Furthermore, in alignment with the principles of the Thatcherite 'enterprise culture,' Daim's tenure coincided with the rise of a politically prosperous Malay class in Malaysia. Mirroring Thatcher's approach, Mahathir acknowledged the importance of securing backing from both civil society and the state (Hilley, 2000).

Hilley (2000) posits that Mahathirism is fundamentally oriented towards the renewal of consensual relationships across economic, political, and ideological dimensions to address what he terms an 'organic crisis.' Hilley (2000) characterises an organic crisis as a comprehensive systemic disruption resulting in disjunctions across economic/class, political/party, and moral/ideological realms (p. 350), which directly impacts the power bloc. Consequently, when the legitimacy of the Barisan Nasional (BN) bloc is under crisis management, there is potential for the formation of an alternative bloc arising from these inherent contradictions (Hilley, 2000).

One of the most significant contributions Hilley (2000) made to the field of Mahathirism was his effort to periodise the Mahathirism project. This periodisation was previously conceptualised by Cheah Boon Keng (2002), who identified two distinct eras during Mahathir's premiership: the Liberal Phase (1981-1987) and the Authoritarian Phase (1987-2001). However, I argue that the designation 'Liberal Phase', which pertains to Mahathir's tenure from 1981 to 1987, is inappropriate. This is due to the tragic events that took place during that time, particularly the Memali incident, where a confrontation occurred between the police and Ibrahim Libya's devotees, a religious leader and member of the PAS party. Therefore, I find Hilley's (2000) proposed

periodization more detailed and comprehensive. Understanding this periodisation is crucial for analysing the films that I will examine. Hilley's periodisation includes:

- **Early Mahathirism (1981-1985)** - The Mahathirism project predominantly emphasises the intricacies of ethnic constructions arising from the colonial era, the Alliance, and the New Economic Policy (NEP) (Hilley, 2000). In response to the pressing need for economic growth, Mahathir transitioned from NEP principles towards a more liberalised approach to state and civil society, while simultaneously seeking to consolidate executive authority at the national level (Hilley, 2000). To foster consensus, Mahathir endeavoured to reshape the political culture of the nation (Hilley, 2000). This period also witnessed a constitutional crisis, during which Mahathir sought to amend several articles of the constitution related to the functions and roles of the Yang Dipertuan Agong, the sovereign head of the country.
- **Mid-Mahathirism (1986-90)** - Mahathir's neo-liberal policies facilitated deregulation and privatisation, thereby creating hegemonic opportunities for Mahathir and Daim to redirect patronage from the state to a more flexible configuration of control and ownership under UMNO/BN (Hilley, 2000). This period also witnessed significant expansions in the information technology and financial sectors, with the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE) emerging as a crucial development strategy (Hilley, 2000). Politically, Operation Lalang, which involved mass arrests, as well as factional challenges from Tengku Razaleigh's faction within UMNO during the years 1987/88, is indicative of an 'organic crisis' (Hilley, 2000). Furthermore, Mahathir's discourse on Islam emerged in response to the Islamization promoted by oppositional groups, notably the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).
- **Late Mahathirism (1991-96)** -The phase witnessed a consolidation of the power bloc and a significant decline in national popular support for Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia. This period also marks a shift in Mahathir's vision of nationalism, from a focus on Malay nationalism to a broader Malaysian nationalism. Nonetheless, Mahathir's national-popular initiative failed to penetrate the entrenched support base of PAS in Kelantan (Hilley, 2000). Hilley further posits that the zenith of Mahathirism occurred during the 1995 Election,

which marked Barisan Nasional's most significant electoral victory, characterised by a pronounced backing from Chinese voters and business entities (p. 353).

- **Crisis Mahathirism (1997-99)** - During the crisis, the response known as Mahathirism addressed not only the economic emergency but also employed coercive political and ideological measures to maintain cohesion between the power bloc and populist elements (Hilley, 2000). Although Mahathirism's crisis originated from the economic downturn, it subsequently revealed fundamental contradictions at political and ideological levels. The arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, for instance, stemmed from conflicts viewed through an economic lens. Furthermore, Anwar's accusations and arrest, as well as the Reformasi movement, signified a regression to an authoritarian populism reminiscent of 1987, reflecting the crisis surrounding the Vision 2020 Project (Hilley, 2000). Hilley (2000) also identifies a key contradiction: 'Many were tacitly supporting Mahathir on the economy while backing Anwar, PAS, and the Reformasi on the moral front' (p. 358).

Therefore, this aligns with Wain's (2009) assertion that 'Mahathir compromised where necessary to meet the competing and shifting demands of politics' (p. vi), which also relates to Cheah's (2002) arguments regarding the evolution of policies. It is the context of time that compels Mahathir to alter and adapt his perspectives on various issues; thus, I believe it is crucial to consider the temporal setting in each film I analyse meticulously. This vigilance is vital to prevent overinterpretation. According to the periodisation framework established by Hilley (2000), I have come to understand that films produced during specific periods respond to or encapsulate the zeitgeist of those times. For instance, the early Mahathir era, characterised by the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and liberalisation, witnessed Rahim Razali's films such as *Abang* (1981) and *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984), which reflect the challenges faced by the emerging wealthy Malay class and the political corporate landscape. Additionally, several other melodramas, including *Pertentangan* (Salleh Ghani, 1983), *Penentuan* (Aziz Jaafar, 1982), and *Esok Untuk Siapa* (Jins Shamsudin, 1982), effectively portray the dilemmas facing the New Malay society.

Returning to the concept of Mahathirist hegemony, Khoo Boo Teik (2003) aligns with Hilley's (2000) assertion, characterising Mahathirism as a hegemonic project. Khoo (2003) introduces the term 'personalised hegemony' to describe the distinct nature of Mahathir's hegemony, distinguishing it from that of UMNO. Furthermore, Khoo (2003) articulates:

'There were contradictions in each and tensions among these parts, as Paradoxes of Mahathirism has tried to explain. But over the years, the co-existence of these different ideological components of Mahathirism gained Mahathir a wide, effective, and surprisingly, balanced appeal among the populace (and foreign audiences). There were Mahathir devotees, of course, for whom Mahathir could do no wrong. But it was not necessary to like everything about Mahathir to back him.'

(p. 172)

In addition to Khoo (2003), Cheah (2002) also identifies Mahathir's distinctive style of administration. For example, during his early premiership, he emphasised his commitment to work, often regarded as workaholism, by instituting a policy requiring government officials to wear name tags to promote efficiency. This marked a significant liberalisation of government operations (Cheah, 2002). Cheah (2002) points out, 'The personal style of his (Mahathir's) nation-building is best reflected in people's reactions to his leadership. Some loved him, while others hated him' (p. 194). He has been labelled variously as 'a dictator and an autocrat, renegade, recalcitrant, and a practitioner of voodoo economics' (Cheah, 2002, p. 194).

Critics from the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) derogatorily nicknamed him *Mahazalim*, meaning 'The Cruellest', and *Mahafiraun*, meaning 'The Great Pharaoh' (Cheah, 2002). This criticism is further exemplified by national laureate Shahnnon Ahmad's 1999 novel titled *Shit*, which was directed at Mahathir (Cheah, 2002). All of these factors indicate that during his tenure, Mahathir was considered a figure larger than the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) itself; notably, he re-registered UMNO as UMNO Baru (New UMNO) in 1987.

The last two sentences of the paragraph written by Khoo (2003) seem important because they foreshadow what Gramsci (1980) called 'contradictory consciousness'. This contradictory consciousness contributed to reinforcing the hegemony of Mahathirism. As an ideologue and leader, Mahathir developed a paradoxical ideology

named Mahathirism, and the effects of his power and hegemony can be seen in how his subjects reached consensus. Khoo (2003) also provides a few more examples:

‘If some disapproved of Mahathir’s nationalism, they could find solace in his commitment to capitalism. If some considered his shrill nationalist refrains to be ‘out of sync’ with globalization, they might admire instead his futurist dedication to technology. Some frowned on his nurture of capitalist developmentalism and yet they could not deny the nationalist impulses behind it. There were those who hated his politics – meaning the Anwar affair, for example – but took Mahathir’s imposition of capital controls to brave refusal to surrender to the bullying of the Washington consensus...One can continue with observing people half-disliking Mahathir but finding enough in him to support.’

(p. 173)

The paradoxical consensus among the proponents of this ideology continues to reinforce the hegemonic project of Mahathirism. This assertion stems from the understanding that, within a framework of hegemony, the ruling class need not seek to garner complete support from civil society; rather, they aim to diminish opposition without dismantling the mechanisms of coercion. Instead, the ruling class tends to manipulate the apparatus of coercion or private organisations, as articulated by theorists such as Gramsci and Althusser. Consequently, the films I intend to analyse reveal contradictions akin to those identified by Khoo (2003) in the cited passages.

Apart from Khoo Boo Teik and John Hilley, several scholars have examined Mahathir’s ideas on various levels and from numerous perspectives. For instance, Syed Hussein Alatas, one of the earliest scholars to trace the contradictions inherent in Mahathirism (despite never using the term in opposition to Mahathir and not writing a book exclusively dedicated to him), argued in *The Myth of Lazy Native* (1977) that Mahathir’s portrayal of the Malays as indolent and lazy reflects the colonial views of the past. Syed Hussein (1977) effectively demonstrates Mahathir’s contradictions as a Malay ideologue or nationalist; while he is firmly against colonialism, he simultaneously upholds colonial perspectives.

Syed Hussein’s concise book, *Islam and Socialism* (1976), includes a chapter that challenges Mahathir’s simplistic perspective on socialism, particularly among Malaysian socialists. In this context, Syed Hussein (1976) responded to Mahathir’s work, *The Challenge*. Furthermore, one of the most significant arguments presented by

Syed Hussein (1976) is his acknowledgement of Mahathir's evolution from a counter-authority in 1970 (Mahathir-Tunku crisis) to an authoritative loyalist by 1976. Therefore, while the discussion of tracing the contradictions of Mahathir and Mahathirism had begun earlier, the exploration of the consensual contradictions of Mahathirism remains largely overlooked, apart from a brief argument by Khoo (2003) in *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontent*. Thus, this examination of the duality of consensus and coercion within Mahathirism will be traced through selected Malaysian films from the 1980s and 1990s, as I contend that these films typically depict a contradictory consciousness within their narratives.

2.3 Exploring Reaganism, Thatcherism, and the New Order in Cinema

In examining Mahathirism within the context of Malaysian cinema, pertinent comparative references can be drawn from political studies focusing on Indonesian cinema, particularly during the New Order era. President Suharto of Indonesia is a suitable counterpart to Mahathir, considering the parallels in the duration of their respective leaderships, the emergence of the internet, and advancements in information technology. These factors significantly contributed to the erosion of hegemony and the authoritarian structures established by both regimes.

It is equally significant to examine literature beyond Southeast Asia. One of the primary objectives is to identify the distinctions between countries, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom, in their approaches to ruling-class ideology in their cinema. As Hilley (2000) observes, Mahathirism bears a resemblance to Thatcherite politics; thus, I seek to comprehend the operational mechanisms of Thatcherism as reflected in British cinema, particularly through Hill's (1999) analysis in *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes*, with a focus on the chapter addressing British Cinema and Thatcherism. Hill (1999) posits that cinema and politics in 1980s British cinema are undoubtedly intertwined, although not in an overly simplistic manner. Nevertheless, the British cinema of this period, associated with the Thatcherite era, exhibited several genuinely novel and distinctive characteristics (Hill, 1999).

Hill (1999) asserts that Thatcherism is manifested in three principal dimensions: the political style of Margaret Thatcher, the ideological tenets of the New Right, and the policies enacted by the Thatcher administration (p. 4). Key components of Thatcherism include neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, with both ideologies

frequently intersecting. Hill (1999) also discusses the paradoxes prevalent during the Thatcher years; for instance, the Conservative Party, under Thatcher's premiership, was elected to govern Great Britain three times without ever securing a majority in Parliament. Another example of this contradiction is that while Thatcher advocated for 'national unity', her administration predominantly represented British (or unionist) interests rather than solely those of the (southern) English population.

To explore the novelty of British cinema during the Thatcherite government, Hill (1999) initiates a discussion on Thatcherism, drawing comparisons with Reaganism. Hill distinguishes between American and British cinema of the 1980s, noting that the influence of the New Right is evident in American cinema, particularly in Hollywood. This influence manifests through a revival of conservative moral values, entrepreneurial principles, and themes of militarism. In contrast, such trends are less discernible in British cinema. Lynne Segal (as cited in Hill, 1999) posits that, compared to the moral right in the United States, which thrived under Reaganism, Thatcherism presents a more 'ambivalent' and 'less successful' struggle for 'permissiveness'. Consequently, the British experience did not mirror the same 'backlash' against feminism and women's rights that occurred in the United States. According to Hill (1999), the defining characteristic of British cinema in the 1980s is not its endorsement of Thatcherite ideology but rather its critique of Thatcherism and its associated repercussions.

Thus, drawing on Hilley's (2000) analysis regarding the parallels between Mahathirism and Thatcherism, it becomes evident that while there are similarities, they are not overtly recognisable within the context of Malaysian cinema of the 1980s. A notable distinction between Malaysian cinema and Thatcherism is the duration of leadership; Mahathir served as Prime Minister for a notably more extended period—two decades—compared to that of Margaret Thatcher. Throughout this two-decade tenure, Hilley (2000) asserts that Mahathir continuously modified his principles in an effort to sustain his hegemonic position. Consequently, the ongoing adjustment of his principles and stances over 22 years culminated in the emergence of paradoxes and contradictions inherent in his governance.

Returning to British Cinema, Hills (1999) underscores the concept of 'danger reading' as articulated by Lester Friedman concerning British Cinema during the Thatcher era. Friedman posits that British cinema overwhelmingly adopts an oppositional stance critical of the Thatcherite project, which itself represents an

endeavor to homogenize British Cinema. It is noteworthy that not all British films are inherently tied to Thatcherism; however, Hills (1999) concurs that it is considerably more straightforward to identify anti-Thatcherite films than to pinpoint pro-Thatcherite works. One contributing factor to this phenomenon is that Thatcherism successfully instituted economic and institutional changes without necessitating popular endorsement, thereby failing to achieve the status of a widely embraced ideology (Hill, 1999). This condition reflects Stuart Hall's concept of populist authoritarianism. Furthermore, Hills (1999) argues that the visibility of anti-Thatcherism in British Cinema is heightened due to the direct impact of Margaret Thatcher's policies on the film industry itself.

Hills (1999) elucidates the significance of engaging with a comprehensive range of films from the Mahathir era, emphasizing that this approach is crucial in preventing the formation of generalized arguments, as suggested by Friedman (in Hills, 1999). I posit that Malaysian cinema during the 1980s and 1990s exhibited considerable diversity, owing to the varied contributions of numerous directors within the industry. For instance, a comparison between U-Wei Saari, whose extensive experience and notable achievements as a director stand in stark contrast to Z Lokman, known for his low-brow productions, illustrates a significant divergence in themes and ideological perspectives.

The study *Echoes of Reaganism in Hollywood Blockbuster Movies from the 1980s to the 2010s* by Ilias (2019) examines the enduring influence of key elements of Ronald Reagan's political ideology on selected Hollywood blockbuster films. This research seeks to elucidate the intricate relationship between cinematic spectacle and the principles of Reaganist neoliberalism and neoconservatism. The analysis encompasses a broad temporal framework, extending from the 1980s to the 2010s. Notably, Ilias (2019) adopts a *longue durée* approach to highlight the enduring influence, or 'long shadow', of Reaganism in Hollywood cinema, persisting well beyond Reagan's presidency.

This research undoubtedly possesses contemporaneous value; however, since the study of Mahathirism during the Mahathir premiership has not been previously undertaken, it is imperative to focus on this topic during Mahathir's leadership (1981-2003). Furthermore, the concluding chapter will briefly address the enduring influence—often referred to as the 'long shadow'—of Mahathirism in the post-Mahathir context, suggesting that further research could be pursued in the future.

A notable similarity between Mahathirism and Reaganism is the shared elements of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, albeit expressed in distinct manners, encapsulated in Mahathir's concept of an Asian approach or his 'My Way' style. Ilias (2019) asserts that Reagan's political metaphors and the corporatization of film studios during the 1970s and 1980s continue to significantly influence contemporary Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking.

Within the framework of hegemony, Ilias (2019) contends that depictions and representations of hegemony in films are limited. Notable examples include the portrayal of U.S. global hegemony in *Independence Day* (1996) and representations of capitalist hegemony through characters such as Tony Stark (Iron Man) in *The Avengers* (2012) and Bruce Wayne (Batman) in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). However, I posit that what Ilias (2019) interprets as hegemony in these blockbuster films is characterized by the depiction of 'positive images' associated with Reaganism. Although Ilias (2019) fails to provide a theoretical framework for the term hegemony—often overlapping with concepts of 'propaganda' and 'domination'—his argument suggests that these blockbuster movies function as instruments and mediums of hegemony. This perspective contrasts with my research, which seeks to illuminate the contradictory elements in Malaysian films of the 1980s and 1990s resulting from Mahathirist hegemony. These contradictory elements in the films reflect a 'contradictory consciousness,' akin to Gramsci's theoretical assertions.

In reviewing the concept of hegemony as discussed in Ilias's (2019) research, I would like to highlight the article titled *Films and Cultural Hegemony: American Hegemony 'Outside' and 'Inside' the '007' Movie Series* by Shin and Namkung (2008). This empirical study examines how American cultural hegemony operates within the film medium, specifically focusing on the James Bond 007 film series as a case study.

Shin and Namkung (2008) argue that the Hollywood film industry serves as a vehicle for the dissemination of American values globally. The authors assert that the 007 series is 'controlled by U.S. funding and reflects American perspectives vividly' (p. 1). Furthermore, they contend that audiences who engage with the 007 series are 'urged to link the United States with positive, hence legitimate values and accept America's dominant position' (p. 1).

Consistent with Ilias (2019), Shin and Namkung (2008) posit that Hollywood films, particularly the 007 series, are instrumental in 'sanitizing' and promoting the ideologies that America espouses. Contextually, it is evident that dominant powers such

as the United States not only possess broader and more ambitious global agendas but also propagate these agendas through cinematic narratives, unlike developing nations like Malaysia. The portrayal of global political and economic dominance frequently depicted in Hollywood films is notably absent in Malaysian cinema, even in films that could be regarded as ‘propaganda’, largely because that agenda is not congruent with Malaysia’s interests, at least for the present. Therefore, I propose that it is critical to assess research originating from Asian countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia, as their socio-political contexts and cultural conditions are more closely aligned with those of Malaysia.

The most relevant study is *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (1994) by Krishna Sen, from which I have greatly benefited, particularly through the author’s analytical methodology. Sen employs a ‘reading against the grain’ approach, effectively revealing alternative interpretations of New Order cinema. Although this research was conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Politics, the author emphasizes the medium’s distinct characteristics—such as shot composition and editing—to uncover the underlying power dynamics of the New Order within the cinematic text. During the New Order era, Indonesian films were subjected to regulatory constraints imposed by repressive state apparatuses, including censorship occurring at every phase: pre-production (script approval), production, and prior to public release. In numerous instances, such as the film *Perawan Desa* (1978), this resulted in alterations to the narrative, including changes to the ending.

The study is structured into two primary sections: an analysis of Indonesian socio-political dynamics during the New Order period and an examination of the relevant cinematic texts. In one chapter, the author focuses on the portrayal of Suharto and the New Order in historical-genre films. The author posits that the New Order regime utilised this genre to reconstruct Indonesian history, presenting Suharto and the New Order as heroic figures while marginalising the contributions of Sukarno and Hatta to Indonesia’s independence. However, it should be noted that this genre is infrequently produced in Malaysian cinema, particularly during Mahathir’s premiership, rendering it somewhat tangential to the focus of my study.

Additionally, the author focuses on issues affecting the lower class. It is particularly noteworthy that the author adopts a dual critique: not only does he critique the state, but he also scrutinises filmmakers who ostensibly express sympathy for the lower class. Nevertheless, the narratives present in their films tend to be constrained to

a middle-class perspective. For instance, while a limited number of films address poverty within Indonesian society, the filmmakers' chosen viewpoint frames poverty as an issue of individual failure rather than a systemic problem. The author posits that this perspective aligns with the capitalist hegemony of the New Order regime, suggesting that the hegemony either constrains filmmakers or at least negotiates with the prevailing regime.

In the context of political discourse, the term 'class' has become closely associated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and Sukarno, prompting the New Order regime to reframe the concept of 'class problem' as 'social problem' when referring to this genre of film. The author's analysis of films addressing class issues has significantly enhanced my critical perspective and my attention to detail when examining films that challenge the New Malay class. This examination raises the question of whether these films genuinely oppose capitalism or remain enmeshed within the capitalist system aligned with Mahathirism. Moreover, another chapter posits that portrayals of women in New Order cinema often reflect a male gaze, even as these films bring attention to women's experiences of persecution. This chapter also discusses the notion of 'ibuism' within New Order cinema, exemplified by the film *Ibunda*. The prevailing interpretation suggests that *Ibunda* demonstrates that the New Order regime did not neglect or misrepresent women in film. However, Sen (1994) argues that *Ibunda* reinforces the New Order's ibuism ideology by emphasising women's roles and contributions primarily as mothers and wives.

In conclusion, Sen (2009) explores the New Order regime's preoccupation with 'stability' through textual analysis. He designates this phenomenon as 'archetype text.' The concept of 'archetype text' operates within a recurring cycle of 'order-chaos-order.' While this research is extensive to a degree, it becomes apparent that specific genres remain underrepresented or overlooked. Notably absent from this discourse are Islamic films featuring Rhoma Irama, a prominent figure in Indonesian pop culture, and a thorough analysis of horror cinema.

In my study, I benefited from reading 'Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia' by Krishna & David (2007), which explores the institutions and policies that shape what Indonesians write and read (p. 1). The book also emphasises the importance of understanding media texts as reflections of national culture and the political hegemony established by the New Order. These arguments prompted me to engage with Khoo's (2006) analysis of Malaysian cinema as a 'Cinema of Denials' based on several key

points. First, she argues that ‘multi-ethnic diversity is not typically shown in Malay cinema’ (p. 104). Additionally, he states that ‘the issue of representing non-Malay ethnicities was not broached’ (p. 105), and highlights that ‘the censorship board perceives itself to be the moral and national guardian’ (p. 108).

In examining Mahathir’s tenure, it is essential to highlight his role as Minister of Home Affairs from 1986 to 1999, while serving concurrently as Prime Minister. During this period, he exerted significant control over Malaysian cinema, demonstrating an overarching trend of authoritarian governance in the nation. Under Mahathir’s regime, Malaysian cinema faced restrictions characterised by both self-censorship and state censorship. The repressive measures enforced by the Internal Security Act served to maintain a climate of suppression, deterring filmmakers from portraying contemporary social issues that might be perceived as sensitive or critical of the government (Khoo, 2006). Furthermore, the establishment of the National Culture Policy reinforced Mahathir’s objective of positioning the Malay race as ‘the definitive people,’ thereby having a profound impact on the creative industry (Sumit, 2008).

Furthermore, Krishna and David (2007) also attempt to ‘understand how texts are restricted and how they offer a range of alternative readings, which can be circulated in particular contexts’ (p. 9). This statement presents an alternative perspective, wherein the profit-driven creative industry prioritises profits and ratings above all else. Consequently, government censorship is used to ensure that content is not subversive. Furthermore, some politically disenchanted viewers may discern a political message that the censors fail to recognise. This dynamic also elucidates the films selected for my research. This observation is aligned with the argument posited by Krishna & David (2007): ‘the contradiction between the market-oriented media manager, the security-conscious ideological apparatus of the government, and politically disenchanted citizens in search of radical position in their work and entertainment (p. 9).

David and Sen (2007) contend that spectators of films produced during the New Order era may derive interpretations that significantly diverge from the perspectives held by bureaucrats or producers, who are primarily concerned with financing films that adhere to politically acceptable narratives. In order to elucidate the ideological significance embedded within these texts, I align with the viewpoints presented by David and Sen (2007), who contend, ‘the contemporary audience research almost unanimously suggests that state control (or control by producers, creators, or encoders) over the meaning of screen texts is never perfect or complete’ (p. 147). This is what the

authors called ‘reading against the grain’ or ‘disorderly reading’, the reading that opposes the official interpretations of particular films. Although the context of the argument made by David and Sen (2007) circumscribes the circulation of dissident readings of propaganda and censored films, the notion against ‘official interpretation’ in my research is more complex. The basis of this statement is by considering the notion that ‘resistance to official reading/interpretation not only refers to the authority of government bodies but also is against resisting the official interpretation offered by the filmmakers. For instance, when Nasir Jani ‘offers’ that his film, *Rozana Cinta* ‘87, is a rebellious film towards Mahathirism, the marginal side of the film suggests that Nasir Jani is aligned with Mahathir’s Asian values. Hence, this is where Foucauldian discourse will play a role in revealing the contradiction.

One notable aspect of *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia* by David and Sen (2007) is the capacity to identify and establish a classification of the ‘archetypal film of the New Order’ where ‘films made between the 1970s and the mid-1980s followed a narrative structure from order, through disorder to the restoration of order’ (p. 146). For instance, under the Production Codes, authorities stipulate that films addressing themes such as poverty, exploitation, or crime must conclude with a portrayal of punitive measures enacted by state institutions (Krishna & David, 2007). Consequently, this research aims to identify and articulate the cinematic patterns prevalent during the Mahathir administration. To achieve this, a comparative analysis of state intervention between the Indonesian New Order government and the Mahathir regime will be conducted. Notably, state intervention in Malaysia is perceived as less repressive than in Indonesia, where filmmakers face extensive regulations throughout the entire filmmaking process, including pre-production, screenplay formulation, and post-production.

My arguments regarding the representation of medicine as a personification of Mahathirism draw on the research by Noah Viernes, titled *The Politics of Health in the Films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (2014). In this work, the author explores the relationship between hospital-related imagery and the control imposed by Thai authorities. My argument seeks to connect medical-related imagery with Mahathir’s legitimacy, taking into account Mahathir’s authoritarianism, which is contextualised by his background as a medical doctor in Khoo (1995). Viernes (2014) notes that Apichatpong’s early films, ‘Mysterious Object at Noon’ (2000) and ‘Syndrome and a Century’ (2007), were banned by the Thai government due to their portrayal of specific

themes, which, for him, ‘images of control in a Bangkok hospital where its residents are rigidly organized amid symbols of national authority’ (p. 1).

According to Vierners (2014), Apitchapong offers his audience an opportunity to critique the political dynamics within the healthcare sector. The researcher establishes a connection between health and power through the application of Michel Foucault’s framework, as outlined in *The Birth of the Clinic*, which is ‘the disappearance of the sick man, operated as a discourse designed to produce a normalised and sanitised modern citizen-subject’ (p. 11). Vierners (2014) also articulates that ‘Hospitals and associations of doctors became preeminent institutions of the new order, not only extending the political into cultural spaces of well-being but functioning as an instrument of the modern state’ (p. 12). Thus, if the Islamic representation of *kiyai* (religious teacher) can be interpreted as an endeavour to legitimise Suharto’s power within Indonesian cinema, then a representation of medical professionals in Malaysian film during the Mahathir administration may similarly be viewed as an attempt to affirm Mahathir’s authority.

When comparing films during Suharto’s dictatorship (New Order) and Mahathir’s authoritarian regime, it is crucial to consider the differing audiences in both countries. The distinctions in audience perception are influenced by the broader cultural and social practices inherent in each nation. According to Usman and Ismail (1983), Malaysia (specifically the Malay population) exhibits a closer familiarity with the concept of *evolusi* (the Malay term for evolution) when addressing political, customs-related, and social matters. Conversely, Indonesia has historically been inclined towards *revolusi* (the Malay term for revolution). This phenomenon is intricately linked to Mahathir’s hegemony, which navigates a delicate balance between authoritarianism and populism, potentially rendering his approach ‘softer’ than Suharto’s overtly dictatorial regime, which starkly repressed democracy.

2.4 In Search of Mahathirism Within the Malaysian Cinematic Discourse

The study of Malaysian cinema has frequently been analysed through the lenses of gender and identity. To address this oversight, I aim to explore Malaysian cinema through the concept of ‘personalised hegemony’—a term I adopted from Khoo Boo Teik—that remains largely unexamined in academic discourse. This analysis takes a distinctive approach by examining films from the 1980s and 1990s as reflections of ‘contradictory consciousness.’ In this context, Mahathir’s ‘personae hegemony’ or

personae ideology serves as the central thesis for interpreting the interplay of politics and ideology within Malaysian cinema. On that note, this section will review a book and a research paper analysing Malaysian films from the 1980s and 1990s. Few previous studies have explored the impact of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and modernisation on Malaysian cinema, examining how these factors have shaped representations of gender and the portrayal and definition of Malay identity.

In my study, I extensively examined the works of Hatta (1993) and Khoo (2006), both of which offer a comprehensive textual and cultural analysis of cinema from the 1980s and 1990s, while also providing critical insights into the subject matter. Conversely, Hatta's somewhat reductive perspective regarding the absence of national crises—such as poverty, power abuse, corruption at high levels, and issues of national identity—has been effectively questioned by Khoo (2006). On that note, Khoo (2006) contends that this phenomenon of 'self-censorship' arises from the repressive state apparatus, which encompasses censorship practices and the Internal Security Act (ISA). Khoo (2006) argues that Malaysian cinema can indeed be viewed as part of the framework termed 'Cinema in Denials,' as follows: 'multi-ethnic diversity is not typically shown in Malay cinema' (p. 104), 'the issue of representing non-Malay ethnic was not broached' (p. 105), and 'the censorship board perceives itself to be the moral and national guardian' (p. 108) where these arguments suggest that she interprets these crises primarily as a top-down issue.

Nonetheless, Khoo (2006) offers a supporting argument to Hatta, reinforcing his claims. Furthermore, to counter Hatta's assertions, Khoo (2006) references several films which she argues tackle significant issues, such as *Matinya Seorang Patriot* by Rahim Razali. In contrast, my view of films from the 1980s and 1990s reveals a more complex stance, particularly concerning socio-political themes and Mahathirism. Consequently, my perspective aligns with Khoo's (2006) critique of Hatta Azad Khan's oversimplified interpretation of (Malay)sian cinema during that era. However, Khoo (2006) neglects to assert that these so-called 'critical issues' are often addressed in a superficial manner and remain limited to the hegemony of the ruling elite. I also argue that this 'de-radicalized' and 'de-politicized' Malaysian cinema should not be perceived merely as a top-down phenomenon.

In light of the aforementioned concern, Chomsky's Propaganda Model serves as a vital framework for understanding the complexities of modern propaganda, which is significantly more sophisticated than traditional notions of 'propaganda.' In his seminal

work, Chomsky (1994) argues that modern propaganda bears little resemblance to that of the Soviet era. Rather, it operates fluidly, often critiquing corporations and government authorities in a manner that suggests neutrality towards the ruling class and the government. Chomsky (2012) further elaborates that modern civilization is confronted with an advanced 'propaganda system' in which 'the actors know what exactly they're doing' (p. 102). The complexity intensifies as this system indicates that propaganda mechanisms have shifted from governmental apparatuses to private entities that represent substantial interests.

In this context, *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, referenced by Khoo (2006) in relation to pressing societal issues, serves as a pertinent case study. It is noteworthy that the initial two films directed by Rahim Razali, a prominent film director of the decades, were produced by private entities, including Fleet Communication, a subsidiary of Fleet Holding, under the auspices of the Ministry of Finance during Mahathir's administration. In addition, a few of his films, although not produced by Fleet Communication, would also fit in this narrative, as it was likewise produced by a private entity, possibly reflecting Rahim's nuanced stance on Mahathirism. Over his career, Rahim directed nine films, with his first two films benefiting from the support of Fleet Communications, an initiative launched under former Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Ku Li) to promote a new genre of Malay cinema (Zawawi, 2007). Zawawi (2007) posits that the rivalry between Mahathir and Ku Li ultimately culminated in the dissolution of Fleet Communications. This example underscores how the state strategically employs private entities to disseminate propaganda, obfuscating direct control over public information consumption and fostering the illusion of autonomy in civil society. This observation underscores the assertion that Malaysian cinema in the post-studio era is more intricate than existing literature suggests.

In examining this Propaganda Model as a derivative of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, it is evident that the ruling class exerts influence over civil society through coercion and consent. This dynamic engenders what Gramsci describes as a 'contradictory consciousness,' wherein the civil society class possesses political awareness that does not manifest in structural or constructive actions. Often, such awareness does not lead to revolt against the status quo; rather, it integrates into the prevailing order.

As discussed in *Reclaiming Adat*, examining Khoo's (2006) argument reveals that Mahathirism undeniably played a pivotal role in transforming Malaysian cinema

into a 'Cinema of Denial' through the exertion of his hegemony. However, this phenomenon has simultaneously generated contradictions within Malaysian cinema, as films intended to critique Mahathirism have, to some extent, perpetuated its effects. Furthermore, multiple perspectives and discourses can be identified within the selected films.

A comparable situation exists within Malay *hikayat*, as the inherent nature of their narratives is characterized by the substantial use of *khias*. This stylistic choice arises from various societal restrictions, including Sultan's edict of *tulah*, which engenders a complex discourse. This complexity is evident even centuries after the composition of these *hikayats*, where contemporary readers can discern layers of subtext that encompass conflicting viewpoints within each traditional epic. For instance, the discourse surrounding Malay heroes, particularly Hang Tuah, has sparked an extensive and ongoing discussion over decades.

Consequently, Khoo (2006) conducts her research by examining Malaysian films and literature from the 1990s as a case study. The author underscores that modernity, as introduced by the New Economic Policy (NEP) and Mahathirist modernist initiatives, alongside Islamisation, facilitates both the conscious and unconscious recovery of *adat*. This is particularly evident in her focus on aspects of gender subjectivity and sexuality. Furthermore, her research investigates how this recovery may reintegrate archaic practices, such as magic or traditional healing, into contemporary social life.

Khoo's (2006) research differs from mine, as Khoo's (2006) research took a closer look at how Malaysian writers and filmmakers have struggled to understand and define themselves in the modern world, which can come in myriad forms. This multifaceted concept has brought about a problematic concatenation — mixing the interpretation of Islam with Malay adat — which, in turn, has influenced the process of defining genders in Malaysia. In contrast to Khoo's *Reclaiming Adat*, my research will not only examine how NEP affects the gender representation of *adat* in cinematic texts. Instead, my research attempts to show how Malaysian cinema is a product of Mahathir's hegemony, while the film portrays it with the filmmaker's contradiction consciousness'.

Prior, Khoo in 2004, had written a research article entitled *Gendering Old and New Malay through Malaysian auteur filmmaker U-Wei Haji Saari's literary adaptations, The Arsonist (1995) and Swing My Swing High, My Darling (2004)*. In this article, Khoo focuses on 'the tension between the individual and society, which is

heightened by state capitalism and the drive for economic success. Along the way, each film deconstructs the notion of the achievement and success of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971–90) and suggests that men and women manage and manifest their existential anxieties differently’ (p. 1).

In this article, Khoo (2004) posits that both films examine the tension between individuality and the collective Malay identity, particularly through the themes of movement and stasis. Notably, the representation of stasis is delineated by gender; male characters embodying traditional practices symbolise the Old Malay, while sophisticated female characters epitomise the New Malay (Khoo, 2004). This article may serve as a proto-*Reclaiming Adat*, as it endeavours to explore the discourse surrounding gender and the representation of Adat's recuperation in Malaysian cinema.

In her research, *Strangers within the (Imagined) Community*, Khoo Cheng Khoo (2002) examines significant themes about the representation of the kampung (village) in film. One key aspect she discusses is the manner in which filmmakers have contested the negative portrayals of kampung, particularly in the context of the evolving cinematic landscape since the end of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1990s. This perspective serves as a critical counterpoint to the established narratives found in Rahim Razali's filmography. For Khoo (2002), ‘the 1990s NEP generation remains more unique and serious in their exploration of Malay identity because of the major role the state, the NEP, and Mahathirism have played in altering Malay consciousness and society’ (p. 95). In addition to her film analysis, she examines Sabri Zain's Reformasi diary, *Face Off*, which I will not include in my research, as it addresses topics beyond the scope of my study.

However, Khoo's approach may have gone overboard when she interprets her selected films as a political allegory by claiming that ‘the unfair murder of Mamat's brother (in *Jogho*) by the sore loser in the bull arena may be interpreted to reflect Dr Mahathir's unfair treatment of Anwar.’ (p. 88). I want to emphasise that her interpretation represents a significant overreading, as there are no discernible signs or symbols within the film that can be linked to Mahathir or his motivations. Consequently, it is prudent to view this interpretation as imprecise. It is essential to consider both the factual and historical context, alongside the film's background, to interpret and relate it to a genuine political context.

In *Cinema: Film Made by Women: Malaysia*, Khoo (2009) analyses the response of female directors to the neo-resurgent Islam in Malaysia, noting that these

filmmakers created several films that critique religious hypocrisy. Specifically, Khoo (2009) observes that during the 1990s, many female filmmakers addressed the phenomenon of resurgent Islam—often equated with Arabization—by reclaiming adat, or Malay customs, which align more closely with liberal modernity and Western influences. Towards a particular juncture, Khoo (2009) highlighted several things that could be seen as related to Mahathirism, such as the female character in Suhaimi Baba's films who 'personified then Prime Minister Mahathir's vision of Malaysian Islam as one where Islam is compatible with reason and cultural modernity.' (p. 4). Her claim is substantiated by the portrayal of female characters in Suhaimi Baba's works, which reflect a blend of modernity and moderation. To embody these roles, Suhaimi often casts cosmopolitan Pan-Asian actresses, such as Deanna Yusoff. As for the film *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999), the character that Vanida Imran acted, Mustika, has been interpreted as 'the perfect symbol and mouthpiece of Mahathirist developmentalism able to reconcile and balance the modern and traditional roles of the Malay women, as well as to negotiate between adat and Islam' (p. 4). I argue that this does not represent the 'ideal' form of Mahathirist developmentalism but should be interpreted as a paradox within the film. From Mustika alone, we can identify the presence of both Mahathirist elements and counter-Mahathirist elements.

My concern is not the legitimacy of Khoo's (2009) work. As previously mentioned, this research aims to illustrate how the hegemony of Mahathirism has influenced Malaysian cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in films that reflect a contradictory nature. This contradiction embodies a 'contradictory consciousness' formed in the minds of those subjected to Mahathir's hegemony. I conclude that Khoo's research (2002, 2006, 2009) does not utilise Mahathirism as a framework, despite her argument that the films of the 1990s respond to Malaysia's sociopolitical landscape. Instead, Khoo tends to focus on the operation of gender within these films, interpreting them as manifestations of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the processes of modernisation, including Islamization. In contrast, I intend to broaden the discussion by emphasising the discourse of Mahathirism rather than concentrating solely on gender and Malay identity.

A notable academic figure who explored Malaysian cinema from the 1980s to the 1990s is Zawawi Ibrahim, who authored the article "On Erma Fatima's *The Last Malay Woman*" (2004). Zawawi (2004) looks at the film *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* as a postcolonial journey of reclaiming Malayness in the context of

globalisation/modernity and Islamic revivalism mediated through a gendered subtext.’ Zawawi (2004) examines Malaysian cinema through a gendered lens. While Zawawi references Mahathir’s speeches as depicted in the films, his analysis does not engage with how these films respond to Mahathirism. In essence, Zawawi (2004) does not utilize Mahathirism as a theoretical framework for this discussion.

In a separate study, Zawawi (2003) analyses Malaysian cinema through a postcolonial lens, examines the influence of colonialism on the construction of national identity, noting that colonialism imposed rigid definitions of race and ethnicity. Prior to the advent of colonialism, individuals were not categorised in such a strict fashion; rather, their identities were characterised by fluidity, flexibility, and pluralism. Building on these findings, Zawawi (2004) emphasises the colonial perspective on race, particularly in the context of Malaysia's National Economic Policy and National Culture Policy.

Three films, *Kaki Bakar* (1995), *Isteri, Perempuan dan...* (1993), and *Jogho* (1999), have been interpreted as critiques of the dominant narratives established by the National Culture Policy, which relies on a stringent definition of Malay identity and Malayness. The character Zaleha in *Isteri, Perempuan dan...* exemplifies an alternative portrayal of Malay women, diverging from the gender stereotypes prevalent in Malay society. Zaleha is depicted as a woman with aspirations for emancipation and liberalisation, positioning her as an outlier among the majority of Malay women. Similarly, Kakang in *Kaki Bakar* and Mamat in *Jogho* are portrayed as individuals alienated from their respective societies, reflecting a shared experience of isolation influenced by factors such as race and ideology. Kakang, a Javanese man, finds himself ensnared in a materialistic Malay society, while Mamat, a Malay from Kelantan, Malaysia, is confined within the Malay community in Thailand's Pattani region.

Another study by Zawawi Ibrahim explores the intricate relationship between film and identity in an article titled *The Beginning of Neo-Realist Imaginings in Malaysian Cinema: A Critical Appraisal of Malay Modernity and Representation of Malayness in Rahim Films*. The insightful interview between the author and the filmmaker, Rahim Razali, offers a substantial perspective on Razali’s views regarding Mahathir, particularly in how Mahathir’s ideologies influence some of his films. I contend that Zawawi's (2007) assertion that Rahim Razali’s films represent Neo-Realism is fundamentally flawed because it lacks sufficient evidentiary support. Rahim's filmmaking approach deviates from Neo-Realist principles, given that the

aesthetic elements of his films do not align with those outlined in the Neo-Realist framework. Nevertheless, I concur with Zawawi (2007) that Rahim's films engage with pertinent issues surrounding Malay identity during and after the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

In addition to reviewing the prior research conducted by Khoo Khoo Cheng and Zawawi Ibrahim, I am also examining the article by Juliana and Mahyuddin (2009). This work endeavours to analyse three box office films produced by Malaysian filmmakers, positing that these films encapsulate a prevailing ideology. However, it is noteworthy that Juliana and Mahyuddin (2009) do not provide a localized context within their theoretical framework, despite offering an extensive discussion of the Marxist theory of ideology. I contend that contextualizing the theoretical framework is essential to ensure a rigorous analysis and to forge a connection between the text and broader societal issues. It is critical to recognise that the dominant ideology perceived by Marx during his era differs significantly from the contemporary circumstances in Malaysia. Consequently, it is imperative to apply Marxist theory and recontextualize it within the local context. My assertion regarding the presence of Mahathirism in Malaysian cinema represents an ideological approach to localising research on Malaysian cinema.

In contrast, while Juliana and Mahyuddin (2009) strive to produce an autonomous article from a Marxist perspective, they remain constrained by the prevailing authority, adhering to what can be described as a 'safe mode' in their approach. This assertion is based on their omission of a discussion of the hegemony of the dominant class in Malaysia, particularly regarding how the dominant ideology perpetuated by UMNO has become deeply ingrained in Malaysian society. Furthermore, their article lacks an exploration of the impact of repressive and ideological state apparatuses on societal consciousness and the film industry. Instead, Juliana and Mahyuddin (2009) express their discontent with Malaysian filmmakers who continue to produce 'safe products' in the film industry.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter investigates the theoretical frameworks surrounding Mahathirism and its synthesis with the concept of hegemony. It begins by emphasising the importance of studying Mahathirism to understand Malaysian cinema, proposing that interpretations of Mahathirism in this context extend beyond binary perspectives of pro-

Mahathirism and anti-Mahathirism. This approach incorporates the concept of hegemony, as framed by Antonio Gramsci. Through an examination of distinctive characteristics and innovations in Malaysian cinema during Mahathir's premiership, it is posited that Malaysian cinema consistently reflects the zeitgeist of the periods associated with Mahathirism as elaborated by Hilley (2000). These periods are categorised into four phases: Early Mahathirism, Mid-Mahathirism, Late Mahathirism, and Crisis Mahathirism.

To ascertain the distinctiveness of Mahathirism, I reviewed existing literature on prominent leaders from the 1980s in various countries, including Suharto of Indonesia, Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom, and Ronald Reagan of the United States. Given that all these leaders align with right-wing, neo-conservative, and neoliberal ideologies, they have generated predominantly homogeneous cultural products within their respective local contexts. However, Mahathirism presents a notable novelty through its paradoxical elements, as articulated by Khoo Boo Teik (1995, 2003). In the realm of cinematic texts, the distinction of Malaysian cinema under Mahathirism lies in its propensity to embody contradictions, which I describe as 'contradictory consciousness.' In exploring the discourse surrounding Mahathirism within the Malaysian literary canon, I endeavour to examine existing research that addresses the intersections of politics and power within Malaysian films. My findings indicate that discussions surrounding Mahathirism are significantly obscured.

In the upcoming chapter, titled *The History of Malaysian cinema through the lens of Ideology and Politics*, I will present a comprehensive historical overview of Malaysian cinema. This narrative will trace the evolution from the introduction of films and cinema in British Malaya to the formation of film studios in Singapore, which were predominantly controlled by Chinese entrepreneurs, including those from Hong Kong such as Shaw Brothers, as well as local Malayan Chinese.

Moreover, my analysis will transcend a mere recounting of historical events; it will critically engage with the ideologies and hegemonic forces that have influenced both the cinematic landscape and society at large during the industry's evolution. Additionally, particular emphasis will be placed on the Malaysian film industry during the 1980s and 1990s. This period marked the establishment of the Malaysian Film National Development Corporation, or Finas, spearheaded by Mahathir when he served as the Minister of Trade and Industry in the 1980s. He intended to encourage Malay

filmmakers to recognise the potential of cinema as a viable economic avenue and a form of capitalistic production.

CHAPTER 3

THE HISTORY OF MALAYSIAN CINEMA

THROUGH THE LENS OF IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS

3.1 Classical Literature and Modern Malay Narratives

In examining the historical progression of Malay and Malaysian cinema, various scholars endeavour to contextualise the tradition of *wayang kulit*, or shadow puppetry, as a foundational element of cinema within the framework of Malay and, by extension, Asian civilization (refer to Hatta Azad Khan [1994], Norman Yusoff [2012], Hassan Muthalib [2014, 2017], and Khoo Khoo Cheng [2006]). For the aim of this research, I intend to establish a connection between the tradition of Malay literature, particularly the hikayat (epic) and the ‘mirror for the prince’ genre, and the concomitant tradition of ideological and political discourse manifested in cinema.

It is important to reference the Malay hikayat, such as *Sulalatus Salatin* (Malay Annals), which portrays fidelity and obedience to the King through a mythical social contract (Cheah, 2002). The narrative unfolds at Bukit Siguntang and features King Sri Tri Buana and the minor king, Demang Lebar Daun. According to Cheah (2002), this *waadat* between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun represents the earliest example of a ‘social contract’. In this mythical social contract, the minor king, Demang Lebar Daun, submits the demands of Sri Tri Buana, establishing that the inhabitants of Demang Lebar Daun—specifically, the Malays—shall remain perpetually subject to the authority of Majesty Sri Tri Buana, contingent upon certain conditions that ‘they (the subject) must be treated well by your (Sri Tri Buana) descendants’ (Cheah, [2002, p. 74]). As a result, the King, Sri Tri Buana, agrees, but he asks, ‘the Malay should not rebel against him or his descendants (Sri Tri Buana and his descendants), no matter how tyrannical they are or how evil they (the ruler) behave’. (Cheah, [2002, p. 74]).

Although Cheah (2001) contends that this *Waadat* promotes human rights through the framework of *hukum syarak* (Islamic Law) regarding the relationship between ruler and subject, this ‘social contract’ has become deeply ingrained in the Malay psyche, emphasising obedience to the ruler and authorities. In light of this perspective, I argue that this *Waadat* represents a form of hegemony, aligning with Gramsci’s notion of ‘common sense’ among the populace. Cheah (2002) highlights that

the agreements between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun occurred long before the introduction of Islam in the Melaka Kingdom. Ironically, both figures based their arguments on significant Islamic texts, namely the Quran and Hadith. This indicates that the author of the *Sulalatus Salatin* was aware of the Islamic sentiments among the Malays at the time the literary work was produced, yet chose to exploit them. Although this 'social contract' delineates rights for the subjects, its underlying objective is to preserve the status quo and the monarch's authority while deterring insubordination among the subjects.

The mechanisms of hegemony within contemporary Malaysian society are now precise, as they are deeply entrenched in the folklore and collective psyche of the Malay population, which constitutes the majority of the demographic. In light of the above mentions, during the Malacca Sultanate era, 'the subjects derived their social, cultural, and religious identity from the king' (Khoo [2006, p. 33]), but in present Malaysia, the people look for political guidance and protection of their socio-economic and cultural rights from UMNO (Khoo, 2006). Khoo (2006) posits that the antagonism between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat serves as a cyclical metaphor for Malaysian politics. In this context, I suggest that the *waadat*, or 'social contract,' between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun can similarly be viewed as a cyclical metaphor for contemporary Malay politics. To a significant degree, the conflict between Hang Jebat and Hang Tuah can be understood as a manifestation of the *waadat* cycle between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun.

In contrast to *Sulalatus Salatin*, *Taj Uj-Salatin*, authored by Bukhara Al-Jauhari, represents a significant example of Malay literature that diverges from the apologetic portrayal of Malay rulers. It stands out as one of the few literary works that challenge the narrative presented in *Sejarah Melayu* (Farish, 1999). Furthermore, *Taj Uj Salatin* is recognised as one of the early literary texts addressing themes of governance and justice from a critical Islamic perspective (Farish, 1999). Farish (1999) posits that Al-Jauhari advocates for the death penalty for unjust rulers, a notion considered quite radical during the Malay feudal period. Additionally, *Taj Uj Salatin* has exerted considerable influence within both Malay and Javanese courts (Farish A. Noor, 1999). The text is composed in simple language and a realistic style, starkly devoid of gods, demigods, heroes, or monsters, instead emphasising the experiences and actions of ordinary human beings (Farish, 1999).

Another significant literary work deserving attention is Raja Ali Haji's, a prominent Malay-Muslim scholar. According to Khalif Muammar (2016), the genre known as 'mirror for the prince'—referred to in Malay literature as *nasihat al muluk* (advice for the leader) or as *ketatanegaraan*, which translates to politics—has been present in the Malay Archipelago long before the establishment of modern nations in Southeast Asia. In his analysis, Khalif (2016) examines two notable works by Raja Ali Haji: *Thammarat Al-Muhimmah* and *Muqadimmah fi Iltizam Waza'if al-Malik*. Both texts are recognised as contributions to the field of *ketatanegaraan*. Specifically, in *Thammarat*, Chapter 1, Section 4, Raja Ali Haji provides guidelines (*kayfiyat*) on the process of abdication for the King and other rulers. Khalif (2016) note that this *fasal* exists because, '*sejak kedatangan Islam pada abad ke-9 Masihi raja tidak lagi memiliki kuasa yang mutlak kerana kuasanya tertaluk kepada hukum Allah SWT*' (After Islam came in 9 A.D., the Malay Kings no longer held total power because their authority was subject to Allah SWT's law Khalif) (p. 61). Given that this type of literary work (advice to the King) is currently not widely popularised or integrated into public discourse, a study of Raja Ali Haji's *Thammarat* and *Muqadimmah* is crucial for demonstrating that political writings exist within the Malay literary tradition, extending beyond merely fantastic stories and epics.

In the 19th century, Munshi Abdullah, whose *Taj Uj Salatin* inspired Buchara al-Jauhari's *Hikayat Abdullah* (Abdullah's Story) and *Kesah Pelayaran Abdullah* (Abdullah's Sailing Story). These works serve as primary sources that illustrate the ethical decay evident within the Malay Sultanate court of East Malaya (Farish, 1999). According to Abdullah, Malay rulers predominantly sought to enrich themselves and their families, often resulting in the abuse of power. (Farish, 1999). Abdullah, like Buchara al-Jauhari, employs a realistic and candid writing style to expose the weaknesses of Malay courts (Farish, 1999). Given that the fantastic and poetic imagery is synonymous with the court's literary works, Abdullah's realistic and honest style is also a critical practice in Malay literature, establishing a new stage for the evolution of the Malay literary tradition (Farish, 1999).

During the Japanese army's invasion of Malaya, the number of writers who were able to publish literary works diminished significantly due to the severe repression of printed media imposed by the Japanese forces (Usman & Ismail, 1983). Usman and Ismail (1983) also argue that the lack of discourse surrounding poverty issues was a

direct consequence of this media suppression during that period. Following World War II and the Japanese occupation, a nationalist movement emerged in Malaya.

This anti-colonial movement was not solely driven by nationalist organisations such as UMNO, MCA, and MIC; it also included leftist activists and labour unions (Usman & Ismail, 1979). This socio-political environment ultimately facilitated the formation of Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50), also known as the 50 Literary Movement (Usman & Ismail, 1979). The writers associated with ASAS 50 infused themes of patriotism, nationalism, and anti-colonialism into their works, embodying the philosophy of *seni untuk masyarakat* or ‘arts for society.’ The movement declined after Singapore separated from Malaysia, as ASAS 50 was founded in Singapore, leading to the cessation of many Malay publications and literary enterprises that had originated there (Syed Husin Ali, 2021).

During Mahathir’s premiership, the Malay national laureate, Shahnnon Ahmad, authored a satirical novel titled *Shit*, which became a bestseller in 1999 before being subsequently banned by the government (Cheah, 2001). Shahnnon’s insurrectionist sentiments towards Mahathir, beyond the personal, are further illustrated by his involvement in partisan politics; he was a member of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and later served as the Member of Parliament for Sik in the Kedah constituency (Cheah, 2001). The directness and acerbity characteristic of Shahnnon as a political novelist are evident in his works from the 1980s and 1990s (Faizal, 2014). Prior to the publication of *Shit*, Shahnnon had written several politically charged novels, including *Tunggul-tunggul Gerigis* (1988), which satirised the Memali incident, as well as *Sutan Baginda* (1989) and *Patriarch* (1991) (Faizal, 2014).

In the context of local literature, it is evident that literary works express political and ideological subjects with notable variation and some inconsistencies. For example, during the sultanate era, it is surprising to note that only a limited number of literary works concentrate on the leader or monarchy within the Islamic context, including guidelines or protocols for abdication of the ruler. Nonetheless, certain *hikayat* written for the Sultan and the court during the feudal era undeniably uphold and portray the Sultan's glory and the political systems under his authority (Anuar Nor Arai, 2007, p. 27). The emergence of Islam in the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) can be understood through two distinct perspectives: 1) Its manipulation as a means to sustain the power of Malay rulers, exemplified by works such as *Sulalatus Salatin*, and 2) Its role in

enlightening the Malay populace regarding the abuses of power perpetrated by these rulers, as demonstrated in the writings of *Taj Uj Salatin* and Munshi Abdullah.

In modern literature, there are notable distinctions between the Japanese invasion era and the subsequent British administration of Malaya. Specifically, the absence of themes related to poverty and anti-imperial sentiments in Malay literature during the Japanese occupation can be attributed to the oppressive governance of the Japanese military. Conversely, during the British colonial period, both anti-British sentiment and the theme of poverty emerged prominently. It is crucial to recognise that the rise of the anti-colonial movement during the British Era garnered increasing attention from colonial authorities. This attention was driven not only by the efforts of local movements but also by the United Kingdom's transition towards decolonisation policies. The British sought to reform their colonial approach, shifting from a model of territorial imperialism to one of economic imperialism, commonly referred to as a 'commonwealth' (Rice, 2019).

During Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as Prime Minister, writers such as Shahnon Ahmad, along with others not explicitly named, were able to explore political themes, including literature that provided personal critiques of Mahathir himself. Furthermore, beyond its literary contributions, the *bangsawan*—a traditional Malay theatre influenced by Persian (*wayang Parsi*)—served as a propaganda tool for the Japanese military during the colonial era (Hassan, 2014). According to Hassan (2014), 'During the Japanese Occupation, Rahman Star Opera became Ohaiya Gozaimas Opera and was forced to perform stories celebrating the might of Japan' (p. 20). After World War II, *bangsawan* contributed to the nationalist movement and struggle when 'some *bangsawan* tropes gave performances in support of the agitation against the Malayan Union in 1948' (Hassan, 2014, p. 20).

However, at the beginning of the 1970s, the *bangsawan* returned to its form as a 'propaganda apparatus' when some *bangsawan* troupes sponsored by the government performed at FELDA settlements to educate the people (Hassan, 2014). According to Hassan (2014), the *bangsawan* troupes during this era anticipated the critical role of the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) in elucidating and disseminating government policies to the public. In light of the above, the relationship between *bangsawan* and Malay cinema is significant; not only did numerous players from *bangsawan* transition to careers in film studios, but the aesthetics and narrative techniques of Malay cinema were profoundly influenced by *bangsawan* traditions.

3.2 Discourse on the First Malay Film

In this section, I will present a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to the historical development of Malaysian cinema. I contend that scholars and writers have frequently approached the pursuit of identifying the earliest Malay films through an essentialist lens, which aligns with the prevailing discourse of nationalism, particularly in the context of Mahathirism. Consequently, rather than focusing exclusively on historical narratives, I will assess the perspectives of those who have chronicled the history of Malaysian cinema. This assessment will include an analysis of the viewpoints from which these narratives are constructed, the intended audience, and the modes of communication employed. Prior to engaging in a deeper analysis of the ideological representations within Malay cinema, it is imperative first to scrutinise the ‘origins’ of Malay cinema. This inquiry is essential, as the discourse surrounding ‘the first Malay film’ can shed light on the ideological foundations underpinning the historiography of Malaysian cinema.

Most scholarly sources (Jamil et al. [1993]; Hatta [1994]) assert that the first Malay-language film is *Laila Majnun* (B.S. Rajhan, 1933), an adaptation of an Arabic tale, according to Khoo (2006). Furthermore, Hassan Muthalib (2017) states that the first film produced in British Malaya was a Chinese film titled *Xin Ke* (The Immigrant, 1927). Thus, Malay films are not the first to be made locally, although it is undeniable that Malay cinema later experienced a golden era. I wish to redirect attention to the film *Laila Majnun*, as the status of this film as ‘the first Malay film made’ has been questioned and problematised by several scholars. Hatta (1994) argues that *Laila Majnun* is not the first local film because *Nelayan* (Fisherman) was made almost at the same time (p. 91), but Jamil, Hamzah, and Abdul Malik (1993) contend that *Nelayan* is not the first Malay film. They argued that the claim supporting this assertion relies on invalid sources. Considering the aforementioned issue, the film *Laila Majnun*, recognised as the first film in the Malay language, is empirically substantiated by a documented reference in the local newspaper (Jamil, Hamzah, and Abdul Malik, 1993).

Jamil, Hamzah, and Abdul Malik (1993) asserted that the inception of filmmaking in Malaya predates 1933, the year of the film ‘*Laila Majnun*’. However, it is important to note that a significant portion of the films produced during this period were documentaries that captured and explored various locations in Malaya. Jamil, Hamzah, and Abdul Malik (1993) noted that ‘those films are *Malayan Motor Roads* (1920), *Memories of Malacca* (1921), *Malay Nights* (1931) and *Malaysia* (1931)’ (p.

7). The film *Laila Majnun* is historically recognised as the first Malay film, taking into account its linguistic attributes and the participation of a Malay cast. However, Hassan (2017) challenges the concept of ‘Malayness’ inherent in *Laila Majnun*, by stating:

‘*Leila Majnun* (film) was only a film in the Malay language produced and directed by foreigners from India. Similarly, the pre-War and post-war films (as well as those directed by A.R Tompel and Haji Mahadi), were the products of foreign producers and foreign directors. I am in the opinion that Malay cinema *per se* only began with *Semerah Padi* (‘The Village of *Semerah Padi*’, 1956) directed by P. Ramlee. In this film, the authenticity of the Malay world can be discerned through mannerisms of characters, their traditional customs and as well as the visual look of the film.’

(p. 2)

This perspective may be understood as prioritising specific notions of cultural authenticity, as evidenced by the emphasis on the ‘authenticity of the Malay world’ in his evaluation of *Semerah Padi*. Nevertheless, the preceding statements reveal a potential tension within Hassan’s (2014) account, particularly when he observes that *bangsawan* and other performing arts ‘underwent changes or assimilated the traditional performing arts of other countries’ (p. 1). In addition to that, Hatta (1994) states:

‘Like *Nelayan*, *Booloo* was also not considered a Malay film even though names like Ratna Asmara and Fred Polin appeared among the cast (Zulkifli Ahmad, 1973;13). The substance and presentation were foreign to Malay customs, values and lifestyle.’

(p. 91)

Hatta’s (1994) previously mentioned assertion contrasts with Hamzah’s (2004) perspective, as Hamzah (2004) argues that *Nelayan* and *Laila Majnun* are ‘*titik mula kepada sejarah perfileman Melayu* (starting point for the Malay film history)’ (p. 11). Nonetheless, I contend that Hatta’s assertion reflects an essentialist perspective akin to that of Hassan (2014). Furthermore, this assertion serves as a microcosm of his thesis, *The Malay Cinema (1948 - 1989): Early History and Development in the Making of a National Cinema*. Hatta’s assertion presents challenges, as noted by Khoo (2006), as ‘the nationalism he (Hatta) perceives is not so much the “many-as-one” variety but more a specific autochthonous Malay nationalism’ (p. 100). This is proven in Hatta’s (1994) statement, which is

‘Films based on the multi-racial historical facts about the country such as Bukit Kepong (Jins Shamsuddin) and Yassin (Kamarul Ariffin) were not patronised by the non-Malays because they were regarded as being pro-Malay and pro-Muslim.’

(p. 341)

These perspectives mentioned above, whether conscious or subconscious, are influenced by the prevailing ideology that perceives ‘Malayness’ as an ‘essential’ quality. This dominant view disregards ‘Malayness’ as dynamic and fluid, instead positioning it as the core of national culture. The National Culture Policy (NCP), initiated in 1971, has predominantly focused on establishing Malay-Muslim culture and identity as the representation of national culture (Sumit, 2008). However, the term ‘national’ within the context of the NCP is not comprehensive enough to reflect the multicultural dynamics of Malaysia. It is primarily a Malay-Muslim centric policy that neglects the rich contributions of other ethnic cultures that have played a vital role in shaping the nation (Faisal, 2021; Sumit Mandal, 2008). Consequently, the national culture delineated by the government tends to reinforce the dominance of Malay-Muslim identity and political structures, benefiting primarily the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its political allies. This assertion is supported by Sumit (2008), who noted, ‘The reified notion of Malay culture promoted by the NCP has strongly shaped arts and cultural activities funded by the government’ (p. 282). In light of these issues, scholarly discourse surrounding the history of Malaysian cinema illustrates that the concept of ‘national culture’ has not only influenced artistic and cultural expressions but has also been subjected to critique by scholars studying the landscape of Malaysian cinema.

3.3 The De-Radicalisation of Malay Cinema During the Studio Era

In this section, I aim to present an overview of the historical context and political ideologies expressed in Malay cinema during the studio era, as well as the factors contributing to the de-radicalisation of Malay cinema. Historically, two primary factors have contributed to the de-radicalisation of Malay and Malaysian films. In addition to political influences, capitalism has played a significant role in the de-radicalisation process of Malay films. I will examine this issue further in the subsequent section by

discussing both the Studio Era (1945-1965) and the Bumiputera Era (1975-2000), which I refer to as the ‘Mahathirist Era of Malaysian cinema’, I would like to highlight the argument presented by Anuar Nor Arai (2007) in his essay entitled *P. Ramlee: Aspek Kemasyarakatan, Sinematografi dan Kepengarahan* (translated as *P. Ramlee: Societal Aspects, Cinematography, and Direction*):

‘Bagi mereka yang berada di luar sistem studio filem di Singapura, pemikiran politik dan sastera sudah jauh melangkau dalam fikiran Melayu untuk bebas daripada pengaruh penjajahan, tetapi dalam filem, masih berlinangan air mata. (While the political and literary ideas of the Malays outside the film studio system in Singapore had already moved towards liberation from colonial influence, films produced within the studio system still focused on tears and sorrow [my translation])’.

(pp. 19-20)

Anuar (2007) articulated that the film industry during the Studio Era of Malay cinema was distanced from prevailing political and ideological discourses. Anuar (2007) also emphasised that ‘*politik jauh terpinggir daripada medium filem* (politics is far from film medium)’ (p. 20). The term ‘politics’ utilised by Anuar (2007) in his essay predominantly critiques colonialism, wherein Malaya and Singapore are recognised as components of the British colonies. This critical perspective appears notably absent in Malay cinema during the Studio Era. Anuar’s (2007) perspective aligned with the opinion expressed by Hassan (2017):

‘In my opinion, Malay cinema then can only be regarded as an artificial cinema being only a construct of the studios that produced the films that were only meant as entertainment for the masses. Unlike Indonesian, Filipino and Thai cinema, there is no film then or till this day, that is critical of the British and their presence in the country as colonialists.’

(p. 2)

Despite the absence of overt political themes, it is essential to acknowledge that films from that era contain ideological critiques, often conveyed in subtle or implicit manners. For example, *purba* films produced during the studio era consistently engage in ideological discourse encompassing liberal versus conservative, royalist versus anti-royalist, and rebel versus rebellious narratives (Norman, 2021). According to Norman, the dual ideologies present in *purba* films not only confine royal interests but also reflect

the experiences of the proletariat. Furthermore, Norman (2021) emphasises that these *purba* films address issues pertinent to their narrative settings and the historical context of their production. Norman (2021) states:

‘For example, Amir Muhammad notes that *Panglima Besi* (Amin, 1964) is a *purba* film with an anti-war theme that definitely mirrored the turbulent period of the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation, as well as ‘lingering memories of World War 2 and the Emergency’. Van der Heide reads P. Ramlee’s *Semerah Padi* as ‘a proposal for the governance of the soon-to-be independent nation of Malaya’

(p. 214)

Additionally, two notable films, *Hang Tuah* (1958), directed by Phani Majumdar and *Jebat* (1961), directed by Hussein Haniff, serve as representations of the ideological landscape prevalent during their respective production periods (Norman, 2021). *Hang Tuah* illustrates the sentiments of the Malay nationalist movement following independence, while *Jebat* epitomises the emergence of leftist politics during the same era (Norman, 2021). Norman’s assertions provide an indirect counter to Anuar’s (2007) perspective regarding the purported absence of political ideology within Malay cinema. This discussion highlights that certain directors from the studio-era cinema demonstrated a keen awareness of the socio-political contexts in which they operated. This aligns with Hassan’s (2014) argument, where he states:

‘...approaches grounded in reality had already begun to emerge in the early 1950s when some Malay film directors like the legendary P. Ramlee, Hussein Haniff and M. Amin began helming productions that moved in tandem with the mainstream melodramas and tearjerkers.’

(p.3)

It is essential to consider multiple dimensions of Hassan’s argument. This necessity arises from the fact that Hassan’s statements risk discrediting the contributions of earlier directors in Malay cinema, including Phani Majumdar, K.M. Baskers, L. Krishnan, Lamberto Avellana, Ramon Stella, and others. Notably, these foreign directors have produced films that employ a more realistic approach, alongside conventional or Bollywood influences, as exemplified by the film *Mogok* (1958).

In contrast, I argue that the emergence of realistic and grounded filmmaking approaches in Malaysia during the 1950s can be closely linked to the decolonisation process (Bernard, 2009). Bernard (2009) posits that from 1955 to 1965, the complexities of decolonization became increasingly pronounced both on screen and off. For example, Bernard (2009) observes that the film *Penarek Beca* presents a narrative that encourages Malays to transcend fatalism, representing an aspiration for *merdeka* (independence). Furthermore, *Penarek Beca* also underscores the significance of Hang Jebat (1960) and other films that depict icons of *merdeka*. Notably, this aspiration for independence is rooted in the involvement of prominent Malay activists in the cinema, such as Jamil Sulong and Hamzah Hussin, who were previously writers for Malay publications (Bernard, 2009).

Nevertheless, concerning this issue, I concur with Anuar (2007) that filmmakers during the studio era did not create films featuring direct political criticism. In a subsequent essay titled *Hussein Haniff: Tafsiran Terhadap Politik Istana Dalam Filem Hang Jebat* (*Hussein Haniff: Interpretation on Court Politics in the Film Hang Jebat*), Anuar (2007) posits that Hussein Haniff, who developed the character of Hang Jebat by referencing that *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, made the film *Hang Jebat* (1961) with a narrative that '*tidak berani meminda paksi baharu yang telah wujud di alam Melayu*' (does not dare to portray a new political praxis that exists in the Malay world) (p. 43). According to Anuar, Hussein Haniff upheld the existing status quo, and Jebat, as depicted in the film, was characterised by weakness. Towards the end of his essay, Anuar (2007) questioned the film on '*Kenapakah mata Jebat tidak terpancar api dendam terhadap Tuah yang mengambil semula kebebasan rakyat dan dikembalikan kepada Sultan?*' (There is no evidence of vengeful intent in Jebat's gaze towards Tuah, as Tuah has restored the autonomy of the Sultan from people) (p.45).

In summary of Anuar's (2007) concept, the term "revolutionary" or "radical" pertains to the absence of 'politics' in Malay cinema. This assertion is grounded in the understanding that 'politics' or 'ideology' pervades film; however, the distinction lies in whether a film opposes the dominant ideology or aligns with it, thus contributing to a counter-establishment narrative. Consequently, if I apply the same analytical framework as Anuar (2007) to the film *Hang Jebat*, then K. M. Basker's *Mogok*, or *Strike* (1957) can be considered analogous to *Hang Jebat* (1961) concerning its ideological antagonism. In *Mogok*, the proletariat continually advocates for their rights, posing a potential strike at their workplace. Interestingly, the narrative reveals that the

source of the workers' exploitation is not the factory owner, but rather the middleman or manager who oversees operations. This narrative twist implies that, despite its Marxist underpinnings, *Mogok* attempts to present a more sanitized view of capitalism and the bourgeois class (through the character of the factory owner). Therefore, while it is arguable that 'revolutionary films' or 'radical films' may be absent in Malay cinema, this does not negate the presence of ideological and political discourse within Malay films.

Despite Anuar's argument, he overlooks several factors that compelled Malay films to adopt radical characteristics. Given these considerations, it is imperative to examine the elements that necessitate the existence of revolutionary films within Malay cinema. I contend that two key factors contribute to this phenomenon: the political factor and the capitalist factor. The political factor encompasses censorship, which aligns with Althusser's conception of the repressive state apparatus that often results in self-censorship among filmmakers. According to Hassan (2014), policies instituted by the British 'effectively denied the locals from criticising the British or their policies' (p. 47), a point that will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section on censorship.

Conversely, the capitalist factor, as noted by Hassan (2014), posits that the Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris 'were only businessmen and did not want to have any problem with authorities, especially with the chairman of the Censorship Board, Jack Evans, an Englishman' (p. 47). I further argue that these two factors persist as foundational elements influencing films produced during the 1980s and 1990s, embedding them within Mahathir's hegemonic framework.

3.4 Censorship and Its Legacy of Colonial Rule

'It began by acknowledging that the cinema is not merely a form of entertainment but, in addition, a powerful instrument of education in the widest sense of that term; and even where it is not used avowedly for purposes of instruction, advertisement, or propaganda, it exercises indirectly a great influence in shaping the ideas of the very large numbers to whom it appeals. Its potentialities in this respect are almost unlimited.'

- Imperial Conference, November 1926 (in Stevenson [1974, p. 213])

The United Kingdom is often characterized as having the most stringent censorship laws in the Western world (Wan Amizah WM et al., 2013). Robertson (in Wan Amizah WM et al., 2013) asserts that British film censorship maintains the sovereignty of Parliament, managed by a select group of the educated elite who perceive themselves as morally superior to the uneducated populace. Consequently, as a former colonial power, the UK perpetuates a similar ideological framework within its colonies, including British Malaya (Wan Amizah WM et al., 2013).

In Wan Abdul Kadir's analysis (as cited in Wan Amizah WM et al., 2013), it is noted that Western films during the colonial era had detrimental effects on local populations. However, this concern was not the primary catalyst for the British authorities to enhance and enforce stricter censorship in British Malaya. The discourse surrounding censorship emerged notably when foreign films, particularly American productions, began to dominate the cinematic landscape in Malaya (Stevenson, 1974). The colonial administration faced significant challenges regarding the portrayal of white individuals in American films, which they perceived as undermining the 'prestige' of the white race (Stevenson, 1974). Furthermore, Sir Hesketh Bell, then governor of Mauritius, expressed apprehensions that cinema had evolved into a tool for communist propaganda. This was articulated in his article titled *The Cinema in the East: Factor in the Spread of Communism* (Stevenson, 1974). Concurrently, the European community residing in British Malaya expressed concerns regarding the representation and dignity of their women within the colonial context. This was largely due to the sexualized depictions of white women in American and European films, coupled with anxieties surrounding interracial relationships, particularly the interactions between white women and men of colour, which ultimately contributed to the imposition of stricter cinema censorship measures (Stevenson, 1974).

According to Stevenson (1974), the control of cinema in the Straits Settlements was notably robust, as Governor Laurence Guillemard had assured the Colonial Office of this fact in April 1925. Stevenson (1974) further notes that the Straits Government enacted Ordinance No. 200 (Cinematograph Films), which facilitated the establishment of the Official Censor of Cinematograph Films, bestowing him with extensive powers in 1923. Initially, the responsibility for censorship resided within the Police Department (Stevenson, 1974). During the Imperial Conference of 1926, the Sub-Committee reviewing cinematic matters articulated their significant concerns, as noted in Stevenson (1974):

‘First, foreign films frequently misrepresented “several parts of the Empire and the habits of its peoples.” Secondly, the constant showing of foreign scenes and settings powerfully advertised “(the more effectively because indirectly) foreign countries and their products.’

(p. 213)

In 1925, it was reported that twelve per cent of films entering the Colony and the Federated Malay States were entirely prohibited, while objectionable segments were edited from ninety per cent of the remaining films. A correspondence from the *Morning Post* in October 1927 indicated that over the preceding eight months, the Official Censor in Malaya had banned 128 films as being ‘unsuitable for exhibition to Eastern audiences’ (Stevenson, 1974). Captain T. M. Hussey, the Official Censor, noted in an interview with the *Manchester Guardian* in 1925 that there were few guidelines in British censorship, despite the absence of any officially published standards (Stevenson, 1974). Hussey (in Stevenson, 1974) stated:

‘Films portraying ‘dress immodesty’, he thought was the first and most important group (to be banned or censored), adding “Every Western woman is immodest from an Eastern point of view. [Asian] respect for Western standards will disappear if we allow these falsifications to be broadly screened.” Next, he said, he would cut all films which showed methods used by criminals. He claimed that he had “definite evidence” that Chinese in Singapore had successfully used methods adopted from the screen. He also named gambling scenes as taboo because the Chinese, who had “a passion for Gambling,” were stimulated by seeing the “best people” on the screen gamble with great success. Lastly, he cited the “surprising” number of films exported to the East which “actually show intimate inter-racial marriages and attachments. [Adding] Of course, all that has to be stopped.’

(pp. 215-216)

Hussey (in Stevenson, 1974) concluded the interview by asserting that cinema control was ‘one of the most important decisions to be made in Eastern politics today’ (p. 216). However, despite the stringent censorship and regulation of film distribution in Malaya, the outcomes sometimes diverged from colonial expectations.

For example, during the 1950s, audiences frequently challenged or rejected the intended governmental messages conveyed in films (Rice, 2019). At the height of ‘the Emergency’, which arose from a decade-long conflict between colonial authorities and

what they referred to as ‘Communist Terrorists’, the government cancelled screenings of *1955: The Year in Malaya* (Rice, 2019). Rice (2019) notes that ‘While (the film) was intended as a piece of anti-communist propaganda, the colonial government balked when newspapers reported cinemagoers applauding the onscreen appearance of communist leader Chin Peng’ (p. 95). This incident illustrates that films are often interpreted in unforeseen ways.

Flash forward, it is often asserted that history tends to repeat itself. In the post-independence era, although censorship has been lifted from the Police Department, oversight remains under the Ministry of Home Affairs, which supervises the Royal Malaysian Police. According to Khoo (2006), the National Film Censorship Board, known as Lembaga Penapis Filem Malaysia (LPFM), was established in June 1966 under Section 3 of the Film Act (Censorship) of 1952. This board is also located within the Ministry of Home Affairs, with Mahathir, who is the Prime Minister, overseeing its operations and the establishment of FINAS. For Khoo (2006), ‘although there are shared principles, colonial policies are substantively different from policies effected by the post-independence Malaysian government, and later during the NEP era’ (p. 107). The LPF’s objective is to ‘regulate and censor local and imported films prior to distribution and viewing’ (Khoo, 2006, p. 107).

Khoo (2006) in *Reclaiming Adat*, characterised Malaysian cinema as a ‘Cinema of Denial’, attributing this label to the influence of political leaders on decisions regarding mass and pop culture. Notably, during the Mahathir administration, inconsistencies emerged within the censorship framework concerning previously defined ‘sensitive’ issues. Unlike the unequivocal interventions of figures like Lenin, Stalin, Suharto, who notably influenced Indonesian horror cinema, or Kim Jong Il, whose writings in "On the Art of Cinema" reflect a profound appreciation for the medium, Mahathir’s engagement with cinema censorship was less direct. His limited interest in cinema as an artistic form, coupled with a focus on development projects centred on science and capitalism, underscores this distinction. The establishment of the Film National Corporation of Malaysia (FINAS) can thus be interpreted as reflecting its capitalist motivations rather than a genuine commitment to the cinematic arts. Nevertheless, it is essential to examine specific instances of Mahathir’s intervention in censorship matters, as they highlight the prevailing inconsistencies within Malaysian cinema censorship.

Khoo (2006) recorded Mahathir's intervention in film censorship. Khoo (2006) disagreed with Hatta's (1994) thesis, *Malay Cinema*, which merely criticised Malaysian films for failing to address real-life issues such as corruption, poverty, or politics. Khoo (2003) argues that Hatta's approach appears to lack thoroughness, as his argument does not adequately address the issues surrounding censorship and is based on a vague and inconsistent set of guidelines. This is proven when Khoo (2006) states:

‘...the American film *Babe*, about the adventure of talking pig, was nearly banned from Malaysian cinema because its protagonist was an animal deemed dirty and non-halal by Muslims. It was the intervention of then deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, that permitted the film to be shown. A ban of *Amok* too was lifted only after the “powers-that-be” (Al-Attas 1996, 15), the prime minister and minister of home affairs, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, intervened (Fuziah and Raja Ahmad 1995, 72).’

(p. 108)

Khoo (2006) asserts, ‘Some of the films that have suffered from the “scissor-happy” board include *Fantasia* (renamed *Fantasi*) (1991), *Amok* (1995), *Perempuan, Isteri Dan ...?* (1993), *Kaki Bakar* (1995), and *Panas* (Heat, 1998)’ (p. 106). Censorship plays a significant role in shaping Malaysian cinema; however, the LPFM's targets are perceived as arbitrary, and its implementation is inconsistent (Khoo, 2006). Despite the implementation of the ‘VHSC policy’ in 1995, which bans violence, horror, sex, and countercultural content across all media, certain films that feature these elements continue to be screened in cinemas and distributed on VHS. The prevalence of horror films during this period, whether or not they incorporate Islamic elements, is noteworthy. For instance, *Rahsia* (Othman Hafsham, 1987) illustrates that human beings can be more dangerous and malevolent than ghosts, although it attempts to convey a sense of ‘restoring order.’ Interestingly, the conflict in *Rahsia* does not resolve through the intervention of a Ustaz or religious figures, a theme similarly observed in other horror films such as *Dendam Dari Pusara* (1983), directed by Ahmad Mahmud.

In analysing the relationship between Mahathir, censorship, and cinema, a notable paradox emerges. While Mahathir generally disdains art, including cinema, viewing it as a potential disruptor of his aspirations, he paradoxically recognises its potential as a medium to promote those same aspirations. This argument may enrich the discourse surrounding Mahathirism in Malaysian cinema.

3.5 From the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) to Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM)

In addition to analysing ideology and political approaches within Malay cinema, it is crucial to briefly discuss the film unit established during the colonial era, initially known as the Crown Film Unit, which later evolved into the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) and ultimately became Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM) after several years of independence. This discussion is significant as this unit not only served as the colonial government's official apparatus for propaganda but was also inherited by Malaysia following its independence. The Malayan Film Unit was established in 1946 and utilised surplus military film equipment (Bernard, 2009). After several decades of producing documentaries, the MFU released its first feature film, *Abu Nawas* (1954), directed by Cyril Randall (Hassan, 2017). Hassan (2017) said, 'this film was part of the psy-war strategy to counter the communist insurrection' (p. 2). The MFU, which later transformed into FNM, produced several notable feature films, including one of my case studies, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (Heartbroken), which I argue serves as a subtle form of propaganda in support of Mahathirist modernisation of medicine among rural populations. Hence, the function of this unit has remained consistent since the colonial period.

The Malayan Film Unit (MFU) was not only the first self-contained information unit but also the largest in the British colonies (Hassan, 2014). Established by the British colonial government in 1946, the MFU was created to produce documentaries intended to serve as a means of propaganda and to promote the British agenda (Hassan, 2014). As noted by Rice (2019), the Emergency in Malaya significantly influenced the MFU's operations and activities. In its initial three years, the MFU produced a total of nineteen films. By 1950, it had become an integral component of the government's Emergency propaganda campaign, producing 52 films that year, followed by an impressive 111 the following year.

The earliest local staff of the MFU consisted of individuals who had previously collaborated with Ralph Elton, a former film director of the Crown Film Unit (Hassan, 2014). During this period, local film workers in Singapore were acquiring skills while working alongside Indian, Filipino, and Chinese professionals. In contrast, their counterparts in Kuala Lumpur worked closely with British personnel, learning from their expertise (p. 79). According to Hassan (2014), of the 135 men and women employed at the MFU, only six had prior film experience before joining the unit. The

demographic composition included 70 Malays, 30 Chinese, 22 Indians, 9 Eurasians, and 4 Europeans (p. 79).

As a propaganda unit, MFU stated in its catalogue (Hassan, 2014) that its mission and functions are to:

‘(a) to help Malaysians of all races to understand the ways of living and the problems of other Malaysians; (b) to combat illiteracy, and (c) to promote public education and information among all groups of the community and its people, and its people, and to assist their progress towards self-government.’

(p. 80)

Almost all the documentaries made by the MFU were ‘propagandistic in nature, portraying the British as being genuinely interested in the welfare of the public’ (p. 80). In 1952, Sir Gerald Templer arrived in Malaya and implemented two strategies of warfare against the Malayan Communist Party: physical and psychological (Hassan, 2014). Law enforcement agencies conduct the former, while the latter relies on various forms of media, including radio, film, and print newspapers, to effectively engage the populace and cultivate their support.

In 1954, the Malaysian Film Unit (MFU) commenced production of its inaugural feature-length film, *Abu Nawas* (Cyril Randal, 1954), aiming to engage the public and the Malay community more effectively. The narrative of *Abu Nawas* revolves around the experiences of a Malay family that is harassed and abducted by communist forces. With the assistance of Abu Nawas, portrayed by Ismail Mukassaim, and the police, the communist hideout is successfully raided, leading to the liberation of the family. According to Hassan (2014), Malays were perceived as allies of the British (depicted as the protagonists) in the opposition against communists (identified as the antagonists), thereby enabling Malays and various ethnic groups to preserve their harmonious way of life (p. 83).

The irony concerning the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) lies in its persistent role as a propaganda tool for British narratives even after the independence of Malaya. This assertion is evidenced by the film *Merdeka for Malaya*, which was produced merely five months following Malaya's independence on August 17, 1957 (Rice, 2019). *Merdeka for Malaya* ‘positively celebrates continued British influence, whether through shots of colonial architecture and sporting events or through the commentary,

which notes the continued “close cooperation” between Britain and the Federation of Malaya’ (Rice, 2019, pp. 233-234). Notably, the elements that extend beyond the frame are concealed, as any opposition or conflict is overshadowed by a narrative centred on racial harmony and efforts toward nation-building (Rice, 2019). According to Rice (2019), ‘the commentary offers one brief mention (and in the past tense) of the Emergency, thanking the troops that helped “rid the country of Communist terrorism” (p. 234).

Rice (2019) also notes that the British are remembered with ‘gratitude’ for their assistance ‘down our long path to nationhood’ (p. 234). The analysis reveals that the documentary *Merdeka for Malaya* does not merely commemorate a significant national ceremony; it also carefully constructs a narrative of ‘loss’ by emphasising the British commitment to the region (Rice, 2019). According to Rice (2019), ‘these films, and the events they depict, seek to perpetuate, to encourage continuity while visually marking this moment of change’ (p. 234). This documentary received an award at the 5th Asian Film Festival in Manila. In 2021, coinciding with Malaysian Independence Day, the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) restored and uploaded the remastered version on their YouTube channel. This action signifies an official endorsement of the narrative presented in the documentary.

According to Bernard (2009), in 1950, Shaw Brothers were willing to screen films produced by MFU. However, as Bernard (2009) stated, ‘Films that the MFU produced, however, had little impact on the larger culture’ (p. 72). The power to spread messages through film remained in the hands of the Shaw Brothers and Cathay, and their network of cinemas’ (p. 72). In 1963, coinciding with the establishment of Malaysia, the Malaysian Film Unit (MFU) was rebranded as Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM). This transition occurred under the leadership of Mohamad Zain Hussein, an esteemed documentary director known for works such as *Timeless Temiar* and *Hassan Homecoming*. During this period, FNM produced several feature-length films, including *Kisah Kampong Kita*, *Tongkat Hitam*, *Nine Lives has Zainal*, *Gelombang*, and *Dayang Suhana*, among others (Hassan, 2014). In 1981, with the support of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who was serving as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry at the time, the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) was established, leading to the merger of FNM with FINAS. However, by 2013, it was noted that FNM ‘...had ceased to exist in name. The studio was now merged with FINAS – the entity that FNM was supposed to have become’ (Hassan [2014, p. 97]).

3.6 The Dawn of the Golden Age of Malay Cinema

Despite the absence of ‘radical films’, the studio era is widely regarded as the pinnacle of Malay cinema. This illustrious period, however, was not perpetual; the industry subsequently encountered a phase of upheaval. Evidence suggests that between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, studios grappled with labour-related challenges, notably union strikes, resulting in a significant crisis in relations between management and employees from 1957 to 1967 (Hatta [1997], Khoo [2006]. The competition between cinema and emerging technologies such as television significantly undermined the dominance of Malay cinema as the primary form of entertainment. Television was introduced in 1963, and American television programs began to captivate audiences (Khoo [2006]; M. Amin and Wahba [1998]). Researchers of Malay cinema, John Lent and Gordon Gray, further argue that additional factors contributing to the decline of cinema studios include their inability to compete with the Indonesian and other foreign markets (Khoo, 2006). Furthermore, socio-political and socio-economic instability played a significant role in the deterioration of the studio era, often referred to as the golden era of Malay cinema (Amin & Wahba, 1998). According to M. Amin and Wahba (1998):

‘Perpisahan Singapura daripada Malaysia turut memberi kesan pahit terhadap dunia perfileman Melayu. Krisis tersebut menyebabkan suasana politik dalam negara tidak stabil dan akibatnya banyak sector kehidupan terutama ekonomi turut terjejas dengan peritnya (The separation of Malaysia and Singapore had a detrimental impact on Malay cinema, inducing a sense of bitterness. This crisis has contributed to political instability, which in turn has adversely affected various sectors, particularly the economy [my translation]).’

(p. 56)

The political unrest between Malaysia and the Singaporean government, coupled with declining prices for rubber and tin, significantly affected the financial stability of individuals and the overall economy during that period (M. Amin & Wahba, 1998). The resulting recession led to a shift in consumer behaviour, where individuals began to ration their spending and reduce their budgets for entertainment, including cinema outings (M. Amin & Wahba, 1998). Furthermore, a documentary produced by the History Channel highlights that Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew mandated that Shaw Brothers and their studios vacate Singapore following the separation of Malaysia and

Singapore. This decision was influenced by Kuan Yew's discontent with the workers' union in Singapore, of which P. Ramlee and other studio employees were members during that time.

In 1958, significant concerns led to the separation of Ho Ah Loke from Loke Wan Tho within Cathay Keris (Bernard, 2009). A critical factor in Ho's resignation was the appointment of Sir Percy McNiece to a high administrative role within the Cathay Organisation; prior to this role, McNiece was a member of the Cinematograph Films Appeal Committee, which later became the Censorship Board (Bernard, 2009). Following Ho Ah Loke's departure, Loke Wan Tho appointed Thomas Hodge, who had previously served as the Regional Information Officer for the Colonial Office in Singapore, as Ho's successor (Bernard, 2009). According to Bernard (2009), Hodge exhibited a lack of respect for local sensibilities, a disposition that continued during his leadership of Cathay Keris, thereby fostering conflict and animosity. During the 1960s, Cathay Keris faced challenges in establishing the direction of both the studio and Malay cinema (Bernard, 2009). After a series of unprofitable Malay films, Hodge issued a memo declaring that 'no more cultural films will be made at this studio' and this decision not only signalled the conclusion of the Golden Age of Malay cinema but also marked the end of Malay cinema in Singapore (Bernard, 2009).

The migration of Shaw Brothers and various professionals from the Malay cinema sector to Merdeka Studio in Kuala Lumpur represents a pivotal transition in the landscape of Malaysian cinema. However, this shift does not perpetuate the legacy of Malay cinema previously established in Singapore. Among the significant contributions of P. Ramlee are landmark films such as *Sitora Harimau Jadian* (1964), *Ragam P. Ramlee* (1965), and *Masam-masam Manis* (1965), culminating in his final work, *Laksamana Do Re Mi* (1972). Between 1964 and 1980, Merdeka Studio produced approximately 80 films, concluding with *Adik Manja* (Cutie Pie), directed by Hafsham. Following its acquisition by Shaw Brothers, Merdeka Studio was rebranded as Merdeka Films Production. Nonetheless, the closure of Merdeka Film Productions in the 1980s marked the end of a significant era in the film studio, which had been primarily dominated by Chinese producers in Malaya and Malaysia (Hassan, 2014).

3.7 The Mahathirist Era of Malaysian Cinema

This section examines the alignment of Malaysian cinema in the 1980s and 1990s with Mahathirism, particularly in relation to elements of Malay nationalism and

capitalism. Additionally, as previously mentioned, censorship serves as a pertinent example of how Mahathir's authoritarianism manifests within Malaysian cinema.

'The emergence of new, alternative filmmakers coincides with the premiership of (Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad who became the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981. His entry, in a sense, heralded a new thinking and a new approach to understanding what was needed to bring about the changes that were badly needed...This was necessary to face up to the impending world revolution that would be brought about by the digital technology as foreseen by Mahathir.'

(p. 114)

It is possible that Hassan overlooked the fact that the initial phase of Mahathir's premiership represents a revival of (yet another) Malay cinema. This revival is characterised by certain limitations in terms of production, funding, and representation, predominantly orchestrated by and for the Malay community. In this context, Mahathir did not introduce significant innovations to the cinematic landscape, apart from occasional developments such as the establishment of the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia (FINAS).

Hamzah (1997) asserts that various challenges encountered by Malay filmmakers and producers have been directed towards the authorities. In 1981, amid these issues, Mahathir, then serving as the Minister of Trade and Industry, initiated measures to establish a committee to advance Malay films (Hamzah, 1997, p. 125). I contend that Mahathir's engagement with the film industry is not primarily motivated by an artistic vision but rather stems from an inclination to promote Malay entrepreneurship within this sector

Discussions have been ongoing since 1998 regarding the privatisation of FINAS, but as of 2022, this has yet to materialise. Hassan (2014) offers an alternative perspective on the inception of FINAS, arguing that Mohamad Zain Hussein, the General Director of Film Negara Malaysia (FNM), had initially proposed transforming FNM into a corporate entity rather than creating a new organisation like FINAS.

According to Hassan (2014), 'FNM was supposed to be 'FINAS'. The ministry replied to Zain's letter within three days, saying it was a novel idea and that they would look into it (p. 97). Hassan (2014) remarks that the ministry has taken little action in the years following Zain's death in 1979. However, filmmakers have persistently questioned the efficiency and effectiveness of FINAS, arguing that its operations should

be led by industry professionals rather than inexperienced bureaucratic officials who lack a comprehensive understanding of the film industry (Khoo, 2006).

3.7.1 The New Malay and Cinema of the Mahathirist Era

In 1971, a group of veteran Malaysian filmmakers, including P. Ramlee, H.M. Shah, Jins Shamsudin, Jaafar Abdullah, Abdullah Hussin, and Turiono Junaidy, established the Perusahaan Film Malaysia, commonly known as the Malaysian Film Enterprise (PERFIMA) (Hamzah, 1997). According to Hamzah (1997), 'The objective of the establishment of PERFIMA is quite nationalist' (p. 120), where they attempt to fight for the rights of Bumiputera in the show business while Hassan (2014), states that the establishment of PERFIMA as an '...effort to break Chinese monopoly' (p. 95) since Cathay and Shaw Brothers are still dominating the industry. In the initial stages, PERFIMA commenced operations by distributing a limited number of Indonesian films produced by Sarinande Filem (Hamzah, 1997). They successfully advocated for government approval to conduct public screenings of Indonesian films in rented spaces at the MARA Auditorium located at the MARA headquarters on Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman (Hassan, 2014). Subsequently, they secured a venue at Odeon for film screenings (Hamzah, 1997). Following internal conflicts within PERFIMA, P. Ramlee and several others departed from the organization (Hamzah [1997], Hassan [2014]). PERFIMA successfully produced one film, *Menanti Hari Esok* (Waiting for Tomorrow, 1977), after which the organization disbanded (Hassan, 2014). While PERFIMA was established prior to Mahathir's tenure as Prime Minister, its initiatives and struggles laid the groundwork for the emergence of Malay nationalist sentiment within the film industry during the Mahathir era.

The designation of this period as the 'Bumiputera Era' by Hamzah Hussein (1997) and the 'Malay Independent Era' by Hatta (1994) highlights the significant influence of the Malay community in both industrial production and visual representation in media. This terminology underscores the extent to which Malays have not only dominated the industry's production aspects but have also established a prominent presence on screen. In examining the 'national' cinema of Malaysia during that period (the 1980s and 1990s), Khoo (2006) argues that the cinema during that period,

‘...ignoring the multi-ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of Malaysians, the films usually feature an all-Malay cast speaking mostly in Bahasa Malaysia and they cater predominantly to a Malay audience. Like the schism noted earlier on the "dissemiNation" of Malay/sia, even though the films locate the narratives in geographical Malaysia, they revolve around Malay society and Malay issues and customs rather than providing a multi-ethnic and therefore realistic perspective of Malaysian society. Because Malay/sian cinema is dominated on and off screen by Malays, it is more popularly known as Malay cinema.’

(p. 102)

The National Culture Policy (NCP) has significantly influenced Malaysian cinema during this period by promoting a more pronounced Malay identity. In Malaysian cinema, the representation of multi-ethnic diversity is often limited, as discussions of race relations are considered sensitive. This sensitivity can be traced back to the events of May 13, 1969, which set a precedent for cautious discourse surrounding racial issues (Khoo, 2006). Consequently, individuals addressing these 'sensitive' topics risk arrest under the Internal Security Act (ISA) (Khoo, 2006). I concur with Khoo (2006) regarding the characterisation of race relations issues as 'sensitive.' This designation is problematic because it effectively stifles opportunities for critical discourse and intellectual debate on the topic. For Khoo (2006), this labelling of 'sensitive' to the 'race relations' issues gives a major chance for the domination of Malay culture and, in seeming to want to prevent ethnic conflict, the state sets up a Malay hegemony (p. 102). To add, racial exclusion in Malay cinema was more pronounced in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and remains so to this day, compared with Malay cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, because the latter had a greater sense of inclusiveness (McKay, 2011, p. 37).

Rahim Razali endeavours to position race relations conflict as a central theme in *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (1985), yet this effort has failed to attract substantial Malay audiences, likely due to the established tendency of Malay viewers to engage solely with pure entertainment (Khoo, 2006). Despite Rahim Razali's intention to emphasise non-Malay characters, as evidenced in both *Tsu Feh Sofiah* and *Anak Sarawak* (1989), the portrayal of non-Malay individuals in these films remains subject to the hegemony of Malay cultural dominance. It aligns with the National Cultural Policy (NCP). For instance, *Tsu Feh* is depicted as a character who speaks fluent Malay; however, this fluency feels forced, particularly because Rahim opts for Malay dialogue even in her interactions with her parents during her childhood. Furthermore, *Anak Sarawak* presents additional

representation issues, as the film utilises Peninsular Malay rather than the Borneo dialect. It is noteworthy that Rahim cast a Malay actor from Peninsular Malaysia. Consequently, the representation in *Anak Sarawak* continues to reflect a problematic stance, reinforcing yet another layer of Malay cultural dominance.

The film *Mekanik*, directed by Othman Hafsham in 1983, is often credited with its attempts to represent racial inclusiveness in the context of multicultural Malaysia. However, this purported ‘inclusiveness’ may be perceived as somewhat limited, as it relegates ethnic groups other than the Malays to supporting roles rather than positioning them at the narrative centre. Additionally, filmmaker Nasir Jani, known for his contentious views, reveals his chauvinist leanings in his 1986 film *Kembara Seniman Jalanan*. In this film, the Malay artist character expresses derogatory views towards Chinese individuals, referring to them using the term ‘*mata sepet*’, above all, alleging that they are responsible for CD and DVD piracy. Furthermore, the protagonist, Bujang (played by M. Nasir), argues that since the Studio Era, the Chinese community has profited from creative products despite the Malays being the creators. This highlights Nasir Jani's complex position; despite his reputation for opposing the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and anti-establishment rhetoric, he operates within a framework of Malay ethno-nationalism. In this context, it is worth noting that Jani's critique appears misdirected, as it fails to address the underlying issues, namely the industry's entrenched capitalist structures.

In addition to that, the 2020 documentary *Nasir Jani Melawan Lembaga Puaka* explores Nasir's struggles against the censorship board and his experiences of being shadowbanned from television and the industry. However, by the film's conclusion, a paradox emerges: despite appearing as a champion for freedom and a rebel, Nasir ultimately endorses censorship to maintain harmony and stability. In this context, it is worth noting that Jani's critique appears misdirected, as it fails to address the underlying issues, namely the entrenched capitalist structures within the industry.

3.7.2 Reclaiming the Studio Era? The Malay Owning the Industry

In this context, I utilise the term ‘reclaiming’ to indicate that, rather than seeking to alter the frameworks established during the Studio Era, industry stakeholders in the 1980s and 1990s aimed to uphold and aspire to resurrect these antiquated systems. By ‘the system’, I refer specifically to the capitalist structures that continued to serve as a mode of production during the Mahathirist Era, also known as the Bumiputera Era.

Filmmakers of this period predominantly focused on preserving these systems while introducing new ownership dynamics among the Malay population. In light of the above concern, I would like to draw attention to Rahman Saari's (1983) argument, which is:

'Telah disebutkan bahawa penutupan studio Jalan Ampas elok dianggap suatu cabaran yang berkesan untuk kemajuan pencinta-pencinta seni filem Melayu. Dengan ketiadaan kapitalis tulen yang memikirkan keuntungan maksima itu, kita sudah menemui manusia manusia yang memahami martabat sebenar bidang ini. (The closure of the Jalan Ampas studio, as noted, should be seen as a significant challenge for the development of Malay film enthusiasts. Without 'pure capitalists' driven solely by profit, we begin to encounter individuals who genuinely acknowledge the true dignity of this art form [my translation])'.

(pp. 43-44)

I contest Rahman's (1983) assertion, as it argues that without a comprehensive understanding of the '*martabat sebenar*' ('true value') of cinema by both the filmmaker and the studio during the Studio Era, this period cannot be regarded as the exclusive 'golden age of Malay cinema'. The decline in quality observed among certain filmmakers during the crisis and subsequent decline of the studio system is evident when analysing the films of P. Ramlee produced in Singapore's Malay film industry and those from Merdeka Film Productions in Kuala Lumpur. It must be acknowledged that filmmakers experienced a significant loss of rights concerning royalties and payments during this transitional period.

However, this does not imply a lack of understanding of cinema's 'true value'. It is important to clarify that my intention is not to romanticise the capitalist structure of studio systems, which drew heavily from the Hollywood model. Instead, I argue that the post-studio era industry should not be considered superior to its studio predecessor. Nasir Jani (2019), a prominent film director from this period, recognises that the new companies established by the Malay-Bumiputera predominantly produced films that borrowed heavily from the stylistic and narrative conventions of Jalan Ampas Studio and Cathay Keris in Singapore. Thus, I shall elucidate the transformations within the industry, even if not framed within the paradigm of 'true capitalism,' as articulated by Rahman (1983).

In alignment with the New Economic Policy (NEP), a new affluent class has emerged among the Malay population. The NEP aimed to eliminate economic

disparities among the various races in Malaysia; however, it has predominantly benefitted the Malays, albeit not all individuals within this group have reaped its rewards. Kahn (2015) articulates that ‘everything did not go entirely according to plan, and the creation of this socioeconomic bloc led to crises of cultural, ethnic, and religious identities’ (p. 51). As Malays transitioned into entrepreneurship and corporate roles, they sought to penetrate the film industry, aspiring to achieve the success exemplified by the likes of the Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris during that era. Nevertheless, outcomes diverged significantly from these aspirations.

Initially, certain production companies, such as Sabah Films, owned by Deddy M. Borhan, achieved success with titles like *Keluarga Comat* and *Azura*. Other Malay-owned companies similarly thrived early on, which aligned with the economic incentives provided by the NEP (Gray, 2015). Nonetheless, in the long run, many of these production companies failed to sustain success, often producing no more than a single film before ceasing operations (Gray, 2015). Hamzah (1997) further observes that ‘Malay distribution companies are established without a long-term plan’ (p. 122). A few Bumiputera companies, such as Sari Artiste (owned by Sarimah) and Sabah Films, managed to survive in the industry; however, both ultimately ceased operations—not due to an inability to manage production budgets, but rather due to indiscipline and mismanagement (Hamzah, 1997). Additionally, numerous companies halted production primarily due to their inability to profit from their films (Hamzah, 1997). Despite their efforts to thrive and reach the stature of Shaw Brothers and Cathay, they encountered fates akin to that of PERFIMA, an early Malay-centric film enterprise. Furthermore, the widespread failure of many Malay-owned film production companies reflects the broader economic challenges faced by the emerging affluent Malays beyond the film industry.

In addition to Malay-owned enterprises, companies also operate as subsidiaries of state entities or governmental bodies. An illustrative example is Fleet Communications, known for producing Rahim Razali’s films, namely *Abang, Pemburu*, and *Matinya Seorang Patriot*. Fleet Communications functions as a subsidiary of Fleet Holdings, with UMNO as its principal shareholder (Hilley [2000]; Beng, Muhyiddin, Kim [2017]). According to Zawawi Ibrahim (as cited in Beng, Muhyiddin, Kim [2017]), the creation of Fleet Communications represents a concerted effort to cultivate a new genre within the Malay film industry. Founded by then Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, colloquially known as Ku Li, this venture signifies the state's direct

involvement in film production through direct investment and collaborative production efforts (Beng, Muhyiddin, Kim [2017]).

As posited by Hamzah (1997), the establishment of Fleet Communications offers promising prospects for numerous industry stakeholders, owing to its status as a substantial corporation with the financial capacity to underwrite various film productions. In the realm of corporate figures engaged in filmmaking, Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin emerged as a significant contributor, with his family also participating in the film industry, paralleling the involvement of families like Sarimah's during that period (Hamzah, 1997). Tan Sri Kamarul produced *Jasmin* and directed its sequel, *Jasmin 2*. The original film drew inspiration from the 'Nadra tragedy' in Singapore, which occurred before Malaya attained independence. At the same time, the sequel adopts a more transnational and ethnographic perspective, reflecting the circumstances following the formation of Malaysia.

The emergence of Malay-owned film production during this period may be interpreted as a form of 'propaganda' within Chomsky's theoretical framework. Although Chomsky's Propaganda Model was initially developed for news media, numerous scholars, including Alford (2009), have extended its application to the analysis of the Hollywood film industry. As Chomsky (1988) posits,

'It is more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private... This is especially true where the media actively compete, periodically attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance, and aggressively portray themselves as spokesman for free and the general community interest'

(p. 1)

In discussing the phenomenon of corporate and governmental malfeasance, as noted by Chomsky (2013), it becomes apparent that there are few films that address these critical issues. Notable examples include *Aku Yang Berhormat* ('I am the Honourable', 1983), directed by Raja Ismail and *Matinya Seorang Patriot* ('The Death of the Patriot', 1984), directed by Rahim Razali. Analysing these films reveals that they not only shed light on corruption and moral decay among politicians but also convey a narrative of restorative justice, where immoral actions ultimately face consequences. For instance, in *Aku Yang Berhormat*, the Member of Parliament ultimately loses his election and is declared bankrupt. Nevertheless, although *Aku Yang Berhormat* tackled

a highly serious and profound political subject, it was produced as a poorly made film when viewed strictly as a film.

In contrast, *Matinya Seorang Patriot* is not only more sophisticated in terms of cinematic aesthetics but also depicts a more intricate moral landscape. This is clear, as the elder brother, who orchestrates a series of murders in his quest for revenge against a corrupt politician, ultimately recognises the immorality of his actions and turns himself in to the authorities. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that *Matinya Seorang Patriot* is directed by Rahim Razali and produced by Fleet Communication, which is part of Fleet Holdings. As previously mentioned, Fleet Holdings is a subsidiary of the Finance Ministry, raising intriguing questions about the implications of a finance minister funding a film that critiques monetary politics through a corporate lens. However, this is closely linked and significant to an argument made by Chomsky (2013), which is that, ‘decent propaganda system’ does not declare or reveal its principles or purposes, and ‘this is one of the reasons the old Soviet system was relatively ineffective, as far as we know’ (p. 46) because If the propaganda media (including film) tell people ‘This is what you have to think,’ then peoples will understand: ‘this is what power wants us to think’ thus they will find a way out.

The Malaysian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, despite its de-radicalised elements, corporate ownership, and sourcing from the states, exhibits characteristics that align with an anti-‘Other’ perspective, which corresponds with Chomsky’s Propaganda Model. During the Mahathirist Era, the industry diverged from one aspect of this model—namely, reliance on advertising—because, unlike news media, films in Malaysia during this period did not generate significant revenue from advertising. Nonetheless, this divergence does not exempt Malaysian cinema of the Mahathirist Era from the applicability of this model. Edward S. Herman, who developed this model alongside Chomsky, indicated that it necessitates specific adjustments based on local and contextual factors (Alford, 2009).

3.8 Conclusion

Since its inception, cinema has evolved into not only a widely embraced medium but also a potent tool for reinforcing the status quo. The term ‘potent’ in this context signifies that cinema serves as the most intimate medium for conveying messages and ideologies, particularly for those who are illiterate or perhaps uninterested in reading. Throughout this chapter, I have come to realize that the concept of

‘hegemony’ was entrenched even prior to the advent of colonial power, as evidenced by the *waadat* between Seri Teri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun in the *Sulalatus Salatin* (Malay Annals). However, as previously noted, Malay literature encompasses not only hegemonic court works but also political writings, exemplified by Raja Ali Haji in *Thammarat al Muhimah* and *Muqadimmah fi Itizam*. In this chapter, I provided a brief historical overview and examine how our literature has responded to various eras.

The examination of Malay cinema during the studio era reveals a conspicuous absence of radical and revolutionary efforts. This lack of initiative can be attributed to the stringent regulations imposed by colonial authorities. It is unjust to assert that filmmakers of this period were merely passive or ‘artificial’ due to the ignorance of their directors; rather, it is crucial to understand that these constraints compelled filmmakers to either suppress dissent or convey it in nuanced forms. This chapter identifies two significant transitional periods: the shift from colonial rule to independence and, subsequently, the transition from the Tun Hussein Onn era to the Mahathir era. Unfortunately, these transitions did not foster any substantial development in Malaysian cinema. The formation of the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia (FINAS) as a protective institution for local filmmakers has produced minimal positive outcomes, as the same oppressive systems, or potentially even harsher ones, continue to prevail. Furthermore, I propose designating the Malaysian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s as the Mahathirist Era. This labelling stems from the industry's characteristics during this time, which was heavily influenced by ethnonationalism and capitalism, compounded by state intervention through censorship, emblematic of Mahathirist authoritarianism in cinema.

In the subsequent chapter, Chapter Four, titled Cultural Change or Moral Decay? The Representation and Critique of Mahathir's Nouveau-Riche Malays in *Abang* and *Matinya Seorang Patriot*. I will analyse two critically acclaimed films directed by Rahim Razali. Both films prominently address the theme of corruption among the emerging affluent Malay class who benefited from the New Economic Policy (NEP). Arguably, these films have become the most frequently discussed works by scholars examining the nexus between the new Malay wealthy and capitalism. However, in this chapter, I contend that both films present paradoxes regarding capitalism and other elements within Mahathirism.

Notably, while Abang critiques the moral and financial corruption present within Din's family through the character of Fuad, it is ironic that Fuad himself extols the virtues of corporatism and capitalism. Conversely, in *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, the narrative centres on the revenge of Haji Shahban's son—a series of murders that I interpret as a form of pre-political action—targeting corrupt politician-capitalists. Yet all characters, whether antagonists or protagonists, are ensnared within a capitalist discourse, as they are all implicated in this political capitalism in a Weberian sense. This is why both films are selected for discussion, as they are entrenched within the hegemony of Mahathirism.

CHAPTER 4

CULTURAL CHANGE OR MORAL DECAY? – REPRESENTATION OF MAHATHIR'S NOUVEAU-RICHE MALAYS IN *ABANG* (1981) AND *MATINYA SEORANG PATRIOT* (1984)

4.1 Thus, Mahathirism Began

In 1981, Tun Hussein Onn's premiership concluded, marking the end of the bangsawan (noble) families' domination of the position of Prime Minister. Subsequently, Mahathir Mohamad became the first commoner to ascend to this role. Notably, Mahathir was the first Prime Minister not to come from a bangsawan family and also the first who had not worked as an administrator in government services prior to entering politics (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). Furthermore, he is distinguished as the first Prime Minister who did not pursue his studies in England, having instead obtained a medical degree in Singapore (Wain, 2009).

This background is particularly significant, as it informs Mahathir's independent, business-oriented mindset. This mindset was evident not only in the establishment of his MAHA Clinic but can also be traced back to his initiation of small businesses during the Japanese invasion in his teenage years. In addition to that, Khalid Abdullah (In Wain, 2009), who is an early business associate and more than half a century mate, stated that 'I think he (Mahathir) has a little superiority complex' (p. 4).

Khalid quoted (In Wain, 2009) a proverb from the Arabs in explaining Mahathir's mindset: 'If you see me with one eye, I have no eyes to see you. If you see me with both eyes, I have all my eyes to see you' (p. 4). This passage evokes Mahathir's affinity for the song 'My Way' by Frank Sinatra, reflecting both his musical preferences and his personal identity. In the context of this chapter, Mahathir exemplifies his self-made journey, characterised by his ascent to a prominent position within UMNO and the Malaysian government, shaped by capitalist principles.

His experience indicates a profound engagement with themes of superiority and introversion, suggesting that the capitalist model—centred on the self-made individual—aligns well with his character. Leading the country for 22 years, it is

reasonable to assert that Mahathir's ideology and inclinations are manifested in his governance and political strategies.

Moreover, it is not unexpected that others may embody Mahathir's characteristics, given the carefully constructed nature of his hegemony. The discourse surrounding capitalism, particularly the emerging affluent class known as the New Malay, has significantly influenced Malay cinema during the post-studio era. One director who frequently engages with themes of capitalism and the ascendance of the New Malay is Rahim Razali. His debut film, *Abang*, is a notable contribution to the film industry and a seminal work in his filmography.

In view of the arguments presented in this chapter, I aim to analyse Rahim Razali's films *Abang* (1981) and *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984). These films encapsulate Rahim's critique of Mahathirist capitalism while simultaneously presenting elements of its sanitisation. I posit that Rahim's essentialism and nostalgia for the traditional kampung serve as a counterpoint to Mahathirism, albeit with notable similarities to Mahathir's emphasis on traditional values and adat. Moreover, this argument does not dismiss Rahim's intention to critique the emerging affluent Malay families and corporations that profited from the National Economic Policy (NEP) and the intertwining of politics and business—often referred to as money politics. This paradox inherent in Rahim Razali's films suggests that while he expresses discontent towards Mahathirism, he also mirrors Mahathir's perspectives in significant ways. In light of this, I will respond to Zawawi's (2007) assertion that Rahim represents one of the most critical critiques of the NEP through cinematic discourse. While I share Zawawi's perspective, my analysis seeks to augment his claims by offering a more nuanced exploration of the themes within Rahim's films.

Rahim's perspective on Mahathirism aligns closely with Khoo's (2003) assertion that discussions surrounding Mahathirism often manifest a nuanced ambivalence, where critics partially disapprove of Mahathir, inadvertently reinforcing his hegemonic position. Additionally, Rahim's film relates to Chomsky's (1994) Propaganda Model, particularly the character *Abang*. Chomsky contends that modern propaganda differs significantly from the overt tactics of Soviet-era propaganda; contemporary propaganda is more subtle and sophisticated. It frequently critiques corporate entities and government authorities, thereby creating an appearance of impartiality and distancing itself from biases toward the ruling class or government—all while claiming to uphold neutrality.

As Chomsky (2012) states, we are now facing a sophisticated ‘propaganda system’ where ‘the actors know what exactly they are doing’ (p. 102). The complexity of propaganda dissemination has increased, particularly when the apparatus employed for this purpose has shifted from government institutions to private entities.

This trend raises concerns about the influence and intentions behind such communications. Notably, the films discussed in this chapter were both produced by private entities, including one produced by Fleet Communication. Fleet Communication is a subsidiary of Fleet Holding, which, in turn, is associated with the Ministry of Finance under Mahathir’s administration. Although the latter, *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, was not produced under Fleet Communication but also by a private entity, it perhaps portrays Rahim’s contradiction of Mahathirism.

In the analytical section of *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, I will elucidate how the film addresses the complexities surrounding money politics and the problematic amalgamation of political and business interests. Overall, Rahim directed nine films, with his first and second being produced under the auspices of Fleet Communications, a subsidiary established through the initiative and patronage of former Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Ku Li). This initiative was part of the government’s broader effort to promote the production of a ‘new kind’ of Malay cinema (Zawawi, 2007).

According to Zawawi (2007), the rivalry and subsequent schism between Mahathir and Ku Li ultimately resulted in the dissolution of Fleet Communications. As a consequence, Rahim finds a way to work with a private sponsor to produce his third film, *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (Zawawi, 2007), which Zarul Albakri produced. Rahim then teamed up with a financier, Datin Wan Ruhani to form an independent company- Angkatan Seniman Abad XX (ASA XX) where they produced *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (1986), *Puteri* (‘Princess’, 1987), *Anak Sarawak* (‘Son of Sarawak’, 1988), *Rentak Desa* (‘Rural Beat’, 1990), *Abang 92* (‘Elder Brother’ 1992) and *Iman... Alone* (1998) (Zawawi, 2007).



Figure 4.1 Rahim Razali Received his Best Actor Award at the 2nd Malaysian Film Festival, 1981, From Mahathir Mohamad (Who Was Then the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry at That Time).

Rahim Razali is an accountancy graduate from a university in Australia. Upon returning to Malaysia, he joined an advertising firm while also actively pursuing theatre and screen acting. He was later appointed head of production at Fleet Communication. During his tenure there, he had the opportunity to create several films, including *Abang* and *Pemburu*. However, Fleet Communication ultimately faced a fate similar to many other Malay-owned production companies, closing down after producing only a few films (with the exception of a few, such as Skop Production, founded by actor-turned-director Yusof Haslam). Following the closure of Fleet Communication, Rahim appears devoted to narrating a story through cinema, primarily addressing the sociopolitical issues prevalent in Malaysia during that era. His filmography encompasses a range of topics, from the New Malay conflict and the interplay between royalty and capitalism to the complexities surrounding Islamisation, Islamic fragmentation, and the federal issues concerning East Malaysia. These themes suggest that Rahim perceives himself as a moral agent, duty-bound to engage with significant societal issues through his cinema. This sense of responsibility arguably fuels his desire to convey narratives, where the motif of a moral agent is recurrently evident in his works.

4.2 *Abang* as Agent of Morality

In this section, I intend to argue that *Abang* exemplifies the ‘saviour complex’ inherent in Mahathirism, particularly through the character Fuad Din, portrayed by

Rahim Razali. Nevertheless, this ‘saviour’ character embodies a notion of ‘moral correctness’; he serves as an agent for the sanitisation of capitalism. The journey of the saviour complex starts when Din’s family finds themselves in a precarious situation upon receiving a telegram from London that brings unsettling news: Fuad (Rahim Razali), the eldest brother, is returning after a decade. The family's reaction to this news is peculiar and laden with dread. This is illustrated by Faizal's (Ahmad Yatim) dialogue at the beginning of this section. As Norman (2021) posits, Fuad embodies a haunting presence due to his nature and character, which serves to ‘relive’ and disrupt the current order, akin to the essence of a ghost.

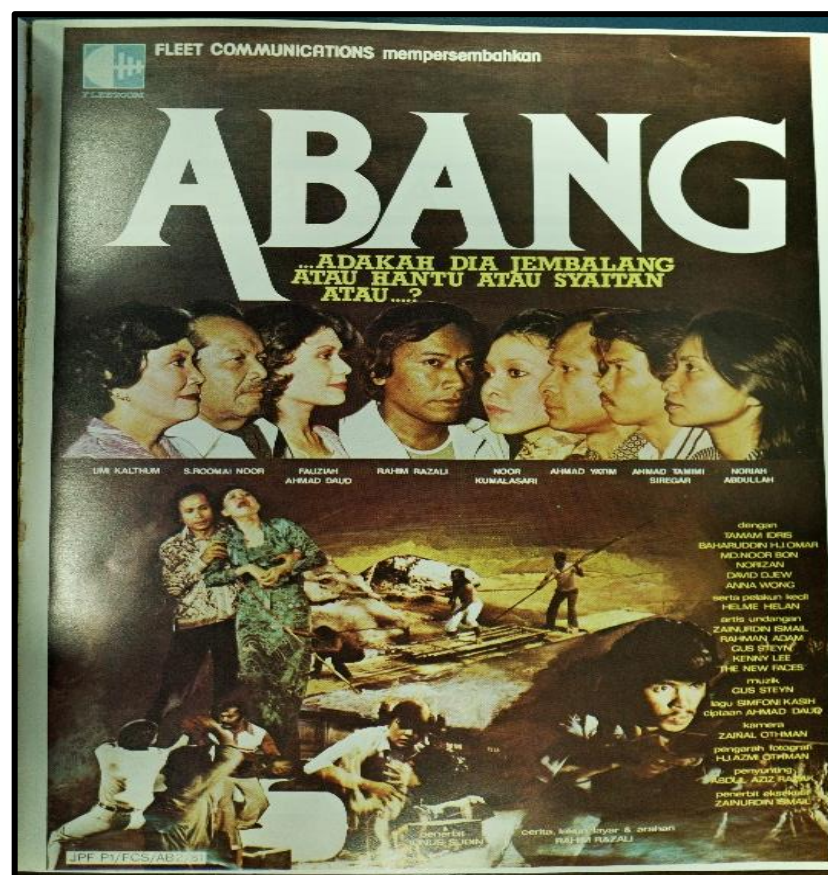


Figure 4.2 The *Abang* Film Poster with the Significant Tagline ‘Adakah Dia Jembalang atau Hantu atau Syaitan... atau...? (Is He a Demon or Ghost or evil..or...? [my translation])’.

Within the narrative, Fuad metaphorically disrupts the status quo by exposing the corruption ensconced within his family’s business, which has thrived under the New Economic Policy (NEP) at the expense of their *jati diri* (identity). The question of *jati diri* is prominently illustrated in one of the film's most iconic scenes: the debates

between Fuad and Farid (portrayed by Tamimi Siregar), in which they critique the values they both uphold. Farid, under the influence of alcohol, charged Fuad with bringing shame to the family by failing to attend the gathering arranged to commemorate his return home. The scene predominantly employs long shots, starting with Farid in the foreground while Fuad emerges from the darkness. Fuad's presence seemingly rouses Farid, who is under the influence of alcohol. The contrasting blocking—Fuad standing and Farid sitting with a glass of alcohol—illuminates the power dynamics between the two brothers. At the onset of their conversation, Fuad successfully asserts dominance over Farid. Nevertheless, Farid emphasises that ‘I’m not drunk. Farid Din crafts my words. Not the drink.’

However, the blocking seems to transform after Fuad states, ‘Whatever truth you may speak, you have no right to address me in that manner’. This statement may prompt a reaction in Farid, prompting him to stand up, suggesting that the power dynamics are shifting and that Fuad is no longer in control of the conversation. The craftsmanship of this scene is compelling because, from its establishment, it becomes apparent that Farid is under the influence of alcohol. Nevertheless, as the scene progresses, the intoxicated Farid presents a significant argument that challenges and provokes Fuad, who regards himself as the more knowledgeable party.

The tension and arguments between them lead to the question of morality and *jati diri*, where Fuad says:

‘Hairan aku dengan pemuda seperti kau, terpelajar saja sikit, maju saja sikit, tak sempat-sempat memeluk satu keperibadian baru, personality yang progresif konon, walhal apa yang progresif itu berbadan kafir, berbau hapak (I am perplexed by young men like you—just a little educated, just a little advanced, and you rush to embrace a new identity, claiming to have a ‘progressive’ personality, when in reality, what you call progressive belongs to the unbelievers and reeks of natural..[my translation]’

This scenario presents a compelling case study, as the term ‘kafir’ elicited a profound emotional reaction from Farid, culminating in significant anger. He began to accuse his brother of hypocrisy, asserting that Fuad is akin to him for several reasons: he is perceived as ‘one who does not care about family,’ ‘one who has wasted 10 years overseas,’ ‘the one who humiliates parents,’ and ‘the one who seeks to undermine the accomplishments achieved by the family.’ As Fuad, having lost his emotional control,

resorts to physical aggression by slapping Farid, it is essential to note that this act does not signify Fuad's dominance over his brother. Rather, it serves as a manifestation of his denial regarding the veracity of Farid's assertions about him.

The tension depicted between the two brothers can be interpreted as a conflict between the Old Malay (through Fuad) and the New Malay (represented by Farid). In addition, this is very important to highlight because, as Zawawi (20017) argues, the film represents the 'New Malay,' challenging traditional notions of identity and Malayness for the first time in Malay cinema. The idea that Fuad serves as an agent of morality within the film reflects his embodiment of traditional 'Old Malay' values, while simultaneously acknowledging his connection to 'New Malay' identity. In this context, Farid's hedonistic values are not merely exemplified in the current scene; they are also prominently reflected in prior dialogues with his wife, in which they engage in a discussion regarding their open marriage, a concept that is incompatible with Islamic and Malay values.

Taking the above into account, Rahim, as a moral agent, extends his dominance beyond Farid. The narratives focus on the dialogues and interactions within the family, particularly highlighting his siblings: Faizal, who experiences profound disappointment; Mona, who exhibits the most morally questionable behaviours; and his youngest sister, whom he endeavours to support in her artistic pursuits. Refining and addressing issues within his family aligns with Zawawi's (2007) assertions about *Abang's* exploration into the resilience of the Malay family unit. This exploration considers the unit's capacity to remain intact despite new wealth and modernisation pressures (Zawawi, 2007). Rahim (in Zawawi, 2007) posits, "No matter who you are, no matter what you have become, how advanced you are – Malay family values will never change" (p. 4). This shows that Rahim believes that Malay identity is deeply intertwined with the integrity and structure of *keluarga* (family).

This resonates with Faizal's dialogue,

'Abang seperti nakhoda yang amat kejam, meninggalkan kapalnya terapung-apung di Tengah lautan, dan kami kelasi mentah dan bodoh, suka tak suka terpaksa mengemudikan kapal abang itu (Brother, you're like a captain who has abandoned ship, leaving us—clueless and inexperienced sailors—with no choice but to navigate the open ocean ourselves [my translation])'

Thus, my extension of Zawawi's (2007) argument concerning the essence of 'family' posits that the concept of 'family' can be critically analysed *vis-à-vis* the tenets of capitalism and the free market, which often celebrate the ideal of the self-made individual. Within this framework, the notion of family—more broadly understood as a sense of community—stands in opposition to the individualism inherent in both free market and neoliberal ideologies, which indirectly contrasts with Mahathirism. Specifically, in the context of Malay culture, particularly in *Abang*, the term 'family' should not be interpreted solely as the nuclear family of Fuad Din. Rather, it encompasses the entire *kampung* community, including those who are not related by blood, which is perceived as an extended family owing to its profound communal bonds. Furthermore, the *kampung* represents the ancestral home of Fuad Din's family prior to their ascent to nouveau riche status. Nonetheless, in Fuad's dispute with Faizal, the former emphasises that his business intentions are fundamentally family-oriented, encapsulated in the phrase, 'business by family, for family'.

The concept of family business contributes a nuanced dimension to the narrative of *Abang*, emphasising the intricate interplay between familial relationships and entrepreneurial endeavours. Central to this discourse is Fuad's resolute determination to safeguard the family enterprise, which epitomises the ethos of being 'by family, for family.' His foremost objective is to address corruption and a lack of accountability within the corporate framework, particularly in his quest to reclaim land that was unjustly disposed of by his younger brother, Farid. Additionally, the dynamics involving his sister-in-law, Mona, further enrich the narrative. Mona, previously Fuad's romantic partner and now married to his brother Faizal, holds significant weight in the narrative, especially as she is the mother of Fuad's child. In Fuad's absence abroad, Faizal adopts the dual responsibility of safeguarding Mona's dignity and preserving the family's reputation. This complex web of relationships illustrates the intertwined nature of familial loyalty and business ethics, in which the family's reputation is inherently linked to the business's viability. Consequently, the narrative serves as a critical reflection on how personal sacrifices and familial obligations shape the trajectories of family-owned enterprises.

The dialogue between Faizal and Fuad regarding Faizal's intention to seek employment with an Indonesian company elucidates the complexities often inherent in family-owned businesses. Fuad's critique of Faizal's prospective departure from the family enterprise highlights a significant concern about the potential ramifications of

such a choice on both the business and familial cohesion. Faizal's response, "So you can leave us, and I cannot?" suggests a perception of double standards within their family dynamics, effectively capturing his frustrations. This exchange underscores the inherent tension between personal ambitions and familial loyalty, suggesting that pursuing both may be fundamentally incompatible.

Fuad's anxiety about Faizal's intentions can be seen as a microcosm of his broader worldview, shaped by the conventional understanding of family businesses. This framework often reinforces a profound sense of obligation and continuity within familial structures. The scenario exemplifies how familial affiliations can complicate professional relationships and decision-making, leading to emotional conflicts rooted in deeper psychological and cultural dynamics.

Therefore, these scenarios necessitate a deeper examination of the influence of familial expectations on personal agency in business operations. However, the concept of 'family business' is significantly related to the idea of being an 'agent of morality.' In this context, Fuad's efforts to rectify the family's moral standing are intricately linked to the strengthening of the family business.

Based on the above analysis, it may not be wholly ironic to utilise the term 'spectre,' particularly since Rahim frequently situates his narratives around the concept of 'death.' The notion of 'death' plays a significant role in shaping Fuad's character as he becomes an agent of morality, endeavouring to correct the course of his family, fully aware of his impending demise. Consequently, I employ the phrase 'spectre of the noble capitalist' to describe Fuad, who has gradually receded into the background (symbolising 'death') before re-emerging as a 'spectre' within his family.

In Norman's (2021) analysis, Fuad is characterised as a figure that 'haunts' his family, destabilising the existing status quo. This re-emergence challenges the dynamics of a greed-corrupted bourgeois family, as he becomes an agent of morality by instigating 'chaos' within that family structure. Nevertheless, the genuine irony resides in the fact that Fuad ultimately exemplifies the attributes of a 'noble capitalist', aligning with the archetype of an 'ideal capitalist'.

This is aligned with Mahathir's argument in *Mastika* (Ogos, 1976) where he states,

‘Kapitalisme dan sosialisme adalah konsep barat yang bertuhankan kebendaan. Tidak ada sebab yang konsep-konsep ini patut menimbulkan kepincangan di kalangan masyarakat yang dikatakan berpegang kepada nilai-nilai rohaniah. (Capitalism socialism and capitalism are Western concepts that worship materialism. There is no reason these concepts should trigger chaos in a society that clings to spirituality elements [my translation]).’

(p. 30)

Additionally, Fuad is portrayed as a character with spiritual concerns, being aware of his impending departure from life. The spiritual journey of Fuad Din aligns with Mahathir’s earlier assertions that no ideological framework is problematic if rooted in spirituality. Furthermore, within the context of Mahathirism, Islam is integral and is not divorced from its association with the modernisation of capitalism. This perspective is supported by Yusof Rawa (as cited in Farish, 2014), who argues that the Mahathirist project of Islamism remains inextricably linked to the capitalist agenda. In the context of *Abang*, the spiritual elements, particularly Islam, serve as foundational aspects of morality, bolstering the argument that Fuad Din acts as a moral agent. The depiction of spirituality becomes more pronounced in the latter half of the film, evident in the kampung scenes through visual elements such as the surau, Fuad wandering through the paddy fields, and the appearance of the nasyid group towards the film's conclusion. Fuad frequently invokes divine and Islamic morality in urban settings during conversations, particularly when engaging with his siblings. Examples of his utterances include: *‘hidup munafik’* (living hypocritically), *‘berbadan kafir’* (living infidel), *‘semoga Tuhan mengampunkan dosa-dosa Abang..’* (May God forgive all my sins), and *‘Cantik! Cantik sekali bumi ini. Sayang kalau digali, kalau dimusnahkan ciptaan Tuhan’* (Beautiful! This land is incredibly beautiful. It would be a shame if it were disturbed, if God's creation is destroyed).

From the preceding discussion, Fuad, through Rahim, seeks to justify capitalism by arguing that the system could be beneficial if administered by competent, accountable, and spiritual individuals. This approach, however, fails to address the underlying structural issues inherent in NEP and capitalism as modes of production. The structure of sanitising capitalism by showing the ‘noble capitalist’ figure related to Rahim’s statements (in Zawawi, 2007), which are,

‘It’s (left-wing) there but I have never really gone very strong on it. I suppose ... it is just within me ... because of my family background and so on ... my uncle has always been a socialist. Ahmad Boestaman was my uncle ... although I wouldn’t say I’m a socialist myself, deep down inside, it is there.’

(p. 7)

Abang thus provides evidence and reinforces the argument that socialist elements are absent. Instead, *Abang* illustrates that Rahim Razali aligns with Mahathir’s assertions, suggesting that any ideological framework is acceptable, provided that spiritual elements serve as the core foundation.

Therefore, a noteworthy aspect of Rahim’s oeuvres is the recurrent exploration of ‘morality’, which emerges as a significant motif. In his narratives, ‘morality’ serves as a central theme and a catalyst that influences the main characters’ actions. In the film *Abang*, Rahim embodies the role of a ‘noble capitalist’ only upon realising death is imminent, prompting him to address unresolved family matters. Similarly, in *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, the characters Safuan (portrayed by Zulkifli Zain) and his brothers are motivated to devise a plan for revenge following the death of their father, caused by immoral characters. This theme of post-death revenge is also evident in *Pemburu* and *Puteri*, where protagonists are spurred to respond to the loss of their loved ones, caused by immoral characters.

In the context of Mahathirism, Mahathir frequently embodies the role of an ‘agent of morality,’ showcasing what can be described as a ‘messiah complex.’ During the tumultuous events of 1969, Mahathir voiced his dissatisfaction with Tunku Abdul Rahman’s administration, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, for its perceived inadequacies in advancing the socio-economic status of Malays. In 1997, amidst the economic crisis that swept Southeast Asia, he again assumed the role of ‘agent of morality’ by dismissing Anwar Ibrahim from his position due to allegations of sexual misconduct and corruption. Even after his retirement, Mahathir acts as a moral arbiter, publicly criticising Abdullah Badawi, the fifth Prime Minister, and Najib Razak, the sixth Prime Minister, for their incompetence and corrupt practices. While both Fuad and Haji Shaaban (from *Matinya Seorang Patriot*), characters from the selected films, endeavour to restore order, Mahathir continues to engage in this pursuit even today actively.

4.2.1 Kampung as a Counterpoint to Mahathirism?

‘*Abang*, for instance, is constantly punctuated by visuals of *kampungs* and rivers which contrast the image of the cityscape represented by concrete buildings, busy streets, noise, neon lights and nightlife entertainment. Again such contrasting images recur in most of Rahim’s films – *Abang*, *Pemburu*, *MSP*, *Puteri*, *Anak Sarawak*, *Rentak Desa* or *Abang 92*.’

(Zawawi, 2007, p. 9)

While the quoted text above at the beginning of this section suggests that *kampung* representation stands in contrast to urban environments, I argue for a more critical and nuanced analysis of this dynamic. In the analysis of Rahim Razali’s films, the concept of ‘rural bias’ emerges, in which Rahim expresses a preference for the *kampung* (village) lifestyle, portraying it as more virtuous and morally superior to urban life. This perspective is frequently supported by scholars (Zawawi, 2007; Khoo, 2006; Normala, 2018) as a counter-narrative to capitalism and modernity. However, I argue that this interpretation is overly simplistic and reductionist. This assertion stems from the portrayal of ‘rural bias’ in both *Abang* and *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, where Rahim dramatically contrasts the city as a ‘sinful’ space and the *kampung* as ‘suci’ (pure). In the film, Rahim attempts to equate urban life with luxury and wealth, exemplified by his family’s party organisation to celebrate his return after a decade. This setting highlights themes of greed and materialism, particularly in the relationship with his younger brother, which nearly culminates in violence. Additionally, the portrayal of a nightclub scene featuring his younger sister performing the song ‘*Simfoni Duniaku*’ further enriches the narrative. This contrasts sharply with the *kampung*, which is abundant in nature and the landscape of the *kampung* and rich in cultural practices and spiritual representation. The spiritual elements include the surau, where prayers are conducted, the RM 100,000 contribution by Fuad, and the nasyid performance during the *kenduri* at the film’s conclusion.

In terms of cinematic aspects, the visualisation of the *kampung* in the last 30 minutes of the film. The spectator would witness Fuad returning to his hometown, accompanied by his mother, receiving accolades from the village community, and ultimately departing from life in his home village. This narrative resonates with Pak Long’s statement, which translates to, ‘I have been here since childhood and will allow my journey to commence and conclude in this place’. Traditional Malay music

gradually fades in as Pak Long, Damian, and Fuad find themselves on a raft on the river. As this music plays, the scene transitions to Datuk Din's house, where Din and Faizal discuss work-related matters. The traditional music initiated in the river scene continues to play, only ceasing when Din turns off the radio in the living room. This music continuity is suggestive; it implies that Din's family is reconnecting with their roots and identity, reflecting Fuad's success in his essentialist journey. Rahim (as noted in Zawawi, 2007) emphasises the importance of not forgetting one's homeland and *kampung* for advanced Malays.

Nevertheless, in this section, I will argue that apart from spirituality, the concepts of *kampung* and Malay essentialism play a fundamental role in establishing Fuad as an agent of morality, and visualisation plays a role in the notion of sanitising capitalism. It has been previously established that the concept of *kampung* is pivotal to the communal dynamics of Malay society, particularly in relation to the origins of the Din family. In discussing the origins of the term, one can observe that essentialism in *Abang* is anchored in this notion, as Fuad Din embarks on a journey to his roots, which includes a connection to the divine. Norman (2021) posits that the character *Abang* embodies multiple dimensions of *kepulangan* (returning), specifically the return to one's homeland and hometown, as well as a spiritual return to God symbolised by the death of Fuad.

As mentioned, the film tends to be essentialist by romanticising traditional values such as *kampung* life as an antithesis to the modern capitalist world. However, it is simplistic to state that Rahim's romanticisation of *kampung* and traditional life is to empower *kampung* and tradition, because, in *Abang*, a *kampung* scene is just used for nostalgia. Reflecting on the narratives surrounding *Abang*, it is evident that the *kampung* has neither empowered Din's family nor served as an alternative way of life for them. Rahim's return to his family appears solely aimed at reviving the family business and sustaining their position within the existing socio-economic framework, adhering to certain 'good morals and principles'. The *kampung* merely complements the New Malay or affluent Malays, who continue to recognise traditional customs ('adat') while simultaneously sidestepping the excessive constraints they impose (Mahathir, 1970). Furthermore, this portrayal suggests that Rahim lacks genuine intent to empower the *kampung*; instead, he uses it as a platform to laud the virtues of the so-called 'noble capitalist,' Fuad Din.

This is evident when the *kampung* community grandly celebrate Fuad Din's return with a *kenduri* (ceremony). A notable moment showcased Fuad Din's generosity as he donates a significant sum to the *surau* (the village prayer room), emphasising his philanthropic spirit. In this scenario, Rahim still makes a material contribution, despite being in a setting that prioritises spirituality over materialism. In this regard, it demonstrates that Rahim makes yet another effort to extend his sanitisation of capitalism, but this time in the *kampung* setting. My critique of Fuad Din's endorsement of philanthropy is closely benefited from Barthes's (1957) analysis of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*:

‘...in which he (Charlie Chaplin) repeatedly approaches the proletarian theme but never endorses it politically. What he presents us with is the proletarian still blind and mystified, defined by the immediate character of his needs and his total alienation at the hands of his masters (the employers and the police).’

(p. 38)

As in Barthes's analysis of Charlie Chaplin, in this film, Rahim too explores a *kampung* setting without advocating or endorsing socialism. The *kampung* residents remain ‘blind and mystified’ by Malay corporatist-capitalism, primarily through their veneration of Fuad Din. Mak Long, his aunt, notably remarks on Fuad's extensive contributions to the *kampung*, asserting that the community's ceremonial acknowledgements are minimal compared to his significant impact. She even suggests that the *kampung* should rename itself in honour of Fuad. This observation further illustrates the intricate relationship between capitalism and philanthropy in the narrative. Khoo (1995) states that Mahathirist populism lies in ‘...his Malay-centred appeal (that) was unavoidably ‘rural’ because, for a very long time, to be Malay was to be ‘rural’ (p. 199). Therefore, I contend that Rahim's depiction of *kampung* can be interpreted as a ‘populist’ approach in his cinema, tailored to resonate with the Malay audience of that era, particularly as most Malays still reside in rural areas or have an attachment to the *kampung*. Thus, showing a preference for *kampung* reflects a nostalgic sentiment and embodies a populist approach in his filmmaking.

Just like Mahathir, whose ‘people-centred worldview’ rejected ‘class’ as a framework for understanding social issues and political conflict (Khoo, 1995, pp. 198-199), *Abang* also lacks a discourse on ‘class’. Rahim overlooks the potential to highlight the class tensions between the *kampung* and urban contexts, which may be read as

parallel to the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Rather than exploring these dynamics, Rahim opts to emphasise solely the nostalgic dimensions of *kampung* life, including activities such as swimming in the river, rafting, cycling, and engaging in *kenduri* celebrations. There is a notable absence of any indication of class consciousness; instead, Rahim tends to romanticise the bourgeoisie within the *kampung* milieu. This depiction of philanthropy, coupled with the idealisation of a ‘noble capitalist’, reinforces the notion that the overarching narrative of *Abang* serves to sanitise and legitimise New Malay and capitalism. It is somehow related to Mahathir’s stands that he has consistently expressed a strong affinity for urbanity, viewing the city as a central hub of civilisation and progress (Khoo, 1995).

Notably, this film was released in 1981, the year Mahathir was appointed Prime Minister, marking the emergence of the Mahathirist Era in Malaysian cinema. Rahim (cited in Zawawi, 2007) even suggests that *Abang* draws inspiration from the *Malay Dilemma* (p. 5). However, given the apparent lack of correlation between the two works, I find it challenging to unravel the connection between the inspiration from the *Malay Dilemma* and *Abang*. Instead of ‘inspired,’ the term ‘responding’ may be more appropriate, as the central argument of *The Malay Dilemma* concerns the fatalistic traits of Malays and the discourse around the ‘rehabilitation of Malays’ aimed at advancing their material progress while concurrently marginalising traditional *kampung* values.

Therefore, the preference for the *kampung* over urban settings in this film, as well as the associated nostalgia for *kampung* life, should not be interpreted merely as a contrast to Mahathirism. In reality, the *kampung* plays a crucial role in Mahathirist-populism, which is fundamentally centred around the people, particularly within the context of the Malay *kampung*. Regarding the film, the nostalgia portrayed for the *kampung* serves not just as a sentimental longing but functionally as a means of sanitising the implications of Mahathirist capitalism, thereby presenting a noble image of capitalist ideals.

4.2.2 The Predecessor of the Jebat Trilogy

‘I brought in a strong element of Jebat but the spirit of *Tuah* was also there as was the spirit of the other brothers as well. I wanted to make use of a well known situation in Malay history and place it in the context of the present moment and dilemma that the Malays are in today’

-Rahim Razali (in Zawawi, 2007, p. 5)

In this section, I argue that the character Abang embodies the layered narratives of Tuah and Jebat, as this motif is a significant element in Rahim's film. Through this examination, we can contextualise it within the framework of Mahathirism, which tends to align more closely with Tuah, associated with 'order' and right-wing ideologies, rather than Jebat, which is synonymous with 'anti-establishment' and leftist sentiments. The quotes at the beginning of this section refer to *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, in which Rahim implies the Tuah-Jebat narrative. However, this has become a recurring theme in his filmography. Besides *Abang*, other films that showcase Rahim's authorship include the Jebat trilogy, consisting of *Pemburu*, *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, and *Puteri* (Zawawi, 2007). It is referred to as the Jebat trilogy because these films revolve around a theme of revenge, as well as revisiting the Tuah-Jebat conflict narrative, which explores loyalty and betrayal within friendship and brotherhood in Malay folklore. Although *Abang* is not included in this trilogy, I argue that *Abang* serves as a precursor to the Jebat Trilogy, not only because it is Rahim's first film, but also because the Tuah-Jebat narrative is present within it, culminating in the perspective that Rahim articulates in his subsequent three films.

The framework of *Abang*'s narratives, which addresses themes of family, loyalty, and betrayal, appears to be intricately intertwined with the Tuah-Jebat narratives, possibly in an unconscious manner. While the Tuah-Jebat narratives focus on the institution of the palace, disrupted by Jebat's rebellion, in *Abang*, the emphasis shifts to familial relations. This raises the crucial question: who embodies the roles of Tuah and Jebat within the context of *Abang*? In the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the turmoil within the palace is ignited when the Bendahara conceals Hang Tuah after being summoned by the King, who intends to execute him. The unrest escalates as Jebat, Tuah's childhood companion, seizes control of the palace. Ultimately, it is Tuah who returns to restore order to Malacca.

Thus, although it is not overtly apparent, Fuad can be interpreted as a 'Tuah' within Din's familial context. The avaricious and corrupt younger sibling, Farid, and the inept Faizal—who nearly accepted an employment offer with an external entity based in Indonesia—may be analogous to Jebat, as they disrupt the family's business affairs. In parallel to Hang Jebat, who attained the rank of admiral in the court during Tuah's absence, Farid and Faizal have risen to prominence within their company in the absence of Fuad, which has led to their increasing greed. Farid, the younger sibling, has sold a parcel of land belonging to the family. In contrast, Faizal has sought to collaborate

with an Indonesian businessman and is contemplating abandoning the family business altogether. This situation has resulted in both individuals experiencing fear, confusion, and anxiety at the prospect of Fuad's return, akin to Jebat's bewilderment regarding Tuah's unexpected return after being presumed dead. In Norman's (2021) analysis, Fuad is characterised as a figure that 'haunts' his family, thereby destabilizing the existing status quo. This phenomenon is reminiscent of Hang Tuah, who, having previously 'died', similarly disrupted the stability during the Jebat rebellion. Additionally, akin to the Sultan of Malacca, Din, Fuad's father, finds himself incapable of addressing the family's issues without Fuad's intervention. Fuad's role is essential, paralleling the Sultan's reliance on Hang Tuah to confront Jebat's challenges. Furthermore, the historical relationship between Mona, Fuad's sister-in-law, conjures parallels with the bond between Tun Teja and Hang Tuah. As Tuah served as an agent of order, so too does Fuad endeavour to restore familial harmony and ethics. Where Tuah aimed to protect the integrity of the royal institution from the threats posed by Jebat, Fuad perceives his responsibility as safeguarding his family from the discord instigated by its own members.

In examining the Tuah-Jebat narratives, it becomes evident that Rahim's films do not necessarily glorify Jebat; instead, they reveal his haunting preoccupation with the figure. As noted by Zawawi (2007), Rahim identifies his uncle as Ahmad Boestamam, a prominent left-wing political activist during the pre-independence era in Malaysia. However, this familial connection does not significantly influence his principles, as observed in his cinematic works. The character Abang and the other three films within the Jebat trilogy reflect Rahim's obsession with restoring order and establishing lawful governance. Zawawi (2007, p.5) notes, '...[Rahim] brought in a strong element of Jebat, but the spirit of Tuah was also present, as was the spirit of the other brothers'. As Hang Tuah serves as an agent of restoring order, whereas Hang Jebat embodies an agent of democracy (as argued by Kassim Ahmad in 1996), it is pertinent to note the similarities between Rahim and Mahathir in their perspectives on 'order' and institutional integrity. In the context of *Abang*, the Din family may be interpreted as a microcosm of the nation, where such institutions are deemed essential for protection and restoration. Mahathir, recognised for his conservative approach, maintained 'stability' during his premiership through the implementation of repressive state apparatuses, including the Internal Security Act (ISA), the University and University College Act (AUKU), among others, which were perceived as necessary to safeguard

his vision of stability and development. Although Khoo (1995) indicates that Mahathir exhibited rebellious tendencies in 1969, he paradoxically regained loyalty in 1987. Mahathir's insurrection against Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, stemmed primarily from his concerns regarding the Malay community, as he believed Tunku was insufficiently advancing Malay interests. Mahathir's rebellion was motivated by a desire to 'restore order,' which takes on a more complex dimension in *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, where it intertwines with themes of revenge and the disruption of stability. Nevertheless, Rahim (cited in Zawawi) provides a nuanced perspective on Jebat and his methodologies, reflecting this inherent paradox.

4.3 Finding Jebat in *Matinya Seorang Patriot*?

'What I am saying is there is a way of eradicating all these things but it is not the way of the law. If you go by way of the law, you cannot eradicate all these. That's what I am suggesting.'

-Rahim Razali (in Zawawi, 2007, p. 7)

The preceding statement boldly articulates Rahim Razali's position in *Matinya Seorang Patriot*; however, it is beset with numerous contradictions and complexities regarding its portrayal in the film. Within *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, the manifestation of political corporatism is intricately linked to what Max Weber characterised as fiscal and political capitalism—a form of capitalism inherently reliant upon governmental or political party structures (Shaharudin, 1984). Ironically, Rahim's depiction of Haji Shahban (Mustafa Maarof), a board member within this political corporatism, is framed as that of a 'patriot,' as indicated by the title. Furthermore, while the narrative centres on the revenge enacted by Haji Shahban's son—manifested through a series of murders that I interpret as pre-political actions—each character remains ensnared within a capitalist framework. Regardless of their roles as antagonists or protagonists, including Haji Shahban, all are embroiled in this political capitalism. Their grievances, therefore, do not lie with the systemic issues, but rather with the individuals perceived to mismanage that system. Therefore, I would like to draw attention to Normala's (2020) argument, which emphasises:

*'Berlawanan dengan watak-watak korup yang dihidupkan dalam filem ini, watak Haji Shahban adalah contoh tokoh korporat Melayu yang berjaya, mempunyai teras agama, dan amanah dalam menjalankan tugas, sejajar dengan gagasan Tun Dr. Mahathir dalam kempen beliau yang terkenal dengan slogan 'Bersih, Cekap, dan Amanah' ...Haji Shahban dan anaknya Safuan merupakan patriot yang sanggup mengorbankan diri untuk menentang kebatilan daripada bersekongkol dengan Ahli Lembaga Pengarah Melati Holdings yang jelas menyeleweng (In contrast to the corrupt characters in the film, Haji Shahban stands out as a model of a successful Malay corporate figure, grounded in faith, principled, and dedicated to integrity in his duties. His character aligns with Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's renowned campaign for *Bersih, Cekap, Amanah*. With his son Safuan, Haji Shahban is depicted as a patriot willing to sacrifice in the fight against corruption, refusing to collaborate with the clearly compromised Board of Directors of Melati Holdings [my translation].)'*

(p. 6)

Normala (2020) posits that Haji Shahban epitomises the ideals encapsulated in the slogan *Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah*. This assertion is supported by a significant flashback scene in which Shahban expresses his intention to report the misconduct of the Boards to the Prime Minister. Such a statement reflects an optimistic view of the Prime Minister, indicating that Shahban aligns himself with uncorrupted individuals. He articulates, *'Kalau dia kata saya salah, maka salahlah saya, kalau dia kata saya bodoh, maka bodohlah saya.'* (If he [the Prime Minister] said I'm wrong, therefore I'm wrong; if he said I'm stupid, then I'm stupid [my translation]). This dialogue suggests a profound loyalty to higher authority. In contrast, the character of Safuan is depicted as more multifaceted, with his actions often embodying a cynical stance towards the purported principles of *Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah*.



Figure 4.3 The Poster of *Bersih, Cekap, Amanah* from The Film, *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984).

Safuan's decision not to contest his position as Youth Leader within the party signifies his disillusionment with the political system. Consequently, Safuan's actions in seeking revenge should not be interpreted as congruent with Mahathir's intentions; instead, they reflect a profound disappointment in the system, aligning with Rahim Razali's assertion that there is a means of eradicating all these issues (the corruption). However, it is not the method of the law' (Zawawi, 2007).

Rahim's argument and Safuan's actions exhibit certain fallacies. Firstly, they reinforce Mahathir's stereotypical perspective regarding the concept of amok among the Malays, as well as Safuan's actions mirroring Jebat's behaviour, which Shaharuddin (1984) describes as pre-political actions. Such actions are unlikely to enact meaningful change or revolution, as evidenced by Jebat's historical failure in this regard. Indeed, as Shaharuddin (1984) contends, Jebat represents merely another feudal figure incapable of contributing beyond the established framework's confines. Mahathir (1970) states,

'Amok is a Malay word. It is a word now universally understood. There is no other single word that can quite describe amok. And the reason is obvious, for amok describes yet another facet of the Malay character. Amok represents the external physical expression of the conflict within the Malay, which is his perpetual observance of the rules and regulations of his life causes in him.

(p. 153)

Haji Shahban's ancestry traces back to a Malay warrior, as he indicates. This lineage is elaborated upon in a flashback when he expresses his discontent with the corrupt leadership of Melati Holding to his wife. In a subsequent flashback, Haji Shahban asserts to Safuan that there is nothing inherently wrong with the concept of running amok. He posits that 'amok' and 'insanity' are distinct phenomena, noting that historical figures such as Jebat, Datok Maharajalela, and other patriots also exhibited similar behaviours. In contrast, Syed Hussein Alatas (1989) challenges Mahathir's viewpoint, arguing that the term and phenomena of 'amok' should not be exclusively associated with Malays but rather understood as a characteristic of individuals, analogous to the myths of laziness. By glorifying the notion of amok, Rahim seems to reinforce Mahathir's stereotypical perspective, which portrays Malays as *pengamok*

Towards the end of *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, Rahim affirms that he is not endorsing unlawful action, which quite embodies his statement at the beginning of this section perhaps because as he said, 'the law of the day will not permit his Jebat

characters to survive or go unpunished' (Zawawi, 2007, p. 8) and as Rahim (in Zawawi, 2007) states that Jebat 'stance is good but his methods can be corrected, can be questioned'(p. 8). This sentence from Rahim affirms what I said in the previous section: He is actually not upholding Jebat but is more haunted by him. He wanted his character to take action like Jebat, but at the same time, considering 'to be like Tuah'. Safuan, who is the mastermind of the series of murders, at last surrenders to the police. It suddenly alleviates after having a one-to-one fight with the agent of restoring order in this film, Saiful (Eman Manan), his younger brother. Therefore, I would like to draw attention to Zawawi's statements (2007), which are;

'In *MSP*, the resolution emerges out of a contestation of values between the brothers themselves as Saiful refuses to kill the innocent Hanis, Yusoff's daughter with whom he has fallen in love and is prepared to defend with his own life. The climax is the re-enactment of the legendary Tuah-Jebat *silat* battle between Safuan, the eldest brother (representing Jebat?) and Saiful, the younger brother (representing Tuah?). The difference is in the outcome. In contrast to the legend in which Tuah successfully kills off Jebat, in *MSP* it is not 'Tuah' (Saiful) but 'Jebat' (Safuan) who wins the battle of the day but Safuan refuses to kill his younger brother, Saiful.'

(p. 8)

The portrayal of Tuah and Jebat in this film presents a complex narrative that varies depending on the interpretive lens applied. From a political standpoint, Saiful embodies the role of Tuah, as he is tasked with safeguarding the daughter of Yusuf, a member of the Board of Directors at Melati Holding, thereby restoring social order. Conversely, when viewed within the context of familial dynamics, represented by the Haji Shahban family, Jebat can be likened to Saiful, who defies his brothers' directives, thus reflecting the warrior spirit inherited from his father. It is noteworthy that by the film's conclusion, it is unveiled that Saiful is not responsible for the demise of the Board of Directors; rather, that role is fulfilled by his brothers. Furthermore, Saiful is assigned a 'special' mission to eliminate Hanis (Noorkumalasari), the daughter of one of the directors, with whom he has fallen in love.

Regarding artistic strategy, Safuan's intention to eliminate Hanis appears to be the most incongruous, as it is evident that he has primarily targeted other board members rather than their relatives. Nevertheless, in the case of Yusof, Safuan opts to inflict suffering analogous to the pain experienced in witnessing his father's demise.

Disregarding the feeble motive underlying this decision, the orchestration to eliminate Hanis evokes parallels with the narrative of Jebat, who executed thousands of Malaccan individuals following his defeat by Hang Tuah. While this act may seem arbitrary and inhumane to some, Kassim (1996) interprets it as a form of protest and disillusionment directed toward the Malaccan populace, who perpetuate the feudal system, thereby rendering themselves deserving of such consequences. Consequently, Safuan's scheme to eliminate Hanis transcends mere retribution against Yusof for the loss of his daughter; it is, in fact, a protest against a society that remains complacent within corrupt systems. The climactic confrontation between Safuan and Saiful symbolises a struggle between an individual seeking to challenge the established order (Safuan) and one who aspires to uphold it (Saiful).

4.3.1 Murdering as a Manifestation of Destabilising Capitalism

The motif of death is central to the narrative of *Matinya Seorang Patriot* and to reinforce this motif, the film commences with the funeral of Haji Shaaban, emphasizing the demise of the patriots, as indicated by the title. Throughout the film, a series of murders significantly contributes to the unfolding narratives. This series of murders and attempted murders, I argue, manifests the destabilisation of the corrupt capitalist system. Within the context of the narrative, when these board members perceive themselves to be in a stable position following the death of Haji Saaban, the sons of Haji Saaban disrupt this stability through a series of murders. The initial murder involves Jamali, a board member and the mastermind behind various malevolent schemes. This scene begins with Shamsudin, who departs from Jamali and his girlfriend to attend a nightclub to celebrate his success in eliminating Haji Shaaban's influence. Following Shamsudin's exit, Jamali indulges with his girlfriend in alcohol, dancing, and music, which encapsulates the moral decline of this New Malay society. The film employs intercutting shots and soundtracks, juxtaposing the murderer (one of Haji Shaaban's sons) with visuals of Jamali's girlfriend dancing. The music transitions between suspenseful and energetic tones, paralleling the alternation of shots. Subsequently, Jamali and his girlfriend enter the shower together, but suddenly, he hears a bell ring, mistakenly believing it is Shamsudin. At this moment, Jamali is attacked by the murderer. In this scene, Rahim chooses to highlight contrast: the murderer dons a silat uniform against the backdrop of a modern, affluent residence, illustrating the differing values each character embodies. Ultimately, Jamali is killed,

and his cries go unheard by his girlfriend in the bathroom due to the high volume of the music.

The second board member murdered by Haji Shaaban's son is Kadim, who is depicted as engaging in the act of murder while jogging. This scene is notable for the interaction of two instances of intuition or instinct, which Heide (2002) refers to as 'telepathy-triggered cross-cutting of earlier Malaysian cinema' (p. 106). The first instance occurs when Kadim encounters a monkey's wreckage, provoking a sense of restlessness within him. The second layer is when the scene of Kadim being killed is juxtaposed with the scene of Haji Shaaban's wife visiting his grave to pray; she suddenly experiences a feeling of unease and an instinct that something ominous is occurring, specifically the murder orchestrated by her son. Rahim employs the *silat* uniform as a motif, signalling that this murder is perpetrated by one of Haji Shaaban's sons.

Another individual who has been killed is referred to as P.C. In the mahjong scene, his companion questions how he can master the courage to continue playing despite the recent murders of two of his colleagues. Prior to his own murder, he expressed a lack of concern regarding the killings, even boasting about possessing a pistol while engaging in the fight. His murder is depicted under low-key light on a rainy day. Despite having a pistol, he is swiftly killed due to the heavy rain, which impairs both his vision and mobility. This scene revisits the motif of the *silat* uniform, underscoring the notion that this murder is orchestrated by the sons of Haji Shaaban.

In a different context, Puan Hajah, the wife of Haji Shahban, frequently expresses her distress or intuition regarding the hostile acts committed by her sons. When her intuition becomes overwhelming, she reacts with aggressive vocalisations reminiscent of possession. This behaviour coincides with a series of murders involving the board of directors of Melati Holding. Puan Hajah is also plagued by memories of her husband, Haji Shahban, who harboured intentions of violent retribution against Jamali, Shamsudin, Khadeem, and Yusuf, the directors of Melati Holding. Her apprehensions materialise in the murderous plans Safuan and his siblings devised targeting these directors. Additionally, a flashback reveals an incident at a *silat* court where Haji Shahban articulates Puan Hajah's concerns about their children learning *silat*, as she fears it may lead to aggression. Haji Shahban advises their children to refrain from misusing their martial arts skills. However, the malfeasance exhibited by

Safuan and his brothers has indeed manifested, intensifying Puan Hajah's distress. Regarding the cross-cutting techniques in the film, Heide (2006) argues,

‘The cross-cutting techniques also function to create a sense of foreboding and predestination– while cleverly edited together, such scenes are linked by a fate-oriented omniscience and purpose typical of 1950s Indian and Malay cinema. There are also references to the Malay cinema’s Golden Age in the casting of Saadiah as the mother (Saadiah was a major actor of the 1950’s, starring in films like *Penarik Beca*, *Hang Tuah*, *Semerah Padi* and *Antara Dua Darjat*) and the inclusion of a P. Ramlee song, sung by the village children in the presence of Haji Shahban (the only song in the film).’

(p. 211)

On the other hand, I posit that the ‘death’ depicted in *Matinya Seorang Patriot* exhibits a complex yet distinctive approach, primarily focusing on two characters: Yusuf Mahmud, portrayed by S. Roomai Noor, and his mother, Puan Hajah, played by Saadiah. Examining the character Yusuf Mahmud, the Chairman of Melati Holding, evokes a profound sense of horror and unease. This is particularly evident in his psychological turmoil as he grapples with the spectre of being the next victim in a series of murders targeting his board of directors. His anxiety and dread are exacerbated by the mounting tension and the impending threat to his life. Furthermore, it is significant to note that the onset of these murders coincides with a deterioration in his health, marked by a pre-existing heart condition. Additionally, flashbacks featuring Haji Shahban's menacing threats to expose Yusuf's corrupt activities to the Prime Minister further intensify his psychological distress. It is crucial to note that the murder scenes in *Matinya Seorang Patriot* are often depicted with low-key lighting and a noir aesthetic, creating an air of mystery around the murderer, rendering them enigmatic and haunting.

On the other hand, although there is no literal ghost or any exorcism depicted in the film, I argue that the sons of Haji Shahban (excluding Saiful) are possessed by their father's warrior spirit. In one scene, when several villagers advise Safuan to assume his father's position at Melati Holding, one of them states, ‘*Sifat-sifat Haji Shahban hidup segar dalam tubuh badan kamu, Safuan*’ (the attributes of Haji Shahban live vividly within you, Safuan [my translation]). This illustrates how those around him recognize that he embodies the values and spirit of Haji Shahban. In another scene, Safuan tells his mother, ‘*Sekarang kami nak menamatkan usaha untuk Allahyarham pula.*

Janganlah ganggu usaha kami mak' (We wish to complete our deceased father's work. Please do not disturb our efforts, mother [my translation]). Much like ghosts that haunt those who have wronged them, Safuan and his brothers engage in actions that mirror this vengeful behaviour, but they do so in honour of their father, Haji Shahban.

In a broader context, *Matinya Seorang Patriot* addresses monetary politics and the integration of politics and business. It is noteworthy that Rahim (as cited in Zawawi, 2007) expresses a desire to touch upon the subject of 'corruption in high places', drawing upon his own 'knowledge' and 'observation'. Although Rahim does not specify the nature of the corruption he refers to, Wain's (2009) analysis of the politics of Fleet Holding is remarkable and carries significant implications. As previously mentioned, Rahim began his film-making career at Fleet Communication, a subsidiary of Fleet Holding, after being appointed to lead Fleet Communication by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Ku Li). According to Wain (2009), Ku Li, upon obtaining approval from Tun Abdul Razak, established the UMNO Political Fund, which was regarded as a 'special fund' that 'should not be linked to major businessmen who dealt with the government; nor should it have anything to do with government contracts' (p. 127). Ku Li commenced investing UMNO funds in the stock market with the approval of Tun Abdul Razak, who served as the second Prime Minister of Malaysia. In 1972, under the auspices of Tun Razak, 'Ku Li acquired 80 percent of the operations of Singapore's Straits Times Press in Kuala Lumpur' (p. 127) and subsequently 'repackaged them as the New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd' (p. 127). According to Wain (2009), Fleet Holdings Sdn. held the shares in New Straits Times Press. Bhd., a company established in 1972 by Ku Li himself.

In 1984, Daim Zainuddin assumed a significant role within Fleet Holding, succeeding Junus Sudin (Wain, 2009). According to Wain (2009), Daim 'exercised some of that authority immediately – calling himself the 'de facto treasurer' — as he held control over Fleet and its subsidiary companies' (p. 129). As Ku Li emerged as a rival to Mahathir, the latter sought to diminish Ku Li's influence. Daim, a close associate of Mahathir and one of Malaysia's most prominent bumiputra businessmen, played a crucial role in intertwining politics and business in Malaysia (Wain, 2009). Mahathir and Daim were driven by a shared ambition to advance Malaysia into a modern industrialised society (Wain, 2009).

According to Wain (2009), Mahathir's persuasion of Daim to contest a parliamentary seat led to Daim's election victory. Subsequently, in 1984, Daim

succeeded Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah as the finance minister and treasurer of UMNO. Wain (2009) notes, 'As UMNO split a few years later and polarized around factions led by Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh, the matter was bitterly debated' (p. 130). Despite the controversy, Fleet under Daim ditched Ku Li's 'passive approach' to investing (Wain, 2009). Through Mahathir's instruction to 'shake up the group by tightening management and financial control and getting the companies "really moving", Daim sought to turn a profit in a hurry' (Wain, 2009, p. 132). It is plausible that Rahim Razali was influenced by the organisational 'shake-up' that prompted his departure from Fleet Communication to produce *'Matinya Seorang Patriot'* with ZSA Production, owned by Zarul Albakri, in 1984. Furthermore, amid numerous money-politics scandals, this situation closely aligns with Rahim's comments, which were based on his 'knowledge' and 'observation' (Zawawi, 2007).

4.3.2 'The Patriot' of Essentialism

Yuhanis, also known as Hanis and portrayed by Noorkumalasari, is the daughter of Yusuf Mahmud, the chairman of Melati Holding, and works in the entertainment industry. Her romantic involvement with Saiful unfolds under the sinister machinations of Safuan, who conspires to have her killed. Initially depicted as a Westernised individual, Hanis exhibits a desire to delve into what she perceives as 'national culture.' In her discourse with her superior, Tarmimi Serigar, she argues for the integral incorporation of cultural elements into the productions she manages for her clients, resisting the notion of adapting solely universal themes through the use of jazz and ballet. Saiful later joins this dialogue, reinforcing Hanis's stance by asserting the existence of universal components within national culture, thereby negating the need to resort to Western elements. This represents the essentialist perspective on culture, which aligns with Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia. This viewpoint aims to restore the past and operates under the belief that there are original elements within a culture.

Consequently, essentialists reject new developments and assert that culture is an extrinsic rather than intrinsic phenomenon. Following this exchange, Hanis grows closer to Saiful, leading to the development of their romantic relationship. Hanis's quest to engage with her indigenous culture is facilitated through her connection with Saiful. Their courtship is illustrated through various scenes, including a visit to Petrosains, a science and technology museum and theme park managed by Petroleum Nasional

Berhad (Petronas), followed by an experience of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry). Hanis is depicted as both enthralled and absorbed by the performance, implying a reconnection with her cultural roots. This not only endears her to Saiful but also distinguishes her from other members of the affluent contemporary Malay community, who have drifted away from their cultural identity. Heide (2006) states that the ‘death of the patriot’ is a cause for mourning and retribution, but also hints at the end of an era and a reconsideration of traditional values and heroes. In this way, the film’s title references Usman Awang’s play, *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan* (The Death of a Warrior), which centres on *Hang Jebat* (1961). In this context, the film resonates with the thematic element of essentialism, akin to that of the film *Abang*.

In relation to Hanis and Saiful’s perspectives on national culture, I argue that their views reflect the National Culture Policy (NCP), which aims to position Malay-Muslim culture as the central element of Malaysian identity. It is noteworthy that Rahim Razali is recognised as one of the presenters at the National Culture Congress (the precursor to the National Culture Policy) (Faisal, 2021). Faisal (2021) indicates that Rahim presented alongside Krishen Jit, Syed Alwi, and Usman Awang within the theatre section. Although I encountered limitations in obtaining detailed information about Rahim’s specific presentation, the dialogue between Hanis and Saiful reinforces Rahim’s stance on the policy, suggesting that he is aligned with the National Culture initiative. Nevertheless, the term ‘national’ within the context of the National Culture Policy is not sufficiently inclusive for a multicultural Malaysia, as it largely embodies a Malay-Muslim-centric approach, often overlooking the contributions of other ethnicities that shape the nation (Faisal, 2021; Sumit Mandal, 2008). According to Heide (2006), Saiful thus emerges as the quintessential Malay, a status initially attributed to Safuan and Haji Shahban.

He recognises the intricacies of contemporary Malaysian culture while reaffirming the importance of Malay traditions. Discourses propagated through Saiful and Hanis position Rahim’s voice as one that seeks to elevate Malay-Muslim values and culture, aiming to assert dominance over the concept of ‘national culture’. Saiful subsequently introduces Yohanis, whom he perceives as culturally ignorant due to her urban, Western background, to traditional Malay culture, including a Wayang performance, where Saiful even participates as a musician in the *dalang*’s orchestra (Heide, 2006). Consequently, the national culture advanced by the government serves primarily to reinforce the hegemony of Malay-Muslim identity and political interests,

thus favouring UMNO and its affiliates. This assertion is corroborated by Sumit (2008), noting that: ‘The reified notion of Malay culture promoted by the NCP has strongly shaped arts and cultural activities funded by the government’ (p. 282). For Heide (2006), ‘the film’s cross-cultural references are employed and acknowledged, only to be denied and rejected; the hybridity of Indian culture and Malaysian culture is ultimately discredited in favour of a Malay homogeneity’ (p. 210).

Essentialism, when framed through the lens of ‘national culture,’ is intricately connected to Mahathir’s concept of Malay nationalism. In his formative years, Mahathir wrote several essays on culture and mass culture. Among these is the essay ‘Town Malays Drop National Dress,’ published in *Early Years* (1948). In this work, Mahathir (1948) asserts, ‘...Malay men have forgotten that their race has a national dress worthy of their pride. They have lost the art and desire to wear this dress’ (p. 15). He further remarks, ‘The cosmopolitan atmosphere of this city, the American tourist and the cinemas have their effects and none too pleasing’ (p. 15). The complexity surrounding the reasons of modern-minded figures such as Mahathir engage with tradition and exhibit essentialist views on culture is elucidated by Amoroso (2014) in her discussion on traditionalism, which defines traditionalism as ‘the conscious use by the British of traditional elements of the earlier Malay kingdoms to consolidate their own administration’ (p. xii). Amoroso (2014) further contends that ‘these new rituals of state safeguard the Malay ruler’s privileged position while simultaneously shielding their subjects from the realities of colonial rule’ (p. xii). Amoroso (2014) asserts that,

‘It was the central paradox of colonial rule in Malay states that, while the economic, demographic, and political foundations of the peninsula were transformed, the British aimed to preserve Malay society in a traditional form—overwhelmingly rural, politically docile, and deferential to traditional aristocracies and royalty’.

(p. 4)

Nationalism and the essentialist perspective on culture, in relation to the idea of NCP (New Cultural Policy), are inherently linked to the dynamics of colonialism. Mahathir’s approach to culture reflects his promotion of ‘Asian Values’ and ‘Look East Policies,’ which echo the colonial perspectives he seeks to resist. Thus, a paradox emerges: despite Mahathir’s efforts to differentiate himself from the West—historically representative of colonialism—he paradoxically aligns with colonial expectations of

identity. As former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher poignantly remarked to Mahathir, ‘If you go too far east, you will end up in the west.’

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I present a comprehensive analysis of two films directed by Rahim Razali, namely *Abang* and *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, which reveal two significant observations. Firstly, despite Rahim’s apprehension regarding the morality of the affluent families depicted, his films do not imply that the systemic framework is inherently problematic. Secondly, Rahim’s interpretation of the revolution, particularly regarding the concepts of Jebat and amok, remains partially restricted to the idea of stability. This presents a paradox within Rahim Razali’s cinematic works. However, he expresses concern about Mahathirist neoliberal capitalism, ultimately contending that the issues lie not in the system itself but in the moral character of individuals operating within it. Furthermore, there is no denying that Rahim is a prominent director of his time, given his focus on socio-political issues facing the Malay community. Nonetheless, although his films are closely associated with the Jebat narrative, Rahim’s perspectives appear limited by his endorsement of capitalism within the context of Mahathirism. Conversely, while Rahim’s perspective on kampung may differ from Mahathir’s, both ideologies assert that Kampung should complement modern Malay identity. I assert that this narrative presented by Rahim constitutes a facet of hegemony, as it seeks to convey to the audience that, despite the extensive developments initiated by Mahathir, he has maintained the essence of ‘Malayness’ through the preservation of Kampung. Thus, I argue and emphasise that both films correspond with Khoo’s (2003) assertion of a nuanced criticism toward Mahathir.

CHAPTER 5
‘A DOCTOR IN A *KAMPUNG*’ –
MAHATHIRISM, MODERNITY AND MEDICINE
IN *BILA HATI TELAH RETAK* (1983)
AND *TSU-FEH SOFIAH* (1986)

5.1 A Doctor as a Saviour?

‘You know that Conan Doyle who wrote *The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes* was a doctor. I read Conan Doyle first, then read medicine. The way Conan Doyle solves his problems is the doctor solves his cases.

-Mahathir Mohamad (in Khoo, 1995, p. 297)

The subtitle of this chapter, ‘A Doctor in a Kampung,’ draws inspiration from Mahathir’s 2011 autobiography titled *A Doctor in the House: The Memoirs of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad*. This subtitle refers to the films analysed in this chapter, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (Rahman B, 1984) and *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (Rahim Razali, 1986), both of which focus on medical professionals: a doctor in *Tsu Feh Sofiah* and a public healthcare nurse in *Bila Hati Telah Retak*. Both characters, Tsu Feh and Rohana, enter rural areas for distinct purposes. However, they share the overarching goal of ‘curing’ and ‘reviving’ the rural populace, who are perceived as suffering from society’s ‘ailments’. While both films tackle different themes and issues, Tsu Feh and Rohana confront two varieties of ‘disease’ stemming from a common source: ‘backwardness’ and ‘intolerance.’

The thesis articulated in this chapter draws inspiration from Khoo Boo Teik’s examination of Mahathir’s political perspective, which is influenced by a medical framework. Consequently, Mahathir interprets socio-political issues through a medical lens. His seminal work, *The Malay Dilemma*, exemplifies this approach by incorporating diagnostic and therapeutic components (Khoo, 1995). This analogy positions society as a patient requiring diagnosis and treatment, or, in a more critical light, as a frail entity in need of healing. In this context, a Foucauldian analysis reveals significant power dynamics between the physician and the patient. Foucault posits that a form of governmentality emerges during medical consultations, suggesting that

contemporary medicine exerts an overarching authority over the individual's body, a phenomenon he terms the 'medical gaze.'

In light of this, Mahathir positions himself as a 'doctor' tasked with curing Malaysia, implying he holds an inherently authoritative role in shaping the nation's direction. He is convinced he understands what is most beneficial for society, particularly for the Malay community, and believes that transitioning Malaysia into a developed nation is essential. He perceives 'backwardness' as a 'disease' afflicting Malaysians. Notably, while Mahathir initially aspired to study law in the United Kingdom, his medical career became intertwined with his political ambitions. Just as a lawyer can influence societal norms, so, too, can a physician, especially when the number of Malay doctors was notably scarce. This context supports Khoo's (1995) assertion; Mahathir practised medicine as a means to enter politics and then advocated for medicine as a vehicle for political influence. Thus, the principal theme of this chapter revolves around the notion that Mahathir's medical persona, associated with modernity and progress, reflects his perceived messianic role towards his '*bangsa Melayu*' and the nation of Malaysia.

In light of the aforementioned concerns, this section contends that both films, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* and *Tsu Feh Sofiah*, illustrate the notion of a doctor (medic) as an agent of restoration order and power reinstatement, thereby positing the concept of modernity (via medicine) as a saviour of the so-called 'uncivilised' society. The characters from both films are argued to personify Mahathirism, projecting the ideals associated with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. This chapter may serve as a response to or an expansion upon the arguments presented by Khoo Gaik Cheng in her essay 'Film Made by Women', which posits that the leading female characters in *Selubung* (directed by Shuhaimi Baba) and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (directed by Erma Fatimah) align with the archetype of Mahathirist womanhood. However, I intend not to assess the validity of such an argument but rather to illustrate the multifaceted representations of women in 1980s cinema. While Khoo's writing predominantly addresses 1990s films, I aim to demonstrate that 1980s films featuring women as central characters possess a nuanced complexity of personification, revealing that these characters neither wholly oppose nor fully endorse Mahathirism.

5.2 Doctor Politician and Clinical Approach

‘He left medicine for politics only to practise politics as medicine.’

-Khoo Boo Teik (1995, p. 10)

I argue that the most novel aspect of Mahathirism is its embodiment in the figure of the doctor-politician, characterized by a clinical approach that can be analysed through a Foucauldian lens of the medical gaze. This critical element, however, tends to be overlooked by many scholars researching Mahathir and Mahathirism, although Khoo Boo Teik does address it in a subsection of a chapter in his work, ‘Paradoxes of Mahathirism’. Consequently, examining the influence of Mahathir’s clinical approach in Malaysian cinema as a means of personifying both Mahathir and Mahathirism can significantly enrich the discourse surrounding this ideology. Before delving into film analyses, I will establish a connection between Mahathirism and the concepts of ‘doctor-politicians’ and ‘clinical approaches.’

Mahathir Mohamed holds the distinction of being the only individual with a medical degree to ascend to the position of Prime Minister in Malaysia. Prior to his tenure, however, there were several other notable ‘doctor-politicians,’ including Tun Dr Ismail, Dr Tan Chee Khoon, Dr Lim Chong Eun, and Dr Chan Man Hin (Khoo, 1995). Furthermore, according to Khoo (1995),

‘Many would admit the advantages of using a private medical practice as the launching pad for a political career; the doctor’s rapport with his ‘patient-constituents’, his social standing in the ‘community-constituency’, and the personal-professional-financial independence which comes from thriving ‘self-employment’. None would disparage the individual qualities, talent, and dedication which went into the making of each renowned case of ‘medicine-to-politics’ transition..’

(p. 294)

To add, Mahathir himself stated, ‘a certain degree of restlessness...which would make total commitment to medicine quite unsatisfying’ (p. 294). From 1953 to 1957, Mahathir served as a government doctor in Penang, Alor Star, Perlis, and Pulau Langkawi. In 1957, he established the MAHA Clinic, the first Malay private medical practice in Alor Star. He garnered a reputation for competence, diligence, and

dedication. His compassion for patients was evident in his bedside manner and his willingness to provide free consultations and medicines to those less fortunate. In 1958, he communicated with the Kedah State Surgeon, offering to assist in managing emergency cases at the General Hospital, stand by for surgical operations, and provide his services pro bono. This situation parallels the character of Dr Idris from the film *Doktor* (1958), which narrates the story of a Malay doctor facing challenges in operating his clinic due to his commitment to offering free services to impoverished individuals.

In Khoo's (1995) analysis, Mahathir's 'medico-politico' approaches are examined within the context of his populism, particularly in the subchapter titled 'The Doctor and the Common Crowd'. Khoo contends that Mahathir's background as a physician fosters a dual empathy: he relates to both his fellow doctors and the rakyat, especially those who are ill. Mahathir reflects on this connection by stating, 'The practice of medicine came easily to me. I discovered I was naturally sympathetic to people and their problems. It was very satisfying to be able to cure a sick person' (p. 296).

In addition to that, during the Conference on Business in Southeast Asia held in February 1977, Mahathir (in Khoo 1995) states,

'As a doctor, one is always tempted to look at problems as disease, and the people affected by them as patients. Since taking politics and the chores of running a Government, that temptation has seldom been resisted by me, and I must admit that the clinical approach to problems pays.'

(p.297)

Mahathir's clinical approaches are evident in several of his works and actions. For instance, his book, 'The Malay Dilemma', is structured to reflect the methodical approach that doctors apply when addressing medical issues (Khoo, 1995, p. 298). The text begins with a pathological report identifying the problems faced by the Malay community, which culminated in the events of May 13, 1969. It progresses to a therapeutic analysis of the Malay value system and code of ethics. The book concludes with what he refers to as the treatment of body politics (p. 300), asserting, 'If you examine all that I have said, I will admit to forthrightness and frankness, but I will not admit to being extreme' (p. 300).

Second, Mahathir's clinical approach is evident in his political actions; as Musa Hitam states (in Khoo), Mahathir was likened to a 'good doctor who wanted to push things down your throat' (p. 298). Furthermore, Khoo (1995) reports that other unnamed members of UMNO indicated that Mahathir's response to Team B during the UMNO General Assembly was to adopt a 'medical solution...to cut out the cancer' (p. 298). It seems significant that Mahathir frequently asserts, 'As a doctor, I know how to choose good medicine' (p. 298). Therefore, this 'doctor-politician' dimension not only constructs Mahathir as a populist figure but also underscores his authoritarian tendencies.

Nevertheless, the concept of the 'doctor-politician' parallels, albeit in a distinct manner, the notion of the 'medical gaze' as articulated by Michel Foucault. This phenomenon is characterised as the process by which physicians integrate a patient's narrative into a 'biomedical paradigm', thereby excluding what is considered extraneous information. Within this framework, physicians are viewed as emphasising the biomedical aspects of patients' issues, leading to a reduction of patients to mere biological components rather than recognising their personhood. According to O'Callaghan (2022), the principles of rationalism, binary thinking, and the underlying beliefs prevalent in Western medicine reinforce the dominance of the medical gaze.

In the context of Mahathir, his perspective is distinctive due to his 'clinical approach' to analysing society and politics. This 'clinical approach' aligns closely with the Foucauldian concept of the medical gaze, which I propose to refer to as 'clinical approaches' in Mahathir's framework. As previously discussed, his work, *The Malay Dilemma*, is characterised by these 'clinical approaches', reflecting a tendency towards rationalism, binary thinking, and ideologies drawn from Western medicine. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the selected films, *Tsu Feh Sofiah* and *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, also incorporate elements of 'clinical approaches' within their narratives.

However, before concluding this section, I wish to highlight the statement made by Mahathir in his book, 'A Doctor in the House', where he remarks:

'As a career, there were only two things she (Mahathir's mother) didn't want me to become: a police inspector or, ironically, a doctor. Either she would mean that I would never get any sleep. But when I did go study medicine, she didn't object'.

(pp. 16 -17)

It remains a mystery why Mahathir's mother opposed his pursuit of a medical career, as Mahathir himself lacks insight into her reasoning. However, one might hypothesise that, in addition to the medical profession, she also disapproved of him becoming a police inspector. Both professions—doctor and police inspector—share the commonality of demanding significant hope and responsibility. Furthermore, each career entails various risks and dangers, as well as the potential for the misuse of power inherent in such roles.

5.3 Mediating Medicine in Malaysian Cinema

The representation of physicians, particularly doctors and nurses, is a prevalent theme in Malay and Malaysian cinema. In 1958, Phani Majumdar directed a film entitled *Doktor* ('A Doctor'), which centres on the character of Dr Idris. The narrative follows Dr Idris's journey to fulfil his father's aspiration for him to become a doctor, a dream rooted in the father's trauma from losing his daughter due to the absence of medical professionals in their kampung. The father dedicates himself entirely, making numerous sacrifices, until this ambition is realised. Despite qualifying as a certified doctor, Idris faces significant rejection from the local community, which is deeply entrenched in traditional medicine. Ultimately, Dr Idris gains acceptance from the kampung residents; however, he faces challenges in managing his clinic as his father prohibits him from accepting payment from the local working class. A pivotal moment in Idris's life occurs when he is unable to save his father during a surgical operation, leading to profound emotional distress. Nonetheless, his despair begins to lift when he successfully operates on his girlfriend, aiding in her recovery.

During the late Studio Era, P. Ramlee directed his film *Dr Rushdi* (1970), characterised by its 'noirish-Hitchcockian' style. The narrative centres on a dedicated physician who grapples with marital issues when his wife expresses dissatisfaction over the lack of attention he provides, particularly concerning her sexual needs. This discontent prompts her to pursue a romantic affair with one of his friends, thus catalysing the film's central conflict. In an attempt to manipulate circumstances and deprive his former spouse of any insurance money, Dr Rushdi stages his own death and enters into a marriage with his nurse, who harbours romantic feelings for him. Ultimately, Dr. Rushdi's character evolves into that of an anti-hero, culminating in the

murders of both his ex-wife and his friend, after which he absconds to an indeterminate location.

In addition, P. Ramlee directed the film *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), which, while not centred on a medical professional, features an iconic character named Dr Ismadi, portrayed by Ahmad Mahmud. The narrative unfolds around the relationship between Kassim Selamat and Sabariah, a union opposed by Nyonya Mansur, Kassim's mother-in-law. The plot escalates when Nyonya Mansur orchestrates a deceit regarding Sabariah's demise, plunging Kassim into profound sorrow, ultimately leading to his blindness. However, despite his visual impairment, Kassim Selamat's exceptional talents remain intact, propelling him to greater acclaim and culminating in a performance tour. During his tour in Singapore, Kassim encounters Sabariah and her husband, Dr Ismadi, who extends a free service to restore Kassim's sight.

The intriguing aspect of these three films lies in the multifaceted portrayals of their respective doctors, who are depicted not merely as medical practitioners but also as 'doctors' of society—engaging in moral and modernising endeavours. Each of these doctors does not solely focus on reinstating morality and order; they also seek to reclaim their own power, specifically over their subjects. In the film *Doktor* (1958), Dr Idris experiences personal disillusionment when he fails to save his father during surgery, symbolising a loss of his power to ensure the recovery of both body and soul. However, his sense of authority is restored when he successfully saves his girlfriend in a subsequent operation, alleviating his feelings of depression and sorrow. This theme of power restoration is echoed in the film featuring Dr. Rushdi, whose act of killing his wife in response to her scandal reflects an attempt to reclaim his authority as a man and husband, which her actions had undermined. Simultaneously, Dr Ismadi's intervention on behalf of Kassim Selamat can be interpreted as a means to recover his own wife, Sabariah, from sorrow while simultaneously asserting power over Kassim Selamat. In a pivotal dialogue towards the film's conclusion, Dr Ismadi implores Kassim to forgive Sabariah for the sake of his own recovery of sight. In retaliation, Kassim Selamat protests by inflicting self-harm and blinding himself once more. In conclusion, the representation of physicians within the framework of Malay cinema during the studio period is significant, as these figures serve a dual function of reinstating societal equilibrium while engaging with intricate power dynamics involving their patients.

In addition to *Tsu Feh Sofiah* and *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, another significant film addressing medical themes in the post-studio era of Malaysian cinema is *Sindrom Mana*

Anakku (1984), produced by Filem Negara Malaysia. This film confronts the critical issue of child trafficking, centring around Dr Kamal (portrayed by Hail Amir), who becomes intrigued by the case of Rohani's missing child, suspecting that she had given birth shortly before their encounter. Alongside Rohani's boyfriend, Kamal embarks on a quest to unravel the mystery, ultimately discovering that the *mak bidan* (midwife) who initially contacted the hospital for Rohani's assistance is, in fact, the leader of the trafficking syndicate. Consequently, the film seeks to illustrate how medical professionals engage with societal maladies, particularly the pervasive issue of child trafficking.

5.4 *Tsu-Feh Sofiah* (1986), 'Curing' *Takfiri* and Backwardness

In Pulau Mama (Mama Island), a Chinese doctor named Tsu Feh, who is from outside the island, is contemplating converting to Islam. Her motivation stems from a deeper study of the religion, influenced by poignant memories of her late mother, who did not have the opportunity to embrace Islam before her passing. However, Tsu Feh's spiritual journey proves complex, as the Muslim community on the island grapples with internal conflicts between scripturalist and syncretistic interpretations of Islam. Notably, Rahim Razali illustrates that the extremist ideologies on the island were introduced by external forces aiming to extend their influence; however, this context is not sufficiently elucidated by Rahim.

Tsu Feh becomes enamoured with Nik, played by Rahim Razali. As the narrative progresses towards its conclusion, an extremist faction kidnaps Nik's daughter, levelling threats against Tsu Feh to publicly declare her apostasy (*murtad*) during a Friday prayer at the mosque. Recalling that Nik possesses a firearm at his residence, Tsu Feh resolves to return to his house, intending to enact a plan to liberate Nik's daughter. Regrettably, her effort is thwarted, and she falls victim to kidnapping as well. The film culminates in an ambiguous resolution; Tsu Feh's fate remains uncertain, while Nik awaits her return, gazing out to sea on the beach, devoid of any indication of her whereabouts.

At a particular juncture, *Tsu Feh Sofiah* serves as a reflection or response to the 'takfiri' issues that emerged in Malaysia during the 1980s. This narrative is part of the broader context of the 'Islamisation Race' (Farish, 2014) between Mahathir's UMNO and the more Islamist factions, notably PAS, in their competition to position themselves as champions of Islam. To clarify, the term *takfiri* refers to the practice in which a

Muslim accuses another Muslim of being a non-believer (*kafir*). This could be Mahathir's strategy for handling the Islamic-oriented parties in Malaysian politics, especially those like the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and ABIM, as they continue to overwhelm the political arena. Yet, according to Farish A. Noor (2014), Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) leaders like Yusof Rawa argue 'the state-sponsored Islamisation programme of the UMNO-led state could only be seen as superficial as it took place within the context of the Malaysian economy that was embedded in the system of global (Western) capital' (p. 131). The campaign to demonise and discredit Mahathir's government happened during Yusof Rawa's leadership in the 1980s, which, according to Farish A. Noor (2014), occurred when PAS "went as far as accusing the leaders and members of UMNO of being kafir (infidels), munafikin (hypocrites) and traitors to Islam' (p. 131). Many twists and turns can be found in this conflict, and as this issue reached its peak, came the bloody tragedy of Memali involving the police force and the devotees of Ibrahim Libya (who is the religious leader and member of PAS) (Farish A. Noor, 2014). Notably, within the context of the film, director Rahim Razali refrains from directly identifying any specific party or entity; rather, it subtly implies a contrast between the 'moderate UMNO' and the 'fundamentalist PAS-Islamists'.

Rahim Razali conceptualises Tsu Feh as a physician embodying a significant purpose; she serves as a potent symbol capable of reconciling the discord between two Islamic ideologies, leveraging her clinical role to diagnose and heal. From the outset, Rahim highlights Tsu Feh's unwavering commitment to her profession, portraying it as something that transcends mere occupation. This is evidenced when she renders aid to a family involved in a vehicular accident while the wife is simultaneously in labour. This motif of medical intervention persists throughout the films. In 'Pulau Mama', Tsu Feh attends to Nik's daughter, who suffers an injury from a fall from a coconut tree and subsequently addresses a more severe injury resulting from a conflict between the clans of Alwi and Che Mad. A more significant 'malady' that Dr Tsu Feh adeptly resolves arises when she voluntarily subsidises the surgical expenses for Alwi's daughter, which subsequently diminishes the influence of Islamic extremists over Alwi and the community. Given Alwi's prominent role and influence on the island, his reduced financial reliance on the extremist group undermines the group's power in the locale. Consequently, Tsu Feh effectively 'cures' the rift between the two Muslim factions by this act.

Beyond her role as a physician, Tsu Feh emerges as a pivotal character who originates from an urban environment—symbolising modernity—and exists outside the traditional Malay-Muslim community of the island. Consequently, I contend that Tsu Feh serves as an emblem of moderation and modernity, a notion that gains further significance upon her transformation into ‘Sofiah’. This character evolution reflects a concordant worldview shared by Rahim Razali and Mahathir. In Mahathir's endeavours to navigate the landscape of Islamization, his administration sought to portray a more moderate iteration of Islam compared to groups such as PAS and other Islamist factions. This initiative was exemplified by the incorporation of Anwar Ibrahim, President of ABIM, and the introduction of Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam, among other strategic actions.

Considering the aforementioned concerns, it is evident that Tsu Feh, in her role within *Tsu Feh Sofiah*, addresses not only the contentious issue of ‘takfiri’ ideology but also aims to mitigate the ‘backwardness’ associated with scripturalist and fundamentalist Muslims on the island. The regressive mindset of the fundamentalist Muslims, particularly exemplified by Alwi and his clan, is illustrated by their extreme actions, such as the destruction of a farm due to mere suspicion regarding the halal status of the fertiliser used. Additionally, another instance is highlighted when Alwi forbids Tsu Feh from attempting to assist his daughter and instead consults a shaman for medical treatment. Ultimately, Tsu Feh succeeds in challenging Alwi’s ‘backwardness’ when he concedes to sending his daughter to a hospital for surgery, thereby embracing the principles of modern medicine.

In addition, Zainuddin Mydin (in Cheah, 2001) indicates that Mahathir perceives the Islamist movement as antiquated and regressive, attributing this characterisation to their fatalistic values and opposition to wealth accumulation. At one point, Mahathir noted that they discarded their television and refrigerator (Cheah, 2001). I acknowledge Rahim's perspective on these matters, as he identifies more as a ‘moderate’ Muslim, aligning with UMNO. Consequently, the demonisation of Islamists in *Tsu Feh Sofiah* resonates with Mahathir’s cynicism towards this movement and its proponents. Furthermore, two additional films from this era, *Fenomena* (Aziz M. Osman, 1990) and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (Erma Fatima, 1999), also convey a similar viewpoint regarding scripturalist (fundamentalist). The perception of Muslim preachers may often be characterised as outdated, narrow-minded, and resistant to progress. Within this context, Islamic revivalism emerged as a counter-narrative to

Mahathirism, exemplified by Darul Arqam, which was perceived as ‘anti-establishment’ due to its rejection of modern and Western products (Khoo, 1995).

In opposition to the interpretations of Islam presented by Darul Arqam and PAS, Mahathir aimed to position Islam as a platform for the Malays to embrace progress and modernisation. Notably, during the Third Islamic Summit Conference in 1981, he remarked that Muslim youth were ‘not productive and refused to work’ (Khoo, 1995, p.172). Additionally, Mahathir established the International Islamic University of Malaysia (UIAM) shortly before the 1982 general elections, following his official visit to Jeddah and other Arab nations (Khoo, 1995, pp. 175-176). Further, on July 6, 1982, he announced the creation of Bank Islam Malaysia Berhad (Khoo, 1995, p.177) and introduced the *Dasar Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam*, which was included in the Fourth Malaysian Plan (1981-1985). This policy aimed to implement progressive elements while highlighting the need for progress and modernisation (Khoo, 1995, p. 181). However, PAS President Yusuf Rawa criticised these initiatives as superficial Islamic projects that remain confined to global capitalism (Farish, 2014).

5.4.1 From Tsu Feh to Sofiah, Materialism to Spiritualism

‘It is important to understand this because it is all too easy for a community to be confused by the notion that poverty means spiritual strength and the possession of worldly wealth is synonymous with materialism.’

-Mahathir Mohamad (1986, pp. 106-107)

In terms of representation, Tsu Feh is depicted utilising the Malay Language as her medium of communication, even in interactions with relatives. This portrayal reflects the National Culture Policy intertwined with the Malay-Muslim hegemony. This portrayal may serve as a counternarrative to the stereotypical representations of non-Malay characters. Tsu Feh functions not only as a lead actress but also as a central figure within the narrative, showcasing a multifaceted persona that encompasses her roles as a doctor, a converted Muslim, and a woman.

The transformation of Tsu Feh from a medical professional, typically associated with modernity and scientific rationality, to an individual embracing spirituality through her conversion to Islam illustrates her multifaceted identity. While Tsu Feh is portrayed as a doctor grappling with takfiri issues, this does not categorise her as someone

prioritising materialism over spirituality. Moreover, the kampung residents who dissent against Alwi and his extremist faction are not depicted as materialistic; instead, they embody an Islamic ethos in a syncretic manner. This is exemplified by the Ketua Kampung, who emphasises to Alwi and his ‘dakwah’ group, ‘This Island is in no need to be Islamised. It has been Islam for a century (my translation).’

Conversely, Tsu Feh not only chooses Islam over her material existence, but she also disregards her father’s request to leave Pulau Mama, simultaneously forsaking her fiancée in her decision to embrace Islam. This represents a significant assertion of her agency, as she appears willing to sacrifice her familial and romantic relationships for her faith and beliefs. In a dialogue, her father accuses her late mother of being influenced by the ‘*ilmu guna-guna*’ (superstitious knowledge) of the island’s residents, suggesting that this is the reason her mother generously donated her resources to local charities. However, Tsu Feh firmly refutes the claim that the islanders employed black magic against her, asserting instead that they are fundamentally benevolent.

Furthermore, I interpret the mother’s willingness to financially support the people of the Island, whether as charity or *sedekah*, as indicative of her growing concern for her spiritual journey, rather than an emphasis on worldly material concerns. In this context, Tsu Feh’s nostalgia for her mother is intrinsically connected to her own spiritual path. In Islamic tradition, there exists a funeral ritual referred to as ‘*talkin*’ recitation. An imam or another religious authority typically leads this practice once the funeral proceedings have concluded. During the ‘*talkin*’, the imam recites the name of the deceased alongside the name of her mother, in contrast to the customary practice in daily life, where a Muslim’s name is usually paired with that of their father.

This text articulates Tsu Feh’s deep-seated nostalgia for her mother as a precursor to her eventual return to the *fitrah*, which translates to ‘origin’. However, it closely aligns with the concept of ‘divine’. An essential scene in the film illustrates Tsu Feh’s pivotal role in assisting a woman during childbirth. At this moment, I argue, she signifies her transformation towards her *fitrah*, which means her return to being a Muslim. The scene is enhanced by rainfall and subdued lighting, complemented by the recitation of the *azan*—a call to prayer within the Islamic tradition—and the theme song from the film *Kau Yang Satu*. These elements collectively evoke a profound sense of spirituality through the interplay of visual and auditory components. In this sequence, the depiction of Tsu Feh in low-light conditions is intentional rather than a result of

technical error; it highlights her facial and physical reactions, allowing the audience to experience her inner emotions through the cinematic techniques previously mentioned.

The concept of 'return to the fitrah (origin)' is a recurring motif in Rahim Razali's film. For instance, in the film *Abang*, Fuad (portrayed by Rahim Razali) travels from London to Malaysia, ultimately returning to his *kampung* (hometown) before embarking on a final journey back to God following his death. This trajectory symbolises a homecoming as a spiritual odyssey, signifying a return to fitrah. Furthermore, a parallel can be drawn between Tsu Feh and Fuad; Tsu Feh's return to Pulau Mama represents a form of 'homecoming.' This location holds deep significance as it is where her mother passed away, marking it as the last place she encountered her mother while she was alive.

The following night, this theme of 'back to the *fitrah*' is further reflected when Tsu Feh expresses to Nik that she experiences a feeling akin to being '*dilahirkan semula*' (born again). In this conversation beside the beach, when Tsu Feh looks at the beach, Nik gives Tsu Feh a Muslim name, Sofiah. This act of renaming Tsu Feh by Nik significantly impacts the montage of Tsu Feh almost drowning.

The sequence begins with a close-up of an alcohol bottle being consumed by Tsu Feh's brothers at the chalet. The camera then pans and zooms out to reveal her brother, who is still asleep in a chair outside the chalet. The scene transitions to Tsu Feh swimming alone at the beach, accompanied by ominous music in the background. Following this, the sequence includes Nik fishing at the beach, interspersed with shots of Tsu Feh swimming and her brother coughing while he sleeps. This montage becomes particularly effective as it intercuts her brother accidentally kicking the alcohol bottle until it cracks, coinciding with Nik hearing Tsu Feh's voice screaming for help as she begins to drown. The point-of-view shot emphasises Tsu Feh's struggle in the water. The intercutting continues with scenes of Nik swimming into the sea to rescue Tsu Feh, and her brother realises the perilous situation

Tsu Feh is in at the beach. This section illustrates the adequate capacity of intuition, known in the Malay language as '*firasat*', through Tsu Feh's brother and Nik. Ultimately, Nik succeeds in saving Tsu Feh, and the montage concludes with shots of the sea. I contend that by juxtaposing the alcohol bottle, a symbol of 'sin' in Islamic tradition, with sea water, which symbolises pure water or '*air mutlak*', effectively illustrates Tsu Feh's transition into the 'fitrah', representing purity. This scene can be interpreted as foreshadowing Tsu Feh's 'renewal', as she nearly drowns in the sea,

which parallels themes of purity and rebirth. A close analysis reveals that her rescue by Nik resembles a synchronous scene with her mother before death; the difference is that she is safe while her mother is dead after drowning.

In support of the above analysis, I would like to draw attention to Zekrgoo's (2024) arguments that:

‘The Eternal Ocean is a metaphor for Gods essence – veiled and hidden, intangible and incomprehensible. Waves that appear on the surface of the Ocean, on the other hand, symbolize divine attributes – endless variety of manifestations through whom people connect and relate to the Source.’

(p. 89)

According to Zekrgoo (2024), Hamzah Fansuri, the Sumatran religious scholar and Sufi ulama, elaborates on the *Wahdatul Wujud* (Unity of Being) by employing metaphors of ‘the union between waves and the ocean’. What interests me in Zekrgoo's (2024) article in relation to *Tsu Feh Sofiah* is the metaphoric image of waves and ocean that, as emphasised by Hamzah Fansuri, is the manifestation of ‘Unity of Being’. *Tsu Feh Sofiah* employs the ocean, waves, and water as recurring motifs throughout the film, culminating in a poignant scene in which the spectator sees Nik gazing despondently at the sea, awaiting Tsu Feh's return. Even prior to Tsu Feh's arrival on the island, the dialogues of Nik's mother subtly underscore the significance of the oceanic elements, water, and waves, which is ‘*Seorang perempuan cantik, putih melepak, datang di bawa ombak, akan menyelamatkan pulau ini* (A beautiful woman, with a fair complexion, will be brought by the waves and will save this island [my translation])’.

Hamzah (in Zekrgoo, 2024) illustrates the metaphor of waves symbolising manifestations of a superior power. Although waves inherently rely on the ocean for their existence, the ocean, in turn, requires waves as a means of expression and embodiment (Zekrgoo, 2024). The association of Tsu Feh with waves in Nik's mother's dialogue is presented as supportive of the Sufi themes evident in the film. Furthermore, Tsu Feh's ambiguous fate following her loss is interpreted as a return to the Eternal Ocean, a perspective articulated in Hamzah's arguments. This notion is reinforced by the cinematography, which increasingly focuses on the ocean as Nik gazes upon the

sea, symbolising his anticipation for the return of Tsu Feh. In support of that, Hamzah (as cited in Zekrgoo, 2024) wrote,

‘The waves are by nature transitory,
They go home to the Everlasting Sea’



Figure 5.1 Shot of the Beach and the Sea That Becomes a Leitmotif of the Film *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (1986).

Furthermore, this Sufism argument relates to Mahathir's point of view on Islamic discourse, in terms of Materialism versus Spiritualism. PAS President Yusuf Rawa criticised Mahathir's Islamic initiatives as superficial Islamic projects that remain confined to global capitalism (Farish, 2014). In addition to that, in his seminal book, *The Challenge*, particularly in a chapter 'Materialism and Spirituality', Mahathir (1986) started with the criticism on Socialism and Capitalism but the Mahathirist notion bold when he tries to sanitising capitalism by arguing capitalism would bring benefit to the ummah (the Muslim society) if it is bring into the right path and the right path for him is the Islamic way. Mahathir (1986) states,

‘The control of capitalism has become more difficult not only because capitalist can use their wealth to gain power but also because the system, developed rapidly in non-Muslim societies, which did not emphasize spirituality to begin with.’

(p. 57)

Mahathir's primary discourse in this chapter centres on the balance between materialism and spirituality. He posits that a free market and the accumulation of wealth do not inherently contradict one's spiritual beliefs. This perspective potentially challenges the rigid stance of certain Islamist factions that dismiss material wealth entirely. Mahathir (1986) posits that the pursuit of wealth does not inherently conflict with one's faith or spirituality. Therefore, this perspective should not be conflated with the notion that a commitment to a life of *zuhud* (asceticism) automatically detracts from an individual's spirituality.

However, Mahathir (1986) states,

‘Without wealth and efficiency, the Muslims will be oppressed and finally spiritual values too will be lost. Such is the relationship between spirituality and materialism and the effects of both sets of values on human society, particularly Muslim society.’

(p. 82)

In *Tsu Feh Sofiah*, Tsu Feh rejects her past life and emphasises that no external forces, not even financial incentives like ‘wang ringgit’ (money), can deter her conversion to Islam. This assertion highlights a resistance to Mahathirist interpretations of Islam. This text also relates to Tsu Feh's other, who donates all his financial resources to the islands. Additionally, Tsu Feh will provide subsidies to cover Alwi's daughter's medical expenses.

In consideration of the aforementioned concerns, it is essential to recognise that Tsu Feh, Nik, and other residents of the Island who oppose Alwi and the extremists adopt a moderate Islamic stance. On a superficial level, this stance may appear similar to Mahathirist moderation regarding Islam. However, at a deeper level, the principles of Sufism are fundamentally at odds with the Mahathirist perspective, which seeks to reconcile Islam with capitalism.

On the other hand, a particularly significant dialogue that reinforces the connection between water and the film's thematic undertones arises when Nik's mother observes, ‘*seorang perempuan cantik, putih melepak, datang di bawa ombak, akan menyelamatkan pulau ini* (A beautiful woman, with a fair complexion, will be brought by the waves and will save this island)’. Nonetheless, this dialogue represents a crucial juncture, highlighting that Rahim, in his directorial role, has portrayed Tsu Feh as a

‘saviour’ or potentially, an agent of restoring social order. In this context, Tsu Feh exhibits characteristics akin to those of Mahathir, both embodying a ‘saviour complex’ that Mahathir has demonstrated multiple times throughout his political career. A pertinent example is Mahathir's effort to ‘restore order’ by writing a letter to Tunku Abdul Rahman, the then Prime Minister, urging him to resign because he was unable to ensure the success of the Malay community. This ‘dilemma’ is, for Mahathir, intimately connected to the tragic events of 13 May 1969.

5.5 *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, ‘Nursing’ the Kampung, Empowering Self

The narrative of this film centres on Rohana, a nurse who decides to serve in a kampung following her separation from her ex-husband, characterised as a New Malay hedonistic individual with moral degradation. Rohana encounters significant challenges, notably from the village’s Mak Bidan (midwife), who expresses scepticism towards modern medical practices. Additionally, she faces harassment from some men in the kampung, culminating in an attempted rape. Although the film features two primary settings, the *kampung* and the *kota*, the former is emphasised, as the *kota* primarily acts as a backdrop in flashbacks. Consequently, Rohana's struggles within the kampung context are depicted as more pronounced than her experiences in the *kota* and with her husband. *Bila Hati Telah Retak* was produced by Filem Negara Malaysia, a governmental agency historically involved in producing documentaries and public service announcements, often serving as a propagandistic tool prior to British colonial rule. This film exists in a complex dichotomy, grappling with its dual identity as both a government-sponsored project and a commercial release, which places it in a contentious position between propagandistic intent and artistic expression. Moreover, the melodrama navigates the nuanced tension of upholding and critiquing Mahathirism.

Since *Bila Hati Telah Retak* is produced by Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM), a government agency focused on information dissemination, it is pertinent to provide a brief historical overview of the film unit established during the colonial era. Initially referred to as the Crown Film Unit, it later evolved into the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) and ultimately became Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM) following Malaysia's independence. This historical context is significant, as the unit primarily functioned as an official film apparatus created by the colonial authorities to disseminate propaganda, while simultaneously serving as a cultural entity inherited by Malaysia after independence. The Malayan Film Unit (MFU) was established in 1946, utilising surplus

military film equipment (Bernard, 2009). After several decades dedicated to documentary filmmaking, MFU produced its inaugural feature film, *Abu Nawas* (1954), directed by Cyril Randall (Hassan, 2017). According to Hassan (2017), ‘this film was part of the psy-war strategy to counter the communist insurrection’ (p. 2). The MFU, which subsequently transformed into FNM, has produced several feature films, including *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (‘The Heartbroken’), which I argue serves as a subtle form of propaganda in support of Mahathirist modernisation of healthcare among rural populations. Thus, the primary function of this film unit has remained consistent since the colonial period.

However, according to Bernard (2009), in 1950, Shaw Brothers had been reported as willing to screen films made by MFU. Nevertheless, Bernard (2009) states that the films produced by MFU had little impact on the larger populations. The power to spread messages through film remained in the hands of the Shaw Brothers and Cathay, and their network of cinemas. In 1963, in conjunction with the formation of Malaysia, MFU changed its name to Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM). Under the administration of Mohamad Zain Hussein, an award-winning documentary director (*Timeless Temiar*, *Hassan Homecoming*), FNM began producing theatrical release films, starting with *Dayang Suhana* (1978), followed by *Gelombang* (1981), *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (1983) and *Ke Medan Jaya* (1984). All theatrically released films produced by FNM can be interpreted as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) in Althusserian terms, as they encapsulate the government’s vision and policies within the realms of fiction and cinematic artistry. Furthermore, this function of FNM as ISA extends to the documentary and non-fiction genres, effectively communicating governmental policy and plans. As society evolves and becomes more intricate, FNM seeks to exploit cinematic fiction to disseminate government propaganda. This aligns with my earlier statement that *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (‘The Heartbroken’) serves as a subtle form of propaganda supporting Mahathirist modernisation of healthcare for rural populations. In 1981, with assistance from Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was then the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry, the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) was established. However, by 2013, FNM no longer existed in name. The studio was now merged with FINAS – the entity that FNM was supposed to have become (Hassan, 2014).

Returning to *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, the characterization of Rohana as a public healthcare worker distinctly sets her apart from many other representations of Malay

women in cinema throughout various eras. In addition to her professional role, Rohana is portrayed as a widow who has relocated from the town to work in a rural kampung setting. This aspect further reinforces the argument for Rohana being an independent woman, in line with Mahathir's vision of a modernized female figure. As a public healthcare worker, Rohana is tasked with ensuring that the healthcare needs of the kampung population are adequately met, particularly for those requiring midwifery services.

Upon starting her work in the kampung, Rohana finds herself the target of various sentiments, including envy over her attractiveness and jealousy from a traditional midwife whose popularity has started to decline. At the same time, the men in the kampung, particularly Jusoh (portrayed by Abu Bakar Omar), persistently attempt to objectify, sexually harass, and ultimately assault Rohana. Jusoh and his accomplices even scheme to attack her, but other kampung residents come to her rescue. Regardless of the reasons behind Rohana's decision not to report the incident to the police, she compels Jusoh to acknowledge and atone for his wrongdoings towards her. The narrative draws a parallel to *Tsu Feh-Sofiah*, wherein 'clinical matters' act as a pivotal force for an antagonist's acknowledgement of their moral failings. The portrayal of Jusoh's egregious conduct juxtaposed with Mak Lijah's jealousy, embodied in her role as a traditional midwife, signifies the director's intention to critique the *kampung*. Furthermore, it emphasises Rohana's role as a symbol of modernity and urbanisation, who restores balance by addressing various issues relevant to clinical practices, particularly in relation to pregnancy and midwifery. This reinforces the idea that the director aims not only to critique the kampung but also to illustrate how Rohana, as an embodiment of modernity and urbanisation, addresses specific clinical challenges in the kampung.

In addition to her clinical responsibilities, Rohana actively participates in social work. In a conversation with her uncle, Pak Long, she articulated her motivations by stating, 'That's why I requested to be assigned to rural areas. In this village, beyond my official duties, there are numerous opportunities for me to contribute based on my knowledge'. This dialogue is followed by a montage that showcases Rohana fulfilling her duties as a nurse at the clinic, where she attends to her patients. These scenes are interspersed with visuals of the Balai Raya (Community Hall), depicting two women cycling toward the community centre. Cut to the interior shots of the Community Hall, where Rohana delivers a lecture on the significance of cultivating one's own vegetables.

In the wide shots, the audience is comprised of women from the kampung, seated in front of Rohana as she presents her lecture. The walls are adorned with portraits of prominent figures, including Yang Dipertuan Agong, Permaisuri Agong, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam, positioned at the highest points. This suggests that Rohana acts as an agent of the government program aimed at empowering women and also functions as an indirect representative of Mahathirism, which seeks to modernize and educate Malay women. Rohana's lecture is accompanied by a series of shots depicting women from the kampung participating in workshops she organises, including workshops focused on cooking and sewing. This montage reinforces my argument that Rohana plays a significant role in addressing the backwardness prevalent in the kampung, particularly among women.

Towards the conclusion of the film, Rohana's ex-husband, Aziz, visits her residence in an attempt to persuade her to remarry him. Notably, Aziz arrives in an imperfect and diminished state, having lost his leg due to an accident, which, according to Rohana, was a consequence of his decision to drive under the influence of alcohol. The scene where Aziz proposes reuniting in marriage with Rohana takes place in his uncle's living room. A notable aspect of this scene is the exploration of gender dynamics, illustrated through strategic character blocking. As the camera tracks out, transitioning to a wide shot, it becomes evident that the living room is predominantly occupied by males. Aziz is accompanied by his two friends and Rohana's father, while Rohana is the only female present, alongside her uncle. In accordance with traditional Malay customs, her aunt is positioned discreetly at the periphery of the space.

Nevertheless, Rohana remains firm and cynical at the beginning of the conversation. She starts expressing her cynicism by stating, 'But *Ayah*, even until now, I still do not know how to dance. It might embarrass Aziz when we go to the party'. The mood of the scene changes after Aziz's father states, 'If you still remember the past (of what Aziz had done to you), then your mom's and my dream of seeing both of you get married will vanish'. Following this dialogue, melancholic music gradually fades in, while the camera remains stationary, capturing the silence shared between Rohana and Aziz's father. After a brief pause, Rohana articulates that she still harbours feelings for Aziz. However, upon expressing this sentiment, she requests permission to retire to her room for a while.

Despite Rohana's absence from the living room, speculation arises among her father, Aziz's friends, and Aziz himself about Aziz's hope of remarrying Rohana.

Eventually, Rohana emerges from her room and joins them in the living space. Subsequently, she reveals to Aziz all the letters she has received and sent, both to him and from his friend. Rohana then turns her head away and leans against the window. A notable shot depicts Aziz attempting to touch Rohana's head in a bid to persuade her, yet he abruptly halts as she continues to avert her gaze. This shot, captured from outside the window, creates a frame-within-a-frame effect, allowing the audience to observe only Rohana and Aziz. The act of blocking Rohana symbolises her disengagement, evident as she turns her head and averts her gaze from the living room.

These behaviours significantly reinforce Rohana's resolution to refrain from remarrying Aziz. Throughout the conversation, her statements fluctuate in nuance, suggesting a desire to connect while also expressing reluctance. This paradox parallels physical obstruction; despite her presence, it suggests that she does not genuinely desire to inhabit that space, to observe Aziz and the other male figures as they attempt to sway her. The windows further illustrate the power dynamics between Rohana and the other Malay males, underscoring her determination not to be swayed by the men in the living room. Eventually, Rohana erupted in tears as her declaration of refusal to marry Aziz showed her agency as a woman and her emancipation. The agency and support for emancipation are represented through images of birds soaring in the skies, symbolizing freedom.

I contend that Rohana's dismissal of Aziz's remarriage proposal represents a rejection of both the New Malay identity and the New Rich class. This rejection serves as an underlying critique of the capitalistic and moral decline associated with these New Malay classes. This is supported by Rohana's mentioning her inability to dance at the disco a few times during the conversation, as for Aziz, it is embarrassing, and this is about contradicting values that 'broke her heart' and cannot be 'cured' anymore. The word 'disco', as referenced by Rohana, holds substantial significance in the films, serving as one of the factors shaping her emotional state, particularly her concerns about the heart. Moreover, it is crucial to recognise that disco has emerged as a leitmotif in the post-studio era, often employed to demonise characters associated with it, portraying them as morally degraded. Conversely, during the studio era, the representation of clubbing culture in cinema was primarily illustrated as a normative aspect of society. Unlike its precursor, the Malaysian cinema of the post-studio era, such as Salleh Ghani's *Pertentangan* (1983) and *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, not only

showcases nightclub scenes as attractive venues featuring popular musical artists, but also includes moralistic discourses surrounding the association of ‘sin’ with nightclubs.

A quintessential illustration of this practice is Saloma’s performance of the poignant song *Bila Hati Telah Retak* in a nightclub scene in the film of the same name. Despite this scene, the character of Aziz (played by Ismail Din) remains a persistent presence through flashbacks, framing him as an individual who has succumbed to the tumult of urban life and betrayed the trust of his former partner.

The flashbacks involving Aziz are interspersed with various sequences set in the nightclub, where the film commences with Rohana, grief-stricken, contemplating her emotional pain next to a window while refusing her ex-husband’s attempts at reconciliation. Rohana’s poignant declaration, “If a palace collapses, it can be rebuilt. But if a heart is broken...”, signals a deep emotional turmoil. This line seamlessly transitions into Saloma’s performance of *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, which is introduced through a visual of a disco ball, serving as a narrative bridge into the vibrant nightclub setting, enriched by the live musical accompaniment of the band Hi’ Beat.

The interplay between dialogue and the lyrical content of *Bila Hati Telah Retak* underscores its function as a medium for conveying Rohana’s disillusionment and emotional estrangement from Aziz. The nightclub environment also features Aziz engaging with another woman, while Rohana’s presence is visually juxtaposed through a shot of her laboriously descending a staircase, symbolising her enduring pain.

This sequence reveals an unusual portrayal of the nightclub realm, characterized by a melancholic backdrop juxtaposed against the typically hedonistic narrative traditionally associated with such venues. Notably, the patrons present are depicted in a seemingly composed manner, countering the anticipated chaos of nightlife and highlighting the religiously infused lyrics:

‘Ya Allah,
Maha Kuasa,
Mendatar Gunung, Menyeri Lautan,
Lepaskan daku, dari cengkaman,
gerita batin yang menyiksa.
(Oh Allah,
Almighty,
Who flattens mountains and beautifies the seas,
Release me from the grip,
of this torturous inner grief.)’

Subsequently, the shots shift to depict Rohana in a vehicle, weeping profusely, while Aziz engages in photo sessions with another woman within the nightclub. This enigmatic portrayal is elucidated earlier in a mid-film flashback, in which Rohana recounts her husband's proper disposition to her uncle and aunt. Nonetheless, Rohana's rejection of Aziz's proposal can be interpreted as a form of counter-Mahathirism, indicating her reluctance to align herself with the concept of the New Malay and the urbanised individual envisioned by Mahathir.

This focus on his physical condition suggests a plea for care and compassion; it parallels the dynamics of a caregiver-patient relationship, with Aziz seemingly begging Rohana to 'treat' and 'nurse' him back to health. This interaction not only reveals Rohana's lingering affection for her former husband but also foreshadows her eventual choice about their future together. Despite her father's counsel urging her to reconsider, Rohana firmly asserts her reluctance to remarry Aziz. This pivotal scene illustrates Rohana's agency in making her own decisions and, symbolically, Aziz's disability positions her as more powerful than him, akin to a nurse possessing greater authority over a patient in need of care.



Figure 5.2 A shot from *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (1984), Showing the Final Scene After Rohana Rejects Aziz's Proposal for Remarriage.

The title of the film, *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (The Broken Heart), is highly relevant to its conclusion. Despite Rohana's successful interventions in numerous midwifery cases and her ability to address various challenges within the kampung, such as issues related to traditional midwifery practices and the inappropriate behaviour of

specific individuals, she ultimately fails to mend her own emotional wounds inflicted by her husband. As a manifestation of her autonomy and decisiveness, she ultimately declines Aziz's remarriage proposal.

5.5.1 The Cinematic Portrayal of 'Politics of Health'

I argue that *Bila Hati Telah Retak* resonates with Michel Foucault's (1994) concept of *noso politics*, or the politics of health, which simultaneously reflects Mahathir's notion of *noso politics* as outlined in *The Malay Dilemma*. This development significantly expanded the scope and authority of medicine. According to Foucault (1994), a physician or medical officer created a context 'for the exercise and application of an intensified medical power' (p. 99). Since the eighteenth century, for Foucault (1994), medicine has transcended its role as a mere technique of health or an art of healing; it has instead established 'an important place in the administrative systems and the machinery of power' (p. 100).

Foucault (1994) stated,

'The doctor becomes the great adviser and expert, if not in the art of governing at least in that of observing, correcting, and improving the social "body" and maintaining the it in a permanent state of health.'

(p. 100)

A number of doctors enter academic institutions and study societies, participate in the publishing of encyclopedias, and become counsellors to representatives of power. The occasional presence of a doctor as a programmer of a well-ordered society, or as a social or political reformer, becomes increasingly notable in the eighteenth century (Foucault, 1994). The eighteenth century, marked by the birth of the clinic and the emergence of health politics, represents a pivotal chapter in medical history that transforms medicine for the future.

In light of the aforementioned concerns, I would like to draw attention to Mahathir's concept of *noso-politics*, as articulated in his work *The Malay Dilemma*. In this text, Mahathir posits that one contributing factor to the idleness and perceived laziness of the Malay population is rooted in hereditary elements, which he associates with Social Darwinism. He further contends that this hereditary factor can be mitigated through reforms addressing the Malay tradition of intermarriage among first cousins,

which he contrasts with the Chinese tradition that promotes exogamous marriages. According to Mahathir, the latter practice fosters a more favourable genetic inheritance, contributing to the industrious traits characteristic of the Chinese community. Nevertheless, *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, a product of the Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM), can be interpreted as the government's effort to signal its interest in the principles of noso-politics.

Within the realm of noso-politics, the film *Bila Hati Telah Retak* elucidates two critical aspects: 1) the incursion of modern medicine into the traditional and rural healthcare paradigm, and 2) the disparate forms of medicalisation evident in urban versus rural contexts. This analysis will focus on the first aspect, particularly on Rohana's role within the village, exemplifying the modern medical intervention in the traditional rural 'body'. Rohana's presence engenders conflict between Mak Lijah, a traditional midwife symbolising conventional medical practices, and Rohana, who represents contemporary medicine. Furthermore, the film appears to vilify Mak Lijah, portraying her as a characterised figure by jealousy and animosity towards Rohana. A pivotal scene occurs towards the film's conclusion, where Mak Lijah fails to assist Som, a villager in labour, leading Som's father to seek Rohana's help. Throughout this episode, Mak Lijah is depicted in a negative light, showcasing her reliance on supernatural beliefs and superstitions. In stark contrast, it is only after Rohana arrives and provides assistance that Som successfully gives birth.

Following that scene, the film transitions through intercut sequences featuring a vehicle transporting Rohana's ex-husband en route to a meeting with her. The dialogue within the vehicle carries notable significance, as one of the characters articulates that,

'Lima tahun dulu, kawasan ini memang penuh dengan hutan beluakar saja. Tapi sekarang, penuh dengan rumah-rumah. Jadi satu bandar. (Five years ago, this area was entirely covered by forest. Currently, it has been developed into a residential zone, transforming it into an urban environment. [my translation]'

I contend that the intercutting of scenes depicting Rohana assisting Som in delivering a baby alongside the automotive scene constitutes a significant interpretation of Rohana as not merely an agent of modern medicalisation in the village, but more broadly, as a catalyst for urbanisation. This observation leads to a crucial point regarding the representation of the 'politics of health' in *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, which

focuses on the disparities in medicalisation between urban and rural environments. Rohana's position as the sole representative of modern medicine underscores the isolation of rural areas from access to adequate healthcare facilities, such as clinics or hospitals. Foucault posits that since the eighteenth century, hospitals have become increasingly associated with urban locales. Therefore, this film serves as a propagandistic instrument within the framework of Mahathirism, as it endeavours to propagate the notion of progress through a modernised and urbanised lens. Within the framework of this film, medicine emerges as a symbol of modernisation, urbanisation, and the liberation of women, a theme I will discuss in the subsequent section.

5.6 Rohana and Tsu Feh as an Ideal Woman of Mahathirism?

‘Who would want a wife who is unable to carry herself with unself-conscious propriety at social functions and who is always exposed to ridicule? Who would like to go home to a wife who doesn't understand and cannot sympathise with one's business and political problem? Who would like to be accompanied with slatternly, ungainly wife who gapes at everything because she has been confined so long in a coconut shell that she knows nothing of the world outside? Unless social reforms are carried out, and that quickly, Malay girls would be in danger of being neglected and despised by boys of their own race.’

-Mahathir Mohamad, ‘*Malay women make their own freedom*’ (1947) in *The Early Years* (1995, p. 4)

I find it intriguing to explore the motivations behind an individual like Mahathir in advocating for women's empowerment. His perspective of 'looking east to catch up with the west' may have contributed to his support for fostering more professional and independent women. However, it does not necessarily align with an absolute feminist revolution. Furthermore, the concept of a strong woman seems to be deeply influenced by the image of his mother, the late Wan Tempawan. This connection likely stems from his early childhood, when he had a closer relationship with his mother than with his strict father. Mahathir mentions in *A Doctor in The House*;

‘I was closer to my mother than my father and as a result, she shaped my personality more. She taught me the values that I have upheld throughout my life, especially to be modest and not boastful about what I have done...She also taught me very clearly that if I wanted something, I had to work for it’.

(p. 15)

Mahathir was greatly influenced by his mother’s diverse capabilities, which included poultry farming with chickens and ducks, cultivating jasmine and rose flowers, and preparing traditional remedies such as *bedak sejuk* and *celak*. His mother's entrepreneurial endeavours not only generated income but also provided Mahathir with financial rewards for his assistance. Consequently, she was not only a figure of admiration and respect for him but also played a significant role in shaping his personality. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention that Mahathir's wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, is a distinguished doctor and the first Malay woman to attain this profession. This reflects Mahathir's own principle that ‘to keep in step with the ideas and interests of their husbands, Malay women must be well educated’. His decision to marry a physician exemplifies his commitment to this belief. It is evident in his worldview that he values women's professional development and encourages them to think beyond traditional confines, while also advocating for alignment with their husbands' aspirations and interests.

Khoo (2006) emphasises that the films of Erma Fatima and Shuhaimi Baba, specifically *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* and *Selubung*, effectively encapsulate the attitude, spirit, and vision of Mahathirism regarding gender, sexuality, race relations, and Malaysian identity (p. 8). In *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*, the character Mustika, portrayed by Vanidah Imran, is depicted as ‘the perfect symbol and mouthpiece of Mahathirist developmentalism, able to reconcile and balance the modern and traditional roles of the Malay woman, as well as to negotiate between adat [pre-Islamic Malay custom] and Islam’ (p. 8). Conversely, in *Selubung*, Mastura, played by Deanna Yusoff, is represented as ‘a stronger independent character, who opts for a Westernised or more secular-oriented path as a modern and moderate Muslim woman’ (p. 4). In view of these observations, Khoo concludes that ‘the cinematic portrayals of both female characters reflect the ideology of UMNO’s ‘moderate’ stance on women and modernity, in contrast with the position of PAS and other religious fundamentalist groups such as the

Al-Arqam sect, which advocated polygamy prior to its prohibition in Malaysia in 1994' (p. 5).

Consequently, examining the characters of Rohana (from *Bila Hati Telah Retak*) and Tsu Feh (from *Tsu Feh Sofiah*) reveals their alignment with established definitions. Embodying the envy of a midwife in a traditional village, Rohana confronts numerous challenges in her efforts to address the perceived 'backwardness' of the kampung residents regarding modern healthcare practices. Nevertheless, by the film's conclusion, Rohana successfully reconciles and balances the modern and traditional roles of the Malay woman, as well as navigating the complexities of cultural customs (adat), particularly in her relationship with the midwife, despite the midwife's own struggles. Rohana said;

'Sebenarnya berbidan cara lama dan cara moden ni lebih kurang saja. Keduanya ada lebihnya dan ada kekurangannya. Ana ingin jugak nak belajar cara berbidan lama dengan Mak Lijah. Itupun kalau Mak Lijah sudi nak mengajar Ana. (Midwifery in the old and modern methods is similar to each other. Both have pros and cons. I [Rohana] also want to learn how to handle the midwifery for Mak Lijah, if Mak Lijah has no problem with that).'

The midwife responds warmly to Rohana, expressing her willingness to educate her in traditional midwifery. This interaction not only represents a reconciliation of the conflict between Rohana and Mak Lijah, the midwife, but also exemplifies the ideal image of the Mahathirist woman as depicted through Rohana, characterised as a 'moderate' woman. In contrast, Tsu Feh Sofiah, while addressing spiritual needs, employs material-scientific knowledge and authority to assist Alwi's daughter in receiving treatment, concurrently mitigating the influence of extremist Islam. Thus, the film embodies and crystallises the 'clinical approach' frequently utilised by Mahathir in addressing political and societal challenges, while also harmonising with Tsu Feh's pursuit of her spiritual journey.

However, the arguments presented herein represent but one dimension of the film that correlates with the Mahathirist conception of women, a notion further elucidated in Khoo's (2006) examination of ideal femininity in the framework of Mahathirist developmentalism. Thus, it is imperative to engage in a reassessment of Mahathir's stance on women's emancipation. While Mahathir is frequently linked to authoritarian tendencies, marked by stringent legislation and a Machiavellian,

masculine-patriarchal narrative, there has been a significant dearth of scholarly critique examining the interplay between Mahathir, Mahathirism, and their ramifications for female identity and feminism. Despite his ethnonationalist ideologies, often associated with conservative views, Mahathir's promotion of educational rights for Malay women dates back to his writings in the *Che Det* column. This advocacy has continued through his implementation of a meritocracy, which supplanted traditional gender quota systems.

The quote at the beginning of this section illustrates how early the concept of educating women emerged, encouraging them to break free from their 'coconut shell' (p. 4) to prevent them from '...being neglected and despised by boys of their race' (p. 4). Nevertheless, I would like to draw attention to the entire article written by Mahathir, titled 'Malay Women Make Their Own Freedom' (1947), which is compiled in 'The Early Years' *The first claim made by Mahathir is that Malay women '...have been confined to the kitchen...' (p. 1) since '...the times when the Malays professed the Hindu religion...' (p. 1). Mahathir then continues by saying that by the time they serve the status quo, which is the 'ban on social contact between the sexes and non-religious education for women' (p. 1), and for him, this is because 'for a time Malay parents stuck to traditions and eyed with severe disapproval any modernistic among their children' (p. 1).*

The initial sections of the essays may provide a sense of relief to many feminists; however, this perception shifts upon encountering Mahathir's assertion from 1947: 'To keep in step with the ideas and interests of their husbands, Malay women must be well educated. The time is at hand when young Malays can no longer tolerate nit-witted wives, and when a sound education is a greater asset to the prospective bride than reputation for shyness and delicacy' (p. 4). Mahathir subsequently elaborates on the themes introduced in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. This discourse indicates that Mahathir's reference to 'the emancipation of Malay women' remains ensconced within a conservative and patriarchal paradigm, wherein women's accomplishments are still contingent upon the expectations of their husbands.

In examining Rohana's character in *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, it becomes evident that she embodies the ideals described by Norman (2006), who states that the film represents women liberating themselves from the confines of the home (the private sphere) (p. 61). Notably, by the film's conclusion, Rohana declines her former husband's remarriage proposal, which starkly contrasts with the Mahathirist archetype of an ideal

woman. This act signifies a profound form of emancipation for Rohana, illustrated by the poignant imagery of a bird soaring in the sky during a pivotal scene. Furthermore, Mahathir's assertion that 'to keep in step with the ideas and interests of their husbands, Malay women must be well educated' is also reflected in the narrative, particularly in Rohana's experience of divorce was characterized by a husband who demeaned and condescended to her, perceiving her kampong background, traditional values, and apparent lack of modernity in a negative light (Norman, 2006). This observation leads me to argue that Mahathir's concept of an 'educated' woman remains fundamentally anchored in male-centric perspectives, thus subjecting women to these viewpoints. Although Rohana holds a position as a working wife, and likely possesses an education, her husband's infidelity and betrayal illustrate that she does not conform to the value systems he imposes. Ironically, Rohana's role as a public healthcare nurse signifies a modern career; however, she also embodies a rejection of the Western-hedonistic culture associated with the urban elite, thereby rejecting her husband's notion of a 'modern' value system.

In *Tsu Feh-Sofiah*, Tsu Feh actively prioritises her embrace of Islam over material attachments and familial obligations, notably relinquishing her engagement. During her quest for understanding Islam in Pulau Mama, despite developing romantic feelings for Nik, her character defies traditional gender roles. She decisively intervenes to protect Nik's daughter from danger while her male counterparts engage in Friday prayers. Furthermore, Tsu Feh's connection to Islam is notably influenced by her mother—a non-Muslim figure—challenging conventional patriarchal representations in which male figures dominate as leaders. This narrative contrasts sharply with prevalent images in Islamic revivalism that often depict male Muslims as the primary guides and authorities.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter presents two significant arguments regarding the representation of Mahathirism. Firstly, the portrayal of medical professionals, specifically 'doctors' and 'healthcare workers' in *Tsu Feh Sofiah* and *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, indicates a strong possibility for 'clinical approaches' to emerge within the narrative framework. By 'clinical approach,' I refer to the narrative structure wherein the actions and decisions of a doctor in a healthcare setting parallel the societal context, transforming society itself into the 'patient' that requires examination and remedy, akin to understanding the

‘organs or tissues’ needing treatment. Secondly, this chapter contends that the notion of women's emancipation depicted in both selected films fundamentally challenges and transcends the idealised femininity of Mahathirism. This assertion is underscored by the characterisation of the protagonists, who are portrayed as possessing agency and autonomy, thus liberating themselves from traditional confines associated with both their physical and male-dominated worlds. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine how the characters of Rohana and Tsu Feh exemplify decisive women whose roles converge on restoring societal order. Their decisiveness is instrumental in alleviating conflicts within the kampung, reinforcing the modern woman's position as a ‘saviour’ of the community. The two female medical characters from the selected films share a notable similarity in their goals: a journey from urban to rural settings in pursuit of inner peace and happiness. Ultimately, this chapter aspires to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding Mahathirism through a gendered lens, acknowledging the complexities faced by Mahathir, who embodies a multifaceted persona and operates within a framework replete with paradoxes.

CHAPTER 6

‘POLITICS IS SENSITIVE’ – REPRESENTATION OF POLITICS AND POLITICIANS IN *RINGGIT KASORRG* (1995) AND *INTERLUD* (1992)

6.1 Finding Political Films

In Chapter Two, I argued that a limited number of scholars concur that Malaysian cinema is deficient in ‘political films.’ For a few scholars (Hatta, 1995; Anuar, 2007), political films are defined as ‘radical films’ that offer explicit critiques of authority or the establishment. Nonetheless, this viewpoint remains contentious, as the Malay films from the studio era produced *purba* films that centred on bilateral ideologies and highlighted the lives of proletarians, extending beyond a focus on royalty (Norman, 2021). Anuar’s (2007) assertion regarding the absence of political engagement in Malay cinema overlooks several critical elements that necessitated a more radical interpretation of Malay films than he posited. From the preceding discussion, it is imperative to elucidate the factors that have contributed to the absence of ‘revolutionary films’ and ‘radical films’ (as argued by Anuar [2007]) within the framework of Malay cinema. Specifically, two predominant factors contribute to this phenomenon: the political factor and the capitalist factor. The political factor, in this case, refers to censorship, which functions as a repressive state apparatus within the Althusserian framework, ultimately leading to self-censorship among filmmakers. According to Hassan (2014), the policy implemented by the British ‘effectively denied locals from criticising the British or their policies’ (p. 47). Meanwhile, the capitalist factor, as Hassan (2014) argues, the two big studios, Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris ‘were only businessmen and did not want to have any problem with authorities, especially with the chairman of the Censorship Board, Jack Evans, an Englishman’ (p. 47). I argue that two factors are significant in explaining the persistence of Mahathir’s hegemony in Malaysian films from the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, while these two factors are also inherent to Mahathir’s premiership, they manifest distinctly. Firstly, concerning the role of the censorship board, the people are subject to laws that restrict criticism of authority; however, the authority in question is no longer the British, but rather the Malaysian leadership itself.

Taking the above into account, this chapter will examine the production of films that address and critique politicians during Mahathir's premiership. This phenomenon is intriguing to consider, given Mahathir's association with authoritarian rule; the emergence of such films appears perplexing if we analyse it through a simplistic lens. This perspective is informed by Chomsky's assertion that effective propaganda transcends merely encouraging the audience to 'think like us'; it operates in a far more subtle manner. A key component of Chomsky's Propaganda Model is the notion of 'championing free speech', which creates the illusion that states are not dictatorial. However, while there may appear to be openness regarding topics and subjects for critique, such discourse is often limited and fails to engage with core structural problems.

The additional factor to consider is the capitalist dimension. Hassan states the studio era sought to mitigate conflicts with British colonial interests. However, in the post-studio era, film production—much of it stemming from the New Economic Policy (NEP)—is often spearheaded by businessmen navigating government relations, particularly with the censorship board, Lembaga Penapisan Filem (LPF). This observation aligns with Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model, which posits that contemporary propaganda often utilises private entities to advance its agendas. This approach obscures the reality that, particularly during the Mahathir administration, the state actively engaged in the free market, collaborating closely with the private sector to shape narratives and public perception.

In response to the concern above, I assert that the selected films, namely *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud*, depict politicians predominantly as antagonistic figures associated with moral degradation and corruption. However, this portrayal of moral degradation and corruption is confined to an individual level rather than representing ideological and structural issues as a whole. Furthermore, the negative depiction of politicians within these films serves to divert attention from the more significant negative problems embedded in Malaysian politics and state ideologies. Importantly, this 'diversion' should not be interpreted as the film leading the audience away from pressing external issues; rather, the negative representations of politicians serve to present the state as receptive to criticism and supportive of 'free speech'.

This analysis is consistent with Chomsky's Propaganda Model, which asserts that the state appears to promote free speech and a 'consenting dissident' by facilitating media outputs that critique governmental actions. However, such critiques often serve

to divert attention from more significant systemic issues. During Mahathir's premiership, the representation of politicians in Malaysian cinema, particularly in *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud*, exemplified this phenomenon. These films emphasise sensational subjects such as sexual scandals and portrayals of dysfunctional paternal figures. Yet, they fail to provide substantial structural or constructive critiques of the underlying political systems and ideologies. Consequently, the focus shifts toward individual characters rather than addressing broader societal concerns. This chapter will first examine the representation of politicians in Malaysian cinema, tracing the portrayal of politics and politicians from the early studio era to the post-studio era. This section will subsequently analyse the cinematic representation of Mahathir in Malaysian films. Meanwhile, the analysis will focus on two selected films, *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlude*, with particular emphasis on the portrayal of the politician and the power dynamics between him and other characters. Additionally, the discourse surrounding Mahathirism as presented in both films will be examined.

6.2 Politician in Films

This subsection remains incomplete without acknowledging that Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, is both the first and arguably the only Prime Minister of Malaysia to be involved in filmmaking. As a scriptwriter, he contributed to the production of *Mahsuri* (1959), *Sumpahan Mahsuri* (1989, during Mahathir's premiership), and *Raja Bersiong* (1968) during his tenure in office. No subsequent Prime Minister has engaged in filmmaking, including Mahathir Mohamad, who played a crucial role in establishing the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (Finas). Although Mahathir did not participate in filmmaking to the extent that Tunku Abdul Rahman did, this does not imply a lack of interest in the medium. In fact, in his early writings, Mahathir (1955) referenced several aspects of cinema, including its impact on the decline of traditional Malay dress (1955, p.15) and his recommendations for the Public Relations Department to produce more 'educational films' aimed at encouraging Malays to pursue higher education (1955, p.10).

Furthermore, I would like to direct attention to the representation of politicians in Malaysian cinema. It is crucial to emphasise that politicians are not represented in the films of the studio eras, which encompass the pre- and post-independence periods of Malaya and Malaysia. Nonetheless, 'court politicians' are frequently depicted in the studio era, specifically through the *purba* films, a costume drama genre prevalent in

Malay cinema. According to Norman (2021), 30 per cent of the films produced during the studio eras fall under the category of *purba* films. These films consistently engage in ideological discourse, including themes of liberalism versus conservatism, royalist versus anti-royalist sentiments, and the notions of rebellion (Norman, 2021). Norman asserts that the bilateral ideologies present in *purba* films also illuminate the lives of the proletariat, extending beyond the confines of royalty. Moreover, Norman (2021) emphasises that these *purba* films address issues pertinent to both the historical contexts they depict and the era in which they were produced. Norman (2021) states:

‘For example, Amir Muhammad notes that *Panglima Besi* (Amin 1964) is a *purba* film with anti-war theme that definitely mirrored the turbulent period of the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation, as well as ‘lingering memories of World War 2 and the Emergency’. Van der Heide reads P. Ramlee’s *Semerah Padi* as ‘a proposal for the governance of the soon to be independent nation of Malaya’

(p. 214)

Furthermore, two notable cinematic works, *Hang Tuah* (1958), directed by Phani Majumdar, and *Jebat* (1961), directed by Hussein Haniff, encapsulate the prevailing ideologies of their respective production periods (Norman, 2021). *Hang Tuah* embodies the Malay nationalist sentiment that emerged following independence, while *Jebat* exemplifies the ascendance of leftist political movements of that era (Norman, 2021). It is essential to note, however, that contemporary politicians are not often represented in these films, a notable contrast to the post-studio era, which featured a limited number of political portrayals. Among them are *Menanti Hari Esok* (1977), *Aku Yang Berhormat* (1983), *Jasmin* (1984), *Jasmin 2* (1987) *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984), *Hati Bukan Kristal* (1990), *Ringgit Kasorrga* (1995), *Tuah* (1990), *Interlud* (1992), *Balada* (1993), *Sayang Salmah* (1995), and *Panas* (1998).

From the list, I categorise the films into three distinct categories: 1) films featuring politician characters that are not central to the narrative, 2) films that place politicians at the narrative's core, and 3) films portraying politicians within historical contexts. The films *Menanti Hari Esok*, *Dari Jemapoh ke Manchestee*, *Hati Bukan Kristal*, *Panas*, and *Tuah* and *Jasmin 2* fall into the first category. In contrast, *Aku Yang Berhormat*, *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, *Ringgit Kasorrga*, and *Interlud* belong to the second category. Primarily, these four films emphasise narratives centred on politicians, consistently portraying them as synonymous with moral decay and corruption.

Furthermore, in *Aku Yang Berhormat*, *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, and *Interlud*, despite focusing on corrupt politicians, the directors present other political characters as embodiments of integrity, accountability, and trustworthiness, serving as a counterpoint to the corrupt archetype. This contrast highlights the key features of political films made during this era.

Nevertheless, while this category primarily centres around politicians, it does not imply that the discourse surrounding Mahathirism is confined solely to the second category. Notably, several films within the first category also reflect Mahathirist concerns. For example, *Hati Bukan Kristal* resonates with Mahathir's advocacy for empowering Malay women to compete alongside modernised Malay men. Additionally, *Panas* delves into the dichotomy of traditional and contemporary Malay identity through the lenses of sexuality and politics. The third category comprises period films such as *Jasmin* and *Sayang Salmah*, which explore the era of Malay nationalism in the struggle against British colonialism. At times, these films present complexities in interpreting them as reflections of Mahathirism due to their historical context; however, it is not unfeasible to discuss Mahathirist perspectives, given that many of Mahathir's writings address colonial issues. His works, including *Early Years* and *The Malay Dilemma*, reveal his viewpoints on colonialism, suggesting that Mahathir himself can be viewed as a product of colonial influences. In conclusion, while each category encompasses a spectrum of narratives, I contend that a closer examination of films centred on politicians will yield richer discourse and further opportunities for analysis.

6.3 The Cinematic Portrayal of 'Mahathir' in Cinema

The absence of a direct portrayal of the national leader or head of state in Malaysian cinema does not imply their lack of representation in Malaysian cinema. Addressing this issue, I contend that Mahathir is frequently depicted in the form of portrait photographs in several films, with a few of these representations being significant to the characters and narratives of the respective films. The incorporation of portrait photographs of the Prime Minister in cinema during the 1980s and 1990s is noteworthy and significant. This phenomenon may stem from the fact that Mahathir's charisma, persona, and popularity surpass those of his successors. However, I argue that this practice also serves a crucial function in addressing the legacy of Mahathir and Mahathirism.

The initial film that drew my attention is *Aku Yang Berhormat*, which features the character Hamid, portrayed by Hamid Gurkha, who aspires to enter politics. He decorates his home with portraits of notable Malaysian leaders, including Mahathir Mohammed (the Prime Minister), Musa Hitam (the Deputy Prime Minister), and Tengku Razaleigh (the Minister of Finance). Hamid's ambition is to politically challenge and democratically replace the morally compromised and corrupt politician Jamali. To enhance his oratory skills, he often practices speaking in front of these portraits, particularly Mahathir's, and occasionally engages in dialogue with them.

This behaviour is significant as Hamid is a farmer and a member of the Malaysian Volunteers Corps Department (RELA). He embodies Mahathir's governmental motto, '*Bersih Cekap, Amanah*' (Clean, Accountable, and Responsible). Ultimately, when Hamid achieves electoral victory over Jamali, this outcome signifies that he, through emulating Mahathir and his principles, has successfully displaced the politicians who do not embody the values of *Bersih, Cekap, Amanah*. Hamid's practice of speaking and rehearsing in front of Mahathir's portraits is thus characterised as an act of imitation of Mahathir and his ideological legacy.

The second film featuring portraits of Mahathir is *Panas*, in which these portraits appear towards the film's conclusion. This occurs in a scene set in the UMNO party's meeting room for the Damai Kota constituency. During this meeting, Ariff receives a phone call with the news that Sofiah is in the same hotel room as her ex-husband, Paiman. At this moment, other party members are engaged in animated discussions about political matters and various unrelated topics. A notable subject that can be heard prominently in the background is '*masyarakat madani*,' a term associated with Anwar Ibrahim, who was the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia at the time and is now the 10th Prime Minister of the country. Mahathir's portrait is positioned behind Arif, elevated, suggesting nobility; however, Arif's demeanour shows a lack of reverence or respect toward Mahathir's image.

In a subsequent scene, Arif, as the youth leader of the party, delivers a speech at the UMNO General Assembly, wherein he criticises 'the youth or the old leaders who have been too preoccupied with money and women to relinquish their positions in the party, as they are unfit to uphold its vision'. Although this scene appears to critique Mahathir, it is less significant, as the director portrays Arif, who condemns the leadership for incompetence and corruption, as hypocritical. Throughout the film, Arif is depicted as compromising his morals, engaging in an affair with another man's wife

(Sofiah), leading a hedonistic lifestyle, failing in his family business affairs, and deceiving his family about his marital status. Therefore, the placement of Mahathir's portraits in the Damai Kota UMNO meeting room, positioned higher than those of any other UMNO members present, signifies Mahathir's moral and political superiority over the hypocritical youth members, including Arif.



Figure 6.1 A Portrait Photograph Featuring in the UMNO Youth Scene in a film, *Panas* (1998).

The third film, titled *Tuah* (1990), explores the narrative of Hang Tuah, a legendary Malay warrior from the Sultanate era, who mysteriously travels to contemporary Malaysia. Upon his arrival, he encounters Datuk Shaari and Shahira, who are embroiled in a robbery, from which Tuah rescues them. During this incident, Tuah sustains a gunshot wound to his shoulder; however, it does not result in significant consequences. Distrustful of Tuah, Shahira and Datuk Shaari decide to subject him to both physical and psychological evaluations. Over time, their apprehension transforms into an increasing familiarity and connection with Tuah.

The mystical element of Tuah's journey to the modern era is framed by his concealment in a cave, following a royal decree from the Sultan of Malacca, who has condemned him to death due to allegations of an illicit relationship with Tun Teja, the Sultan's queen. A pivotal moment takes place in Datuk Shaari's office, which warrants particular attention. Within the contemporary setting, Tuah finds himself indirectly serving the authority when Datuk Shaari, portrayed as both a protagonist and a politician, utilises him for political ends. While engaged in a discussion with his

assistant, Datuk Shaari stands before a portrait of Mahathir and asserts, 'If we know him (Tuah) more, we could make him (Tuah) a hero. I believe that we can use him as a symbol for our next election campaign. He is a brave Malay man and not afraid to die. This is the kind of person we need.' This scene implies that Datuk Shaari, perceived as a supporter of Mahathir due to the prominent display of Mahathir's portraits in his office, sees the right-wing figure of Tuah as an ideal representation that aligns with both his political party and the premiership of Mahathir.

In *Hati Bukan Kristal*, a candid photograph of Mahathir is placed on a journalist's desk in the newspaper's office. This imagery may initially seem incongruous, as the journalist is responsible for the publication's women's section. However, a subsequent scene reveals a newspaper headline stating: '*Ramai wanita Melayu jadi mangsa* (Many Malay women becoming victims of prostitution)'. I interpret the interplay between Mahathir's portrait and the accompanying headline as reflecting Mahathir's vision, which advocates neoliberalism and meritocracy, seeking to empower Malay women and enhance their competitiveness relative to women of other ethnicities. This is linked to Mahathir's policies on eliminating gender quotas in university admissions. In an interview with TV3, he criticised the previous gender quotas, stating that they were unfair to women, who, in his view, are generally more diligent and hardworking than men. *Hati Bukan Kristal* arguably emphasises the portrayal of progressive women, exemplified explicitly by the editor, portrayed by Adibah Amin, and the junior journalist, Nina, played by Julia Rais. These characters embody Mahathir's ideal woman, striking a balance between modernity and tradition, and between progressiveness and conservatism. This contrasts sharply with the character Michelle, played by Erma Fatima, who becomes ensnared in a hedonistic and materialistic lifestyle, ultimately resorting to scandalous behaviour in relation to politicians and prostitution. Conversely, the rationale for not selecting the aforementioned films is that the politician character does not occupy a central role, and the political aspect is not the primary conflict. In contrast, both *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud* utilise politics as a central conflict within their narratives, thereby facilitating a discourse on the power dynamics between politicians and the other characters in these films.

Through careful observation and identification, it becomes evident that Mahathir exists in a state of 'presence in absence' on the silver screen, primarily manifested through his portrait photographs. This analysis excludes the influence of his

slogan posters from *Bersih*, *Cekap*, dan *Amanah*, which are featured in films such as *Matinya Seorang Patriot* and *Rozana Cinta '87*. Notably, in the post-Mahathir era, the depiction of state leaders in Malaysian cinema appears to be significantly diminished. Hence, the presence of Mahathir's portrait photographs serves as a crucial alternative to direct cinematic representation, marking a distinctive characteristic of cinema in subsequent decades.

6.4 The Intersection of Politics and Sexuality in *Ringgit Kasorrga*

Directed by a female filmmaker, *Ringgit Kasorrga* explores the sexual scandals and fetishism prevalent within the political elite. The film engages in a discourse surrounding the intricate relationship between sexuality and power while examining their intersections. The narrative centres on Mira, played by Tiara Jacquelina, who assumes the role of mistress to Datuk Shah, played by Zaidi Omar. Despite her awareness of her status as a mistress and the associated scandal surrounding Datuk Shah, Mira exhibits a sincere commitment to the relationship. She harbours a profound aspiration to become Datuk Shah's spouse. Datuk Shah cannot comply because his wife threatens to report him to the minister, which would disrupt his political career. However, Datuk Shah's fetishism undermines Mira's trust when she discovers he records them secretly during their sexual encounters.

Simultaneously, Mira was engaged in a prostitution syndicate linked to her talent agencies. This operation was conducted in collaboration with Khal (portrayed by Hans Isaac) and subsequently involved Nina (Deanna Yusof). After the secret of Datuk Shah's fetishism is explored by Mira, Mira is threatened by Datuk Shah's bodyguard to return the tape that contains their intercourse clip. Mira refuses, and by accident, the bodyguard shoots Mira to death. Khal and Nina, who luckily managed to get the tape, want Datuk Shah to be punished for what he had done. They manage to get Datuk Shah arrested, but in the end, Datuk Shah is released and becomes a witness to the murderer because someone has become a scapegoat for the case.

The central idea of *Ringgit Kasorrga*, which centred on political scandals including sex scandals, reminds me of the case of Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik, the former Chief Minister of Malacca, who was accused in 1994 of statutory rape involving a 15-year-old girl (Zurairi, 2018). Despite the serious nature of the allegations, the Attorney-General at the time opted not to initiate legal proceedings (Zurairi, 2018). In 2018, Rahim Tamby Chik asserted that the accusations of statutory rape and the

subsequent media scrutiny constituted a deliberate conspiracy aimed at undermining both his position and that of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (Zurairi, 2018). As a noteworthy former vice-president of UMNO, Rahim Tamby Chik indicated that during the period of the allegations, he was regarded as a rising star and the preferred protégé of Dr Mahathir (Zurairi, 2018). The investigations ultimately compelled him to resign as the Chief Minister of Malacca (Zurairi, 2018). In the case of Rahim, the former youth leader of UMNO Baru (1994), went on vacation while the police detained the underage victim of the alleged rape (Aliran, 1994). Zarina Abdul Aziz, the secretary of the Women's Crisis Centre, remarked, 'By some twist of logic, the child victim faces detention and interrogation rather than the accused' (Aliran, 1994, p. 3).

According to Aliran (1994), Mahathir, as Prime Minister, and numerous Members of Parliament defended Rahim by invoking the presumption of innocence unless proven guilty. In this particular case, Attorney General Mohtar stated that justice and legal principles require him to prove the accused's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Ironically, these individuals overlook the injustice faced by Malaysians who are deemed guilty and imprisoned without trial under the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA). Furthermore, Mahathir, who is often associated with authoritarian governance in the context of his political opposition, presents a paradox in defending Rahim on the grounds that the judge has yet to establish his guilt.

In addition to that, Aliran (1994) reported,

'The Prime Minister himself has not displayed outrage against the young girl's sexual exploiters. He seems more concerned about Rahim Thamby Chik. Thus the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and all the cabinet Ministers have all been conspicuously and deafeningly silent about the Attorney General's unethical conduct in revealing the minor's background.'

(p. 8)

In a critical examination of various sexual scandals, one noteworthy incident involved allegations against D.P. Vijandran, the Deputy Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat, who was purportedly featured in multiple pornographic videotapes (Aliran, 1994). Shortly thereafter, the discourse surrounding these allegations intensified when Attorney-General Tan Sri Abu Talib Othman made a controversial statement regarding the cessation of the investigation into the videotapes (Aliran, 1994).

Othman's assertion that he had instructed the police to destroy 11 videotapes and four envelopes containing photographs and negatives, supposedly with Vijandran's consent, incited public outrage and led various groups and individuals to accuse the government of orchestrating a cover-up (Aliran, 1994). Aliran (1994) contended that the Attorney General's actions had brought considerable disrepute to his esteemed position and called for his immediate resignation. Furthermore, it was argued that these actions represented a blatant attempt to obliterate evidence and impede justice. Compounding this issue was the Attorney General's prior history of alleged cover-ups and his protection of individuals accused of misconduct (Aliran, 1994). Notably, the public has not overlooked his involvement in suppressing the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) crisis, nor his role in the controversial removal of former Lord President Tun Salleh Abas (Aliran, 1994).

Aliran's (1994) critique extended to the Prime Minister's response, which was regarded as concerning. The Prime Minister's dismissal of the situation, articulated through the assertion that the Attorney General had exercised discretion in destroying the videotapes and images, was deemed insufficient. Aliran (1994) argued that the Prime Minister had a responsibility to initiate an investigation into the Attorney General's conduct for several compelling reasons.

Besides the cases mentioned earlier, the post-Mahathir era also reveals instances involving sex scandals and murder. For example, the case of part-time model Noritta Samsudin's murder on December 3, 2003, is among Malaysia's most famous unsolved crimes (Landau, 2020). Nearly 17 years after her death, the perpetrator has not been identified (Landau, 2020). The identity of the mystery man suspected to be the perpetrator remains unknown. According to Landau (2020), rumours persist that implicate a former Cabinet minister as the so-called 'mystery man,' whose alleged pursuit of sadistic sexual acts is believed to have resulted in the young woman's death.

Besides the cyclical intersection of sex scandals and politics, this subject has appeared in several films during Mahathir's premiership, including *Hati Bukan Kristal*, *Tiada Esok Bagimu*, *Panas*, and *Ringgit Kasorrga*. This suggests that these issues and the associated unrest have inspired filmmakers to translate them into cinematic works.

The discourse surrounding sexuality in this film engages with a nuanced spectrum that interrogates themes of power, surveillance, and political dynamics. The sexual drive exhibited by the political elite catalyses a cyclical process of surveillance, establishing complex power relations between the political elite and the objectified

women. The gaze serves as a conduit into the cinematic narrative, where an elite foreign observer scrutinises models, notably Mira, through a transparent barrier. However, this observation is not limited to mere observation; it also includes Mira's lack of consent regarding the recording of her sexual encounter with Datuk Shah. The scene is significant within the narrative as it follows an event featuring several VVIPs at an equestrian space under the influence of alcohol, which subsequently leads to the death of one of the models. The juxtaposition between Mira's recorded sexual activity and the death at the equestrian scene serves as foreshadowing of Mira's impending death later in the film. The representation of the elite character encapsulates the act of film-watching, elucidating how the male gaze wields power and reconfigures women into objectified subjects. The power dynamics between males and females extend beyond the gaze during intimate encounters, reflecting the fetishised desires of the elite.

Datuk Shah, a prominent member of the Kasorrga elite, serves as a member of parliament for Pekan Riuh. This position affords him significant influence over society as a whole. His esteemed status is evident in the respect he receives from the citizens of Pekan Riuh, exemplified by his invitation to the grand opening ceremony of Pak Teh's restaurant. Given his perception of authority over the inhabitants of Pekan Riuh, he believes that he possesses the ability to subdue Nina and compel her to satisfy his sexual desires. This is evident in the scene where Nina encounters Datuk Shah at Kasorrga. Datuk attempts to intimidate Nina by holding her hand and body, which underscores his dominance over her. Nonetheless, Nina rebuffs his advances, deeming them immoral, and subsequently distances herself from him. This scene serves as a foreshadowing device, illustrating that Datuk Shah's failure to dominate Nina's physicality and sexual autonomy parallels his inability to control her as an individual within the narrative. This notion is further substantiated throughout the film, where Datuk Shah, despite employing various threats and intimidation tactics, consistently fails to assert his authority over Nina. Conversely, Nina actively seeks to undermine Datuk Shah's power, demonstrating her resilience and agency.

Another significant aspect is Datuk Shah's application of *susuk*. In the scene depicting Datuk Shah undergoing the implantation of a *susuk* into his body with the assistance of a shaman, his aide informs the shaman that Datuk Shah intends to utilise it to enforce compliance among others. In another context, this scene implies that Datuk Shah is willing to employ any stratagem to assert dominance over others. Furthermore, the concept of *susuk* serves to enhance his sexual prowess. This indicates that there

exists a parallel and interrelated relationship between political power and sexual power. The relationship between sexuality and Malaysian politicians is complex and multifaceted. Notably, Mahathir Mohamad stands apart from this dynamic. As a result, the numerous scandals that have surfaced involving other political figures have not implicated him. Additionally, sex scandals have predominantly been linked to his political rivals, exemplified by the sodomy controversies surrounding Anwar Ibrahim.

Regarding the matters of *susuk* in this film, I encountered a publication by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, a government agency that publishes a national opinion magazine titled Dewan Masyarakat. One of its editions examines the question, 'Dampangi Bomoh Jika Mahu Memimpin UMNO?' (Using a Shaman to Lead UMNO?), published in April 1987, Vol. 25, Issue 4, authored anonymously and designated as Penulis Khas (Special Writer). The implications suggested by the title may appear to reveal UMNO's vulnerabilities to the public, potentially undermining Mahathir's credibility within the party.

'A candidate for the people's representative is not sure to win. With the help of a shaman who borrowed him 'something', the candidate is now called 'The Honourable'. A minister in the government is now wearing a '*penunduk*' when attending an official ceremony so that anyone who meets him will be 'loving and respectful to him'. It is said that a candidate for the Chief of the UMNO division had to use a shaman to worship all the chiefs of UMNO branches in his 40 dubious quarters, to submit to him to allow him to retain the position of chief [my translation].'

(p. 7)

Nevertheless, I contend that the prevalence of superstitious scandals and gossip is unlikely to undermine Mahathir's credibility. Since he entered politics, he has consistently portrayed himself as a scientific and progressive figure who dismisses superstitious and traditional beliefs that conflict with Islamic principles. Given that this issue has become a matter of public awareness, the revelation of shamanism within UMNO does not serve to destabilise Mahathir; rather, it threatens to weaken his internal opponents within the party. I want to emphasise that the publication period of this issue of Dewan Masyarakat coincided with the imminent UMNO Assembly election. Within the same issue of Dewan Masyarakat, several articles address the dynamics of party competition, including titles such as '*Pertandingan yang membawa perpecahan*'

(Competition that Brings Divides) and '*UMNO Mencari Alternatif*' (UMNO Seeking Alternatives). Consequently, in the context of *Ringgit Kasorrga*, the depiction of Datuk Shah as a misogynist who exploits *susuk* for personal gain does not establish a connection between Mahathir and this cinematic character.

6.4.1 Nina, the Ideal Mahathirist Woman?



Figure 6.2 Nina (Played by Deana Yusoff) in *Ringgit Kasorrga* (1995).

In her article, Khoo (2006) emphasises that Erma Fatima and Shuhaimi Baba's films, *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* and *Selubung*, '...capture the attitude, spirit and vision of Mahathirism concerning gender, sexuality, race relations and Malay(sian) identity' (p. 8). According to Khoo (2006), Mustika (played by Vanidah Imran) in *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* is 'the perfect symbol and mouthpiece of Mahathirist developmentalism, able to reconcile and balance the modern and traditional roles of the Malay woman, as well as to negotiate between *adat* [pre-Islamic Malay custom] and Islam' (p. 8). Meanwhile, in *Selubung*, Mastura (Deanna Yusoff) shows as '...a stronger independent character. Mastura chooses a Westernised or more secular-oriented path as a modern and moderate Muslim woman (p. 4). In light of the above mentions, Khoo concludes that the cinematic position of both female characters '...reflect the ideology of UMNO's 'moderate' stance on women and modernity as compared with the position of PAS, and other religious fundamentalist groups such as the sect Al-Arqam, which propagated polygamy during its existence before being banned in Malaysia in 1994' (p. 5).

In parallel, Nina articulates her commitment to tradition through her engagement in *kuda kepang* activities, which positions her as a representative of Mahathirism ideals as a woman. This is aligned with Khoo's (2006) arguments that the Mahathirist ideal woman is the capability to reconcile and balance the modern and traditional roles of the Malay woman, as well as to negotiate between *adat* [pre-Islamic Malay custom] and Islam (p. 8). The character of Nina in *Ringgit Kasorrga*, directed by Suhaimi Baba, who also directed *Selubung*, exemplifies the Mahathirist ideal of a progressive, globalist woman. She holds a tertiary education in hotel management and demonstrates linguistic proficiency in several foreign languages, including French. Furthermore, she does not reject modernity or globalism; rather, she actively engages with these concepts by collaborating with Mira and Khal at the talent agency, thereby participating in the contemporary free-market economy.

The significance of *kuda kepang*, as enacted by Nina and other members of the kampung, serves as a critical counterpoint to the elite equestrian practices observed in Pulau Kasorrga. Mahathir's appreciation for equestrian pursuits has been documented (YS Tong, Malaysiakini, Feb 1, 2002). Furthermore, Nina's rejection of Datuk Shah's advances towards sexual engagement reflects the deeply ingrained Eastern-Malay ethics that she embodies. Additionally, her ultimate concern for Mira and her family's *maruah* (dignity) at the film's conclusion—where she expresses anxiety regarding Mira's *aib* (shame) and *malu* (embarrassment)—underscores her intrinsic Malay identity, ultimately leading to a complex resolution within the narrative.

The film's concluding segment commences with a close-up of the *kuda kepang* on the ground, being subjected to the crushing force of a bulldozer operating on a construction site adjacent to Nina's restaurant. The scene commences with a bulldozer in motion, demolishing the signage reading 'Bangsal Kota Riuh,' which serves as the identifier for the Kuda Kepang training facility. Subsequently, the bulldozer collides with the Kuda Kepang, which is already positioned on the ground. This construction occurs at the *kuda kepang* court, a primary training facility for the Pekan Riuh *kuda kepang* team. This construction scene at the *kuda kepang* illustrates the juxtaposition between modern capitalist influences and traditional communitarian values, emphasising the predominance of capitalist interests. In the context of the narrative, the bulldozer serves as a metaphor representing Datuk Shah and his proxy, while the *kudang kepang* symbolises Nina and the people of Pekan Riuh. This relationship is underscored in the dialogues between Nina and Khal, in which she asserts that the

construction project and its machinery are controlled by 'orang Datuk' (the Datuk team). Furthermore, Nina emphasises to Khal that it is futile to oppose them. The narrative transitions between their dialogues and visual representations of the *kuda kepang* and the earth, with the bulldozer in the background. This juxtaposition highlights the suppression and repression experienced by the populace at the hands of the politicians, positioning them as mere subjects of political manoeuvring.

In the same scene, Nina and Khal engage in a contentious discussion concerning the explicit tape involving Datuk Shah and the numerous female victims associated with Kasorrga. Nina's perspective on the tape is closely linked to the Foucauldian discourse of power. Prior to this final scene, another sequence features Nina and her friends confronting Datuk Shah about his misconduct and the murder of Mira. During this confrontation, Datuk Shah implores Nina not to expose the tape, arguing that such exposure would bring humiliation to his family. He assures Nina that he will assume responsibility for the events surrounding Mira's death. However, Nina insists on submitting the tape to the court. In her view, exposing the tape to the authorities will lead to Datuk Shah being charged only with immoral conduct, while the true humiliation will fall on the women depicted in the film.

In this regard, Nina appears to be more concerned with humiliation than with justice. This is intriguing, especially considering that prior to this moment, Khal expresses his anger upon learning through the newspaper that Datuk Shah is no longer a suspect in the case. Both characters are aware that Datuk Shah will be released, implicitly indicating their understanding that his case will be dismissed. However, in the context of Nina and the tape, she portrays herself as an authority figure with whom they disagree, thereby attempting to suppress the criminal acts and the actual cases at hand. This aligns with Foucault's discourse on 'power'. Foucault argues that power operates in such a way that individuals submit, even when they possess the freedom to resist. Foucault elucidates that power can only be exerted over free individuals and only to the extent that they are free. Conversely, Foucault posited that slavery does not constitute a power relationship when an individual is physically restrained in chains. In this context, it pertains to a physical relationship characterised by constraint. The conclusion highlights a notable issue that arises from the characters Nina and Khal, who contend that they should refrain from presenting the tape as evidence to the authorities, fearing it would further humiliate Mira and her family. This resolution underscores how

Nina and Khal are ensnared by societal 'common sense,' ultimately surrendering their pursuit of justice in order to preserve *maruah* (dignity).

The final sequences with Nina and Khal, as they remove the tape amid stunning golden hour shots—which enhance the scene's beauty—highlight Foucault's ideas on power because for him, power functions in a manner where individuals submit, even when they possess the freedom to resist. Conversely, Foucault posited that slavery does not constitute a power relationship when an individual is physically restrained in chains. In these moments, both Nina and Khal show a lack of agency, choosing to submit to power even though they could resist because of their scepticism towards the systems. Nevertheless, the shot in the beautiful golden hour scenery does not imply scepticism towards the systems, especially to the spectators. The depiction of the characters with smiling faces suggests that they wish to escape from the conflict, implying that they prefer ignorance because they believe the systems are flawed. Heide (2006) argues that '*Ringgit Kasorrga* is unwilling to pursue the theme of political corruption' (p. 209). However, I believe that *Ringgit Kasorrga* actually engages with political themes, as the central conflict revolves around a politician's character. Nevertheless, the narrative refrains from adopting a more explicitly political or radical conclusion, potentially due to both censorship by repressive authorities and the hegemonic forces that the film seeks to navigate—challenging and conforming simultaneously.

On the other hand, I contend that the pessimistic ending does not emerge from a vacuum; rather, it reflects actual cases and the prevailing state of affairs. In the context of Rahim Tamby Chik's cases, what occurred is as follows: 'By some twist of logic, the child victim is the one who has to face detention and interrogation rather than the accused' (Aliran, 1994, p.3). Therefore, Nina's concern that 'you cannot fight with that kind of person' is quite cynical about the establishment of real life. The real cases of Rahim Tamby Chik illustrate that numerous organisations, including political figures, Aliran (by publishing relevant articles), the Women's Crisis Centre, and other activists, persistently advocate for victims' rights. However, this does not deny that the films are confined by power and embody what Gramsci stated as 'contradictory consciousness'.

The conclusion of *Ringgit Kasorrga* draws parallels to the abrupt finale of *Hati Bukan Kristal*, where both films share a notable similarity: they refrain from depicting politicians as murderers. In *Hati Bukan Kristal*, the narrative clarifies through an intertitle that the character Michelle did not perish due to an altercation with a politician but rather from an overdose of alcohol and drugs. While it is difficult to substantiate the

notion that such an ending is requisite for passing censorship, it is crucial to note that politicians, particularly those with affiliations to the ministerial or prime ministerial levels, are rarely depicted as perpetrators of murder or other significant criminal acts.

6.5 *Interlud*, the Political Allegory of the Nation

This film can be succinctly described as a portrayal of a dangerous political family and the impact such a dynamic has on its members, particularly the destructive tendencies of the political patriarch. The narrative includes a subplot involving a romance between Haris, the son of the family (portrayed by Azhar Sulaiman), and his drama teacher, Cik Nona (played by Louisa Chong). However, the central theme is the dramatisation of the effects of belonging to a dysfunctional family, specifically one led by a politician. The film surprisingly reveals the cruelty of Datuk Muzaffar (acted by Hisham Ahmad Tajuddin), who prioritises his obsession with power and political status above familial relationships. This obsession is particularly evident in his decision to prohibit his daughter, Heryati (played by Sofia Jane), from participating in a dance performance associated with his political adversary, Roslan. Nevertheless, beyond this restriction, Datuk Muzaffar generally disregards the activities and well-being of his children, leading to a palpable estrangement between them and their parents.

In a notable scene, Heryati and her mother engage in a discussion about Heryati's involvement in the arts as they descend the stairs. Both subjects are captured in wide shots, evoking a sense of solitude that reflects their position as women in the household, subjected to the dominance of a more powerful force, represented by the father. Heryati asserts to her mother, '*Seni dengan agama, tak boleh campur aduk dengan politik* (Art and religion should not be mixed with politics.)'. The mother expresses her disagreement, stating concerns regarding Heryati's participation in a dance group affiliated with Roslan, who is the political opponent of Datuk Muzaffar. She reflects on Roslan's past, recalling that when he was younger and unemployed, his father helped him join the party, suggesting that Roslan harbours intentions to oppose Datuk Muzaffar now. The blocking and positioning of Heryati and her mother illustrate a dynamic power imbalance, with Heryati positioned on the staircase, signifying her superior status over her mother. This spatial arrangement symbolises Heryati's assertion of her stance, indicating her belief that her mother is unlikely to effect change in her perspective. Heryati responds, '*Itu soal, Ayah. Soal politik, Ayah. Mak... Encik Roslan dengan Yati tak ada apa-apa. Yati seorang artis, seorang seniman. Yati tak mahu jadi*

alat politik. (That is the issue, Father. It is a political matter, Father. Mother... Mr Roslan and Yati have nothing going on. Yati is an artist, a creative person. Yati does not want to be used as a political tool).’

Suddenly, while seated at the dining table, Heryati's father interrupts the dialogue to reprimand her. The shot utilised here is minimalist, specifically a wide shot, yet the blocking between Datuk Muzaffar and Heryati holds significant implications. Datuk Muzaffar, positioned standing while Heryati remains seated, attempts to assert dominance over her by stating, ‘*Kau jadi alat politik. Alat politik Roslan. Dia gunakan kau untuk menaikkan dirinya. Sudahlah dia menjadi Presiden Parti. Sekarang dia mahu singkirkan ayah. Kau jadi alat dia untuk menyingkirkan ayah kau sendiri*’ (You’ve become a political tool. Roslan’s political tool. He is using you to elevate himself. It is not enough that he is already the Party President. Now he wants to get rid of your father. Moreover, you are his tool to remove your own father). Before Heryati has the opportunity to respond, the dynamics shift as Datuk Muzaffar takes his seat at the dining table, resulting in a balanced distribution of power. Therefore, Heryati asserts, ‘*Yati tak tahu, ayah. Yati tak tahu bagaimana perhubungan ayah dengan Encik Roslan. Yati hanya seorang penari. Dan Yati tak mahu campur tangan. Yati cuma seorang penari*’ (Yati does not know, Father. Yati does not know the nature of your relationship with Mr Roslan. Yati is just a dancer. And Yati does not want to interfere. Yati is just a dancer). Since Datuk Muzaffar could not assert his control over Heryati, he retaliated by leaving the dining table and striking her face.

‘*Anak kurang ajar, kau cuba menikam ayah dari belakang! Lebih baik kau mati! Mati!*’ (You ungrateful child, you're trying to stab your own father in the back! It would be better if you die! Die! [my translation])’

In terms of the dynamics of power, physically, Datuk Muzaffar possesses more power and dominance; however, his act of slapping Heryati illustrates his impotence in dominating her thoughts and stance. Thus, he resorts to physicality. This observation aligns with Foucault’s argument that the use of physical force is not equivalent to power. True power exists when an individual submits voluntarily, without the necessity for physical enforcement, similar to slavery, where the physical oppression operates, showing that the dominant lacks power.

A subsequent scene is linked to the current one, illustrating the moment when the performance featuring Heryati commences. This scene unfolds even prior, as Heryati articulates her aspiration to attend the performance; however, her assistant advises her that her father has prohibited her from going out. Notwithstanding this, Heryati persists in her intention to attend. This transition leads into the auditorium scene, where the performance unfolds, commencing with Roslan acknowledging the audience. The narrative also includes cutaway scenes featuring Harris and her drama teacher as they arrive to watch the performance. As the show begins, Heryati takes to the stage to dance. However, the scene is abruptly interrupted by a phone call received at the police station, reporting a bomb threat at the venue. Despite its shortcomings, the film effectively juxtaposes shots of police car sirens blaring with the audience at the venue, which is thrown into panic. In this chaotic situation, Heryati loses control and tragically collapses, leading to her being trampled by the crowd. She is then transported to the hospital for treatment.

In this scene, we observe Roslan, Datuk Muzaffar's opponent, expressing concern for Heryati. He follows her, who is unconscious, to the hospital. Concurrently, there is a juxtaposition featuring police efforts to apprehend a man, who is later revealed to be the individual responsible for making a false bomb report call. The narrative then transitions to the hospital, where Datuk Muzaffar and his wife arrive. Roslan attempts to reassure Datuk Muzaffar by updating him on Heryati's condition, yet he is met with accusations from Datuk Muzaffar, who blames him for the events that have transpired. Prior to the police's arrival, Datuk Muzaffar was approached and requested to accompany them for investigative purposes. The investigation has revealed that all the tragic incidents occurred as a result of Datuk Muzaffar's scheme to undermine Roslan.

In response to the concerns above, I contend that *Interlud* serves as a dramatisation and symbolisation of the paternalistic politics, particularly exemplified by Datuk Muzaffar, a father and politician, who governs his children with an authoritarian approach. I assert that Datuk Muzaffar's family functions as an allegory for a nation under the dominion of politicians who prioritise their political ambitions over the well-being of their constituents. These paternalistic tendencies in Mahathir's political style highlight his efforts to control societal decisions. Human Rights Watch, Brad Adams (In Al-Jazeera, 2003) points out that Mahathir ran a government that assumed it knew what was best for Malaysians, but stresses that citizens should have the freedom to make their own choices. A clear example of Mahathir's authoritative

approach is how he handled former deputy Anwar Ibrahim, who was arrested in September 1998 shortly after criticising Mahathir (Al-Jazeera, 2003). Charged with sodomy and corruption, Anwar was expelled from his political party and remains in prison. This case demonstrates the autocratic nature of Mahathir's leadership (Al-Jazeera, 2003).

This assertion is corroborated by Datuk Muzaffar's apparent lack of genuine concern for his children, Heryati and Haris, except when their actions intersect with his political interests. For instance, there is a scene where Haris meets his parents at his father's office to wish him a happy birthday. However, Datuk Muzaffar does not appreciate Haris's efforts and continues to discuss his political activities with his wife. Harris became angry and protested, saying that Datuk Muzaffar ignored him after all his efforts to show his care and love for his father. Datuk Muzaffar's parenting style may partly explain why Harris frequently seeks attention through involvement in violent and extreme activities, possibly due to limited guidance and care from his parents.

Notably, in the film, his interest is sparked by Heryati's dance performances, which are linked to his political competition within the party. Consequently, Datuk Muzaffar abruptly exercises his paternal authority to prevent Heryati from participating in the performance. This behaviour appears inconsistent, as he previously showed little concern for his children's activities and involvement. Even after Harris's motorcycle accident, he did not offer advice or express concern. His authoritarian stance seems selectively applied, particularly when his children's actions may affect his political career.

On the other hand, the internal political conflict involving Datuk Muzaffar, whom he termed 'political rivalry' within the party, can be interpreted as a reflection of the political turmoil that besieged UMNO in 1987. This period witnessed a series of rivalries, particularly between Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Ku Li), who sought to challenge Mahathir's incumbency as the party's president.

However, the roots of political dissidence and rivalry within UMNO extend even further back, to the resignation of Musa Hitam from his positions as Deputy Prime Minister and UMNO Deputy President on the night of 26 February 1986, an unexpected turn of events (Khoo, 1995). According to Khoo (1995), the administration at that time was commonly referred to in the press as 'the M' (i.e., 'Mahathir-Musa'), suggesting a

leadership characterised by two 'like-minded and energetic leaders capable of collaborating effectively' (p. 228).

'The parting of the 2Ms' left Mahathir with new political problems under already difficult circumstances. Musa was widely regarded as a diplomatic, popular, and shrewd politician who enjoyed broad grass-roots support...In Malaysia, the public, press and politicians often regarded Musa rather than Mahathir as the behind the liberalism of the '2Ms'. By the time of his resignation, Musa also enjoyed more 'credibility' than Mahathir with the non-Malay community and many NGOs for his opposition Mustapha-Harris's attempt to seize power in Sabah'

(p. 229)

The narrative surrounding Musa's resignation, as articulated in a seven-page letter circulated to all members of the UMNO Supreme Council, illuminates significant themes of political rivalry. In this correspondence, Musa articulated his reasons for vacating his position, notably citing Mahathir's private accusation that he was attempting to discredit Mahathir to "bring him down" (p. 229). This narrative resembles the political dynamics observed in the *Interlud* between Datuk Muzaffar and Roslan. Datuk Muzaffar promotes the belief among his followers and family that Roslan is endeavouring to undermine him. Nevertheless, this perception is rooted in Datuk Muzaffar's subjective viewpoint rather than an objective rivalry on Roslan's part; it is solely Datuk Muzaffar's rivalry. This dramatisation reflects the political rivalry and internal conflicts within UMNO during 1987.

Based on the aforementioned points, following the rivalry between Mahathir and Ku Li, it was after Ku Li's defeat in the UMNO presidential election that he established the Semangat 46 party and the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah coalition in opposition to UMNO during the subsequent election (Khoo, 1995).

According to Khoo (1995):

'The party election of 24 April 1987 brought UMNO's factionalism to a head. Down the party hierarchy, UMNO's elite Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Chief ministers quickly divided into being supporters of 'Team A' (the Mahathir-Ghafar faction) and 'Team B' (the Razaleigh-Musa faction) and prepared to engage in desperate contests for three Vice President's posts and the twenty-five Supreme Council seats.'

(p. 263)

The divided support for Team A and Team B extended beyond the organisational structure of UMNO, permeating the broader Malay community, particularly within the bureaucracy, and even reaching the royal institutions (Khoo, 1995, p. 264). Shamsul A. B, as cited in Khoo (1995), attributes the emergence of Team B to 'competing interests and aspirations' (p. 264) among the Malay upper and middle classes, which were fostered by the New Economic Policy (NEP). This indicates that their 'negative expressions' have been channelled through UMNO politics against the backdrop of economic downturn and financial difficulties.

The rivalry not only influenced the division within UMNO's grassroots but also led to the party's ban due to allegations of invalid votes linked to the then-President, Mahathir Mohamad. Nevertheless, Mahathir succeeded in revitalising UMNO by registering the party under the name UMNO Baharu, which symbolically marks the transition from the 'old UMNO,' characterised by traditional values, to 'the new UMNO,' which embraces modern values aimed at inspiring a new generation of Malays.

While the portrayal in *Interlud* does not entirely replicate or mirror the internal discord within UMNO, it serves as an allegorical response to it. Mr Roslan, whom Datuk Muzaffar's wife referred to as '*Roslan tu musuh politik ayah...Ayah raikan dia. Bawa masuk parti dapat jadi ahli exco parti dapat jawatan tinggi tapi sekarang balik dia nak jatuhkan ayah, nak rampas jawatan ayah dan lontar ayah keluar parti.*' (Roslan is your father's political enemy. Your father once celebrated him, bringing him into the party, making him an executive member, and giving him a prominent position. However, now, he seeks to undermine your father, take his position, and remove him from the party [my translation]).

Datuk Muzaffar also stresses that, '*sudahlah jadi presiden parti, sekarang pun dia nak singkirkan ayah*' (He has already ascended to the presidency of the party, but now he seeks to marginalise your father [my translation]). The rivalry between Datuk Muzaffar and Mr Roslan significantly impacted Heryati's ability to participate in the dance performance, as well as her health. It is reported that Heryati was hospitalised and injured during the turmoil caused by Datuk Muzaffar's sabotage of the performance.

Consequently, Heryati represents individuals who fall victim to political rivalry. In the instance of *Interlud*, Datuk Muzaffar explicitly stated to Heryati after she asserted her commitment to participating in the dance performance, '*Anak tak guna! Kau*

sanggup menikam ayah dari belakang. Lebih baik kau mati! (You worthless child, you're willing to stab your father in the back. You better die! [my translation]). Roslan emphasises to the performer that he does not intend to associate the traditional performance involving Heryati with his political career. Furthermore, he underscores his longstanding involvement in traditional dance performances. Roslan is also depicted as a compassionate figure who cares for his performers; notably, he visited Heryati in the hospital after she was injured during the chaotic performance. Thus, the director aims to present Roslan as a commendable politician, suggesting that any perceived 'rivalry' is primarily confined to Datuk Muzaffar's viewpoints.

At a superficial level, one might argue that this film criticises and vilifies the political class. However, the inclusion of Datuk Muzaffar, a politician who embodies the qualities of a commendable leader, mitigates the critique of the political class and thereby diminishes the potential for a robust critique of the divide between the fundamental and subordinate classes. This assertion is made based on the interpretation that the depiction of corruption and moral decline among politicians is attributed to individuals, suggesting that the political systems and state ideologies are not the primary subjects of critique. This aligns with the thematic explorations in previous works such as *Aku Yang Berhormat* (1981) and *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, each of which posits that the issue lies not in the systems themselves but in the individuals operating within them.

On another note, Roslan, the Yang Berhormat (Parliament Member), articulates state ideologies related to national culture when he emphasises:

'Dan kita telah diminta untuk mempersembahkan tarian kebudayaan Malaysia kepada pelancong yang datang ke negara kita. Jadi saya harap saudara saudara tunjukkanlah imej yang baik dan jaga nama negara. (And we've been asked to perform the Malaysian cultural dance to the tourists who come to our country. Therefore, I hope all of you show a good image and keep the good name of the country.[my translation])'

Despite the complexity inherent in the concept of 'national culture', the film illustrates Mr. Roslan's reference to Malaysian culture predominantly within a Malay-centric framework. This assertion arises from the fact that the dance performance in which Heryati participates is a traditional Malay dance. Since the introduction of the Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (National Culture Policy), a primary critique has consistently centered on the policy's endorsement of a monocultural Malay identity as

the 'national culture', with Islam positioned centrally, thereby reinforcing the ideologies of the ruling class. Within the historical context of the film's production, the 'national culture' sanctioned by the ruling party, UMNO, and Prime Minister Mahathir, was instrumental in consolidating their authority and power. Consequently, Mr. Roslan, positioned as an antithesis to Datuk Muzaffar, does not introduce contradictory values that challenge the foundational class ideologies prevalent in Malaysia. However, his genuine appreciation for culture and tradition stands in stark contrast to Datuk Muzaffar, who appears predominantly engaged with politics and power.

6.5.1 Art as Resistance or Art as Escapism?

'Kita dua beradik ni semacam sebatang kara yang terpenjara dalam gedung yang besar ini. Walaupun kita ada mak dan ayah, tapi mereka tak pernah pedulikan kita. (Both some of us are like lonely souls imprisoned in this big mansion. Even though we have parents, they never care about us.)'

-Heryati in *Interlud* (1995)

The dialogue referenced above expresses Heryati's perception of being 'imprisoned' by her parents. This theme elucidates Heryati's engagement in dance, contrasting Harris's involvement in theatre. Both individuals seek a medium through which they can express themselves and, to some extent, explore their identities. In a poignant scene where Harris interacts with Cikgu Nona, he articulates, '*Setiap kali saya memandang cermin, saya bertanya adakah itu saya?* (Every time I see myself in the mirror, I always ask, Is it me?)' which marks his identity crises and self-reflection. His participation in theatrical performance necessitates numerous acting exercises in front of a mirror, facilitating frequent self-reflection. Moreover, Harris admires James Dean, and the tribute to Dean, particularly from *Rebel Without a Cause*, is relevant to this film. The poster featuring James Dean's likeness, prominently displayed in his room, underscores Harris's quest for self-understanding, as he emulates Dean's demeanour from the aforementioned film. This imitation culminates in acts of violence towards Cikgu Nona, who has deceived him about her marital status. Such violence, however, appears unwarranted, especially considering that Harris's father is incarcerated, and his sister is actively nurturing him.

The film compellingly highlights the rivalry between the young and the old. While the first half of the film showcases the rivalry between Harris-Heryati and his authoritarian father, this theme is poignantly encapsulated in the relationship between Harris and his teacher, Nona, which serves as an allegory for the tension between new and old generations and the generational divide. Harris's imitation of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* holds significant weight, intensifying the film's exploration of youth rebellion. Dean's role (in *Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955), characterised by deep-seated angst and a desire for belonging, serves as a framework for Harris to express his frustrations. By alluding to the imitation of Dean, the film connects the disillusionment of mid-20th-century American youth with the postcolonial generational discontent in Malaysia. Harris transcends mere imitation; he embodies a form of aesthetic and existential resistance. His rebellion is not articulated through coherent ideology or acts of violence. From the beginning of the film, Harris is depicted as inclined towards extreme activities, including bicycle racing, motor racing, bomb-making, and ultimately, the theft of Nona, his teacher and romantic interest.



Figure 6.3 Harris (Played by Azhar Sulaiman) Imitated the Style of James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause*.

Since I argue that this film is an allegory of paternalistic politics, Harris and Heryati's rebellious acts should be viewed as representing civil society's rebellion. In the context of the arts, Khoo (2002) wrote an article in the New Straits Times discussing Reformasi, the movement and mass protests surrounding the removal of Anwar Ibrahim

from his position as Deputy Prime Minister, as seen in Amir Muhammad's *Perforated Sheets*. Sabri Zain's *Face Off: A Malaysian Reformasi Diary* (1998–99) and Shahnnon Ahmad's *SHIT@Pukimak@PM*. Khoo (2002) states,

'Reformasi blossomed as a cultural movement producing writings that criticized, challenged, and mocked Mahathir's regime. Reformasi came to stand for alternative expression and debate unshackled by state censorship. This essay offers a political reading of a set of newspaper columns, a diary, and a novel which were popular among dissident circles.'

(para. 5)

Despite this, it is evident that *Interlud* does not encapsulate the essence of Reformasi, particularly given that its chronological setting precedes this pivotal movement. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that Khoo (2002) identifies three artistic works that demonstrate resistance to authority, including critiques of Mahathir. In contrast, the creative expressions within *Interlud* serve more as forms of escapism and self-expression than as effective instruments of dissent.

Conversely, Heryati demonstrates greater decisiveness and conviction in her actions. She experiences a profound vitality while dancing, motivating her to join the dance collective. However, the dance community is associated with rival political figures who oppose her father, Roslan. When her mother advised her to withdraw from the group, Heryati firmly reaffirmed her stance:

'Mak, Encik Roslan dengan Yati tu tak ada apa-apa. Yati Cuma seorang artis, seorang seniman. Yati tak mahu jadi alat politik. (Mom, Mr Roslan and I does not have anything. I'm just an artist. I do not want to be political tool [my translation])'

Despite her father expressly forbidding her to participate in the dance performance, Heryati remains resolute in her desire to join, unaware that he is orchestrating a scheme to sabotage the event to undermine his political rival. Moreover, I contend that this film presents the family as an allegory for the nation, reflecting the sentiment expressed in *Sayang Salmah*'s (1995) dialogue, '*rumah adalah negeri kecil kita*' (home is our small country). Consequently, Heryati's actions as a dissident and her expressions of discontent can be interpreted as a manifestation of civil society's opposition to a state characterised by authoritarian governance. Consequently, she

becomes a victim of this plan, suffering injuries that, while pivotal to the narrative, are somewhat illogical. The contrasting resolutions of Heryati and Haris may be attributed to their differing artistic philosophies and approaches to art. Heryati participates in the arts driven by passion and adheres to her principled stance on artistic integrity.

Based on the above analysis, the dynamic power structure between Heryati and Datuk Muzaffar in their father-daughter relationship can be understood as an allegory representing the relationship between the State and civil society (which relates to what I mentioned before that Datuk Muzaffar's family is an allegory of a nation). Through the Mahathirist discourse, Datuk Muzaffar's authoritarian stance aligns with Mahathirist authoritarianism. This aspect of Mahathir's authoritarian approach became particularly evident during his interview with TV3, coinciding with his retirement, where he emphasised his father's strict ethos. He stated that his father's strictness contributed significantly to his numerous achievements, ranging from becoming a doctor to ultimately serving as Prime Minister (TV3, 2003). Transitioning from his childhood experiences, his narrative shifted to what can be termed as the 'politics of infantilism' — '*Jadi kalau saya sebagai bapaklah, saya rasa kadang-kadang nak dera orang Melayu ini, supaya dia faham sikit dunia* (If I were to look at myself as a father, I think at a certain juncture, I feel like I want to torture the Malays so that they can understand the real world)'. This sentiment illustrates how his father's ethos influenced his own authoritarian tendencies, a perspective echoed by Khoo Boo Teik (1995). The mass arrests during the Lalang Operation effectively curtailed Mahathir's populism, revealing his authoritarian characteristics (Khoo, 1995).

In addition, while Heryati employed art as a means of escapism from his authoritarian father, Haris also utilised art as a tool for both escape and self-expression. In addition to that, Haris's engagement with the theatre, led by Cikgu Nona, emerges from a quest for self-discovery during his coming-of-age journey. His primary motivation for involvement in theatre is not a strong affinity for acting, but rather the romantic dynamics he shares with Cikgu Nona that propel him into this artistic realm. Ultimately, when the protagonist discovers that he has been exploited and manipulated by Cikgu Nona, he rebels, culminating in kidnapping her as an act of revenge. This narrative suggests that Heryati employs art as a form of expression, whereas for Haris, art serves as an escape. Returning to the dialogue referenced at the outset of this section, it is a striking instance of karma that, after his father's imprisonment for sabotaging the cultural concert—an incident that resulted in Heryati's injuries—he now faces dire

consequences. This situation is particularly poignant, given that throughout the film the father has effectively ‘imprisoned’ his son and daughter by directing his attention solely to political matters. Consequently, he now finds himself imprisoned, a fate brought about by the politics that consumed his life.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have emphasised that the central argument revolves around the portrayal of politicians in Malaysian films during the Mahathir premiership era, characterised by complexity and sophistication. It is crucial to note that the terms ‘complex’ and ‘sophisticated’ do not refer to the inherent traits of the politicians themselves; instead, they pertain to the intricate and nuanced manner in which their characteristics are represented politically. Although the selected films, namely *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud*, depict politicians as antagonists associated with moral degradation and corruption, it is essential to acknowledge that such portrayals are limited to an individual level, rather than addressing systemic or party-related issues. It is also important to highlight that both *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud* have central distinct problems. *Ringgit Kasorrga* primarily addresses political scandals intertwined with sex scandals, whereas *Interlud* focuses more on paternalistic politics, presented allegorically through the family of a politician. Consequently, the negative depiction of politicians redirects attention from the broader, more pressing problems within Malaysian politics toward a more localised narrative.

This supports Chomsky's arguments regarding the Propaganda Model, which posits that the state may project an image of championing free speech through the mediation of news or media productions that appear to criticise the government. However, such criticisms often serve to distract from underlying structural issues. For instance, in the portrayal of politicians in Malaysian films during the Mahathir premiership, particularly in the selected works *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlud*, while issues such as sexual scandals and dysfunctional father figures are highlighted, there is a notable absence of constructive and structural critique of the political systems, with the focus instead shifting to individual concerns.

CHAPTER 7

MALAY DILEMMA OR RECLAIMING MALAYNESS? – MAHATHIRIST MALAY NATIONALISM IN *AMOK* (1995) AND *PEREMPUAN MELAYU TERAKHIR* (1999)

7.1 Mahathir's Malay and Malaysian Nationalist Ideology

This chapter will analyse *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999) and *Amok* (1995) from a Mahathirism framework. Both films are chosen and discussed in this chapter due to their similar themes, which focus on Malay identity and the concept of '*sirih pulang ke gagang*,' exemplifying the idea of returning to one's roots. One of the most significant tenets of Mahathirism that pertains to the films analyzed in this chapter is the concept of nationalism, particularly concerning Malay nationalism, which is a central theme in both films—within the framework of Mahathirism, the late Lee Kuan Yew, the inaugural Prime Minister of Singapore, regarded Mahathir as part of a faction of inflexible Malays, often referred to as 'Ultra-Malay', alongside prominent figures such as Syed Jaafar Albar, Syed Nasir, Harun Idris, Musa Hitam, and Abdullah Ahmad. (Khoo, 1995) The politicians and Malay ideologues, including Mahathir, responded to what they referred to as 'Chinese encroachment' on the special rights of Malays with considerable acerbity (Khoo, 1995).

Mahathir's ethno-nationalist political perspectives can be traced back to his formative years, when he witnessed the decline of the Malays in both the business sphere and the public sector, a phenomenon attributed to the effects of colonialism and conflict (Khoo, 1995). While pursuing his medical studies in Singapore, he wrote regularly about socio-political issues among the Malays in his column, 'Che Det', for The New Straits Times. His book, *Malay Dilemma*, initially banned by the government in 1970 and subsequently published in 1981, explores the issues faced by Malays and articulates his desire for Malays to progress while shedding aspects of their cultural identity (Khoo, 1995). The text critiques Mahathir's assertion that the underdevelopment of Malays is attributable to genetic and environmental factors (Mahathir, 1970). According to Khoo (1995), Mahathir's embrace of the principle of 'survival of the fittest' leads him to adopt a Social Darwinist viewpoint, in which he draws parallels between the historical developments of China and those of the Malays.

Mahathir posits that Malays are inherently indolent—an idea compounded by the lack of intermarriage among them and by the environmental stability of the Malay Peninsula, which he argues distances Malays from the principles underlying 'survival of the fittest' (Khoo, 1995). In a shift from his ethnonationalistic views, Mahathir proposed the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* (or Malaysian Nation) to solicit support from non-Bumiputras while reinforcing his Malay nationalism and addressing the challenges posed by global market dynamics.

Additionally, there are several other reasons for selecting *Amok* and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* for analysis: 1) In *Amok*, Mahathir's assertion from *The Malay Dilemma* is referenced at the outset, addressing the phenomenon of amok among the Malays, 2) *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* presents Mahathir's speech, which is utilised as diegetic sound, extracted from the UMNO annual assembly, where he discusses the progress of the Malays. Furthermore, Erma Fatima's affiliation with Puteri UMNO (Women Youth of UMNO) lends further significance to the selection of *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (Gaik, 2009). Analysing a film produced by an individual associated with the same political party as Mahathir is particularly noteworthy, despite the persistence of a 'contradictory consciousness.'

The notion of this chapter is derived from Khoo's (1995) argument: 'Anxious to secure the survival of the Malays, Mahathir seemed prepared to see the end of Malayness' (p. 9). This distinction enables me to differentiate between Malay nationalism, particularly the Mahathirist dimension, and the concept of Malayness itself, as certain aspects of Malayness do not necessarily align with Mahathirist-Malay nationalism. For *Amok*, I will draw attention to the argument by Khoo (2006) where she states, 'Concurring with the ideology of Malay nationalism and the goals of the cultural policy, the film suggests that there is no place for "foreigners" which indirectly refers to non-Malay Malaysians) who do not assimilate culturally to Malayness' (Khoo, 2006, p. 194). I assert that this scenario exemplifies a paradox of Amok, wherein ethnonationalism and occidentalism converge with Mahathirism. However, the element of superstition (*semangat*) interrupts and challenges the modernisation ideals of Mahathirism. Conversely, the film *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* depicts the dilemmas faced by the New Malay identity. I find myself unable to fully concur with Gaik's (2009) assertion regarding the protagonist, Mustika (played by Vanidah Imran), as she posits that Mustika embodies the quintessence of Mahathirist-Malay women. Mustika's character exemplifies a nuanced balance among traditional, modern, and Islamic values.

This chapter will be divided into two sections: first, it will discuss the relationship between the concept of '*kepulangan*' ('return to the roots') and nationalist or ethnonationalist ideologies, which are among Mahathir's tenets, while the second part will focus on the analysis of films.

7.2 Homecoming and Nationalist Ideology

Adman Salleh and Erma Fatimah stand out as prominent directors of their time, recognised for their contributions to cinema through a number of significant films that not only demonstrate artistic excellence but also engage in critical discourse and convey socio-political messages. This chapter will analyse two films directed by these filmmakers: *Amok* and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*. Although both films explore similar themes of Malay identity and gender discourse, they converge on the concept of *sirih pulang ke gagang* (returning to the roots), which signifies a return to Terengganu. This concept is imbued with the notion of *kepulangan*, which resonates with Boym's notion of 'restorative nostalgia'. According to Boym (2001), restorative nostalgia is oriented towards the 'nostos'—an endeavour to reconstruct the 'lost home'. Individuals constrained by restorative nostalgia perceive their nostalgic experiences as 'truth and tradition' (p. 19). Furthermore, Boym elaborates that restorative nostalgia is integral to contemporary national and religious revivals (2001, p. 19) and is linked to two primary narratives: 'the return to origins' and 'the conspiracy' (2001, p. 19).

According to Boym, 'nostalgia' can be defined as 'longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed' (2001, p.13). The concept of homecoming (*kepulangan* in Malay) is examined in the films *Amok* and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*, both of which express a profound longing for that which is perceived to be 'no longer existent.' Furthermore, the understanding of '*kepulangan*' in these films reflects the National Culture Policy (NCP) notion of essentialism regarding Malay identity and Islamic values. This perspective aligns with Boym's assertion that there exists a utopian dimension within these notions, which does not strictly revert to the past but rather traverses in a 'sideways' manner. Consequently, the idea of '*kepulangan*' in both films illustrates restorative nostalgia, which can be interpreted as an ideological construction. In *Amok*, restorative nostalgia is articulated both through the act of running amok—a form of nostalgic expression—and through the demonisation of Western women, representing a broader rejection of 'the West' through violent acts. Conversely, *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* presents restorative nostalgia via the character of Mustika,

who symbolises the intersection of modernity and tradition, as embodied by the Westernised Malay man who returns to his roots and engages in a praxis of Malay identity.

The emphasis on traditional values and continuity with the past often results in a selective presentation of history, a phenomenon referred to as ‘invented traditions’ (Boym, 2001, p. 42). Furthermore, a paradox of invented traditions lies in their novelty: the new tradition’s invention still appears ancient (Boym, 2001, p. 42). It is noteworthy that the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a significant revival of the past, as evidenced by various total restoration projects (Boym, 2001, p. 45), which aimed to restore a sense of the sacred within a modern and progressive context. Coincidentally, the Malay revivalist project emerged during the same period, posited as interconnected with the rise of the Mahathirist ethnonationalism project. Within the framework of Malaysian cinema, the 1980s and 1990s represent a period when the industry increasingly adopted an ethnonationalist orientation. This shift was particularly noticeable during the post-studio era of Malaysian cinema (1975–1999), which was designated as the Bumiputera era. The Bumiputera era was characterised by the establishment of PERFIMA, initiated by several influential Malay filmmakers, including Jins Shamsudin and P. Ramlee, although it faced challenges in sustaining momentum. Consequently, in 1981, Mahathir, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry, facilitated the establishment of the Malaysian Film Development Corporation (Finas) to foster the industry as an avenue for Malay entrepreneurship.

Khoo Boo Teik (1995) posits that a notable paradox within Mahathirism lies in Mahathir's professed concern for the Malays, juxtaposed with his apparent willingness to allow the erosion of Malay cultural identity. This observation is underscored by the fact that, while Mahathir ostensibly adopts an anti-Western stance, he frequently engages with a Western perspective when analysing the Malay population. Furthermore, Syed Hussein Alatas (1981) presents a counter-narrative to Mahathir’s *Malay Dilemma* and the ideologies put forth by Malay intellectuals in his writings on the Mental Revolution. Additionally, Khoo contends that Mahathir’s Malay nationalist ideology significantly contributes to his populist image, as the Malays not only constitute the majority demographic but are also predominantly rural residents living in kampungs.

7.3 *Amok* (1995) as a Form of Returning to the Roots

In *Reclaiming Adat*, Khoo argues that the film *Amok* engages critically with gender discourse, illustrating a tension between the authentic hypermasculine Malay archetype and the countercultural Western hippie ethos. This tension manifests through the narrative's amok actions. My appreciation for Khoo's scholarship arises from our shared understanding of the Occidental framing of Mahathirism, which aligns with Director Adman Salleh's artistic vision. This alignment is especially significant in light of the often oversimplified, reductive portrayal of Western women, which echoes Mahathir's perspectives on Occidentalism.

Amok is the second film from Adman's unofficial duology on amok as subject matter, and it is a successor to his first film, *Bintang Malam* (1991). While the latter presents a dichotomy between *kampung* (village) and *bandar* (city), it also critiques the capitalist ethos and examines contemporary Malay traits such as mysticism and animism. In *Amok*, the narrative centres around Wan, who resides and is employed in Cherating, Pahang—a popular tourist destination frequented by Westerners. Adman depicts Wan as an individual ensnared by the forces of Westernisation, portrayed through his occupation as a bar worker and his romantic involvement with Natalie (played by Ramona Rahman), despite being engaged to his fiancée in his hometown. As Wan's father's health declines, it becomes imperative for Wan to inherit his father's '*ilmu*' (knowledge pertaining to the supernatural). However, Wan displays scepticism towards these traditions, viewing them as mere superstition. This internal conflict is intricately linked to his relationship with Natalie, who, despite her attempts to understand the Malay culture, engages with it from an orientalist perspective that ultimately limits her comprehension. In a pivotal development, following his father's death, Wan experiences frequent dreams that can be interpreted as *firasat* (prophetic visions in Malay, which relates to intuition), wherein he envisions himself being pierced with a *keris* (traditional dagger). This marks the beginning of his journey towards the realisation of '*reclaiming his adat*' (customs), culminating in a profound manifestation of his struggles as he descends into a state of amok.

The climax of Wan's journey to reclaim his *adat*—while simultaneously reclaiming his Malay identity—occurs through the act of running amok, which incorporates specific superstitious elements associated with the tiger, particularly linked to the *silat harimau* (tiger silat) he learns. This becomes evident in a scene where he tells his friend Rem that the silat he learned from Tok Lah is Silat Harimau (literally

‘tiger Malay martial arts’). The manifestation of this *silat harimau* during his running amok is characterised by gestures and vocalisations that imitate a tiger. Furthermore, the tiger gesture symbolises Wan’s inherent ‘dangerousness’ during his transformation into a *pengamok*, akin to a ‘*harimau masuk kampung*’ (a tiger entering a village), denoting an aggressive and lethal intrusion into spaces outside his own. In Wan’s case, his singular ‘habitat’ as a *pengamok* is defined by his Malay identity. This theme is portrayed when Wan kills individuals representing un-Malayness, including a white woman, a Chinese person, and a decadent Malay. Conversely, he spares Pak Mat Lah, a white man who has assimilated into Malay culture. This is underscored by a scene where Pak Mat asserts to Natalie that his different skin colour has allowed him to become part of the Malay identity. In considering these elements, if Jebat’s amok represented a protest against the rakyat’s acquiescence to the oppressive feudal system, Wan Man’s amok serves as a manifestation of dissent towards Westernisation and Western societal norms. This is illustrated by Wan’s violent actions exclusively directed towards individuals who embody Western influences, while sparing those who maintain or embrace Malay identity, as previously discussed.

Taking the above into account, I would like to draw attention to Anuar’s (2002) observations on *Amok* as follows:

‘...Adman Salleh melihat Melayu dalam konteks Melayu yang umum. Melayu Adman Salleh adalah Melayu yang hilang pertimbangan, Melayu yang cepat terasa, Melayu yang jadi lurus dan duduk di atas jangkaan yang benar itu tetap benar, mengetepikan bahawa factor-faktor sosial dan hambatan sosial adalah lebih menguasai tanggapannya terhadap realiti yang akan dihadapinya. Individu Melayu yang terasing dan menyendiri menjadi individu bertenaga penggerak. (Adman Salleh look into Malay in general. According to Adman Salleh, Malays exhibit a decline in their sense of judgment, tend to be easily provoked, and are often steadfast in their beliefs, maintaining that their perspectives are invariably correct. This perception persists despite the influence of social norms and constraints that inform their worldview. In isolation, the Malay individual evolves into a formidable presence [my translation]).’

(p. 77)

In addition to that, Adman Salleh’s worldview towards the Malays is not only a generalised perspective but also reflects an essentialist viewpoint. This is evident when Anuar mentions,

‘Dengan kata lain, yang menyumbang kepada atribut Melayu dari zaman berzaman ialah Melayu bertindak dengan kejutan dan tidak berpuas hati yang sebenarnya bukan berterus terang yang dituntut oleh agama yang dianutinya. *In other words, what contributes into Malay attribute from times to times is that Malay act in shock and not satisfying in an indirect way as required by religion* (my translation)’

(p. 77)

Anuar’s argument above suggests that he subscribes to the idea that society (particularly the Malays) is not evolving or changing. He generalised the Malays as occasionally not reacting to their discontent. Hence, Anuar himself was confined to essentialism, which he shared with Adnan Salleh and Mahathir. Mahathir (1970) states that (and being cited in the film),

‘Amok represents the external physical expression of conflict within the Malay which his perpetual observance of the rules and regulations of his life causes in him.’

(p. 151)

In contrast to the above statement, Anuar has a slightly different perspective on Mahathir. This is based on Anuar’s argument:

‘Wan tidak gila, dia sedar, tahu apa yang berlaku di kelilingnya, inteleknya kemas dalam keadaan biasa, tetapi ada sesuatu intensity yang bergolak dalam dirinya yang menyebabkan jiwanya gila. (Wan is not crazy; he is conscious and aware of his surroundings. His intellect remains steady and in usual condition[my translation]).’

(p. 91)

Anuar’s statement above somehow reminds me of the dialogue from Rahim Razali’s *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, where an older brother character played by Zulkifli Zain said, ‘*Amok dan gila lain Saiful*’ literally translated as ‘Amok and insane is different, Saiful’. These statements suggest that the act of amok was not insane and remains within rationality. It is noteworthy that few filmmakers attempt to rationalise the phenomenon of amok among the Malays. On one hand, the concept of ‘*amok*’ might be interpreted as aligning with Mahathir’s perspective, potentially reflecting an academic approach rooted in scientific reasoning. This analytical stance could suggest

that the filmmaker adopts a Mahathirist logic by using rational analysis to understand or explain the phenomenon.

At a particular juncture, the representation of Wan Man's state of amok diverges from the rationale associated with Mahathirist ideology. Instead, the act of amok in this cinematic context is conceptualised as an ideological expression, illustrated through Wan Man's violence against individuals perceived not to embody 'Malay' identity and 'Malayness'. This suggests that his act of amok is a rebellion against westernisation. The assertion that Wan Man's actions do not conform to Mahathirist logic is underscored by Adman's depiction of Wan Man's capacity to perform an ideological act, even in a state of unconsciousness, which defies rational explanation. The metamorphosis of Wan Man into a *pengamok* is accompanied by a juxtaposition of natural elements, particularly the depiction of waves in slow motion, symbolising that Wan Man's fervour is a phenomenon intertwined with superstitious and cosmic dimensions.

In *Amok*, elements such as rain, thunder, and sand recur as leitmotifs, even in the dream sequence depicting Wan's father's execution, where thunder reverberates towards him. Abruptly, Wan supplants his father in this dream, symbolising the transmission of superstitious knowledge that Wan is destined to inherit from his father. Thus, amok serves as a representation of this inherited legacy. While the dream motif persists throughout the film, it ultimately culminates solely in Wan's presence after the father's death, indicating that the burden of superstitious knowledge has now devolved upon him.

Badriyah (1993) argues in her essay '*Amuk: Implikasinya dalam Masyarakat Melayu Tradisional*' (Amuk: Its Implication in Traditional Malay Society [my translation]) that '*pada zaman masyarakat Melayu tradisional terdapat perbuatan amuk yang direstui dan tak direstui*' (translated: during the era of traditional Malay society, there are acts of amok that are both endorsed and unendorsed) (p. 25). Badriyah's (1993) exploration of the concepts of 'endorsed amok' and 'unendorsed amok' highlights the portrayal of individuals who engage in amok behaviour, as interpreted by the author. Specifically, Badriyah focuses on the narrative concerning Kampar, who commits acts of amok against Raja Bersiong—a tyrannical ruler known for his cannibalistic tendencies—and received literary endorsement from the author. Badriyah (1993) asserts that,

'Perbuatan mengamuk melawan raja juga digambarkan dalam Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa. Kesahan amukannya tidak dipertikaikan oleh pengarangnya... Perbuatannya (Kampar mengamuk) mendapat sokongan dari Raja Perempuan sendiri dan empat orang menterinya. (The portrayal of running amok against the king is also depicted in Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa. The writer does not question the endorsement of this act of running amok. This action, attributed to Kampar, is supported by the Raja Perempuan along with four other ministers [my translation]).'

(p. 24)

Considering the aforementioned discussion, it is pertinent to examine whether Wan Man's act of amok will receive endorsement. Is his conduct reflective of Hang Jebat, who is unendorsed, or does it align more closely with Kampar, whose amok is endorsed? In addressing these inquiries, I argue that Badriyah makes a significant observation, noting in the narrative that Sultan Ahmad's army engaged in acts of amok following the injury to Sultan Ahmad's hand. She states, '*...hulubalang baginda terus menyerang musuh mereka dengan perlakuan orang mengamuk, tanpa mengira keselamatan diri mereka sendiri* (the army of Sultan Ahmad attacked their enemy in an amok manner without regard for their own safety [my translation])' (p. 28). Badriyah (1993) further elaborates that this act of running amok among the Sultan's army is fueled by '*perasaan malu kerana tidak berupaya untuk mempertahankan raja*' (a feeling of humiliation stemming from their inability to defend their Raja [my translation]) (p. 28).

In view of the arguments presented, Wan's actions serve to connect the narrative of Sultan Ahmad's army with the Portuguese colonisers as an expression of his dissent against Western influences and the process of Westernisation. In the instance of Wan Man, the sense of *malu* was not a result of his inability to defend his ruler; rather, it stemmed from his struggle to uphold his *maruah* as a Malay individual and as a man. In this narrative, Wan Man experiences humiliation at the hands of several Malay men, who derogatorily label him as '*pondan*' (a Malay colloquial term frequently used to refer to effeminate men or transgender women), signifying his perceived lack of masculinity. His discontent escalates when he learns that three men are voyeuristically watching Natalie swim at the beach, clad in a batik. Wan's violent outburst, culminating in the killing of Natalie and the three Malay men, is depicted as an attempt to reclaim his '*maruah*' (dignity).

The scene depicting Wan's outbreak begins with a montage that juxtaposes waves at the sea with Natalie, who lies beside Wan and recites an old Malay text, and with Wan himself, who appears restless, his eyes wide open, suggesting he is about to be possessed by a superstitious spirit. I argue that Natalie's recitation of the traditional Malay text can be interpreted as a *mantra*, functioning as a catalyst for spirit possession in Wan. The sequence transitions from a shot of the sun to a shot of Wan, whose stance and facial expression remain consistent with those from the previous scene, set at night. This continuity underscores Wan's susceptibility to an impending state of possession. The montage then shifts back to a nighttime view of sea waves, with the moon obscured by clouds, followed by a panoramic shot of Wan Man's house. The scene concludes with a dreamlike depiction of Wan, injured, attempting to extract a keris from his back. Wan then wakes and walks to the beach in repose and silence, which suggests he is under the spirit's influence.



Figure 7.1 Wan Man (Played by Nasir Bilal Khan) in a Scene Where He Starts To Be Possessed by the Spirit and Running Amok.

Wan Man then ascended the hill and observed Natalie lying on the beach, dressed in batik attire. As the music gradually intensified, Wan Man's composure dissolved, and his body language took on a tiger-like quality. Meanwhile, Natalie, noticing that Wan Man was on the hill gazing at her, called out to him, prompting Wan

Man to jump down in an attempt to reach her. She was shocked when Wan Man, possessed by an entity, leaped from the hill; upon landing, he seized a keris and stabbed Natalie, resulting in her death. This act marked his first murder and his initial act of revenge through an amok. Subsequently, Wan Man committed additional murders, including three friends who had previously mocked him as *pondan* (effeminate man), a derogatory term. Interestingly, after settling the murders of his three friends, two white women and his Chinese boss, Wan Man, still under possession, destroyed all the alcohol in the bar, which could be interpreted as a rejection of moral degradation, Westernisation, and un-Malay manners.

Furthermore, Wan feels manipulated by his girlfriend, Natalie, who appears to take their relationship lightly while engaging in infidelity. I contend that Natalie represents Westernisation, as she is characterised by her attempts to understand the Malays, particularly through her interactions with Wan Man, which ultimately serve to assert dominance over them. In a pivotal scene, when Natalie requests Wan's tangkal, Wan responds with irritation, claiming, '*Jadikanlah benda ini sebagai souvenir, termasuklah diri aku ini, dah jadi souvenir*' (Take this object as a souvenir! Moreover, I, too, have become merely a souvenir). This dialogue encapsulates Natalie's perception of Malays despite her ostensibly scholarly aim of crafting a thesis focused on Malay culture. Her 'research' journey reduces the Malay individuals, exemplified by Wan, to mere objects, or 'souvenirs'. This dialogue by Wan, particularly the word 'souvenir,' is significant in manifesting Natalie's perspective on Malay culture. Additionally, several objects related to Malay culture are handed over to Natalie, and she is excited about these 'souvenirs'. For example, the keris, a traditional Malay dagger, serves as a significant prop that illustrates Natalie's fixation on Malay artefacts while failing to grasp their more profound cultural significance. As noted by Pak Mat, Natalie's understanding of the Malays is superficial; her intention is not genuine inquiry but rather a desire to assert dominance over them. Consequently, this Orientalist perspective is the reason the Silat guru declines to instruct Natalie in the art of Silat, reflecting his disapproval of her approach.

In a different context, the film employs the keris as a symbol to illustrate the intricate power dynamics between the characters Natalie and Wan. The narrative consistently depicts Natalie wielding the keris in various settings; a pivotal moment occurs when Wan inadvertently brings the keris to the kampung, prompting Natalie to pressure him to retrieve it. Following its recovery, Natalie is portrayed as unrestrained

by Wan, thus establishing her dominance over him. The recurrent presence of the keris with Natalie is significant; notably, there is a scene in which she humorously remarks to Rem, '*Keris ini ada tuah. Tuah dan Jebat. Adanya Tuah dan Jebat adanya Taming Sari* (This keris has tuah (luck). Tuah and Jebat. When there is Tuah and Jebat, there is Taming Sari)'. This dialogue serves as a foreshadowing device, reflecting the evolving power dynamics surrounding the keris. The allusion to the figures of Tuah, Jebat, and Taming Sari refers to a renowned Malay folktale concerning the legendary warriors, Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, who engage in a fierce confrontation at the royal court after Jebat's rebellion against the Sultan. Jebat's invincibility is attributed to his possession of Hang Tuah's keris, known as Taming Sari, a mythical dagger that augments Hang Tuah's prowess as a warrior. Ultimately, Hang Tuah prevails over Hang Jebat only after the former successfully reclaims Taming Sari from Jebat.

The power dynamics illustrated between Tuah and Jebat, particularly concerning the Taming Sari keris, can be effectively analysed in relation to those between Wan Man and Natalie. Furthermore, the character Tok Lah informs Wan Man's mother that the keris are not of Malay origin but rather Javanese, thus enhancing the parallel with the Taming Sari narrative associated with the Tuah-Jebat story. This assertion is grounded in historical context, as the keris was initially possessed by a warrior from Majapahit, a Javanese kingdom ultimately conquered by Hang Tuah. In the film's climax, Wan Man transforms a *pengamok*, obtaining the keris from Natalie, which empowers him to dominate, defeat, and ultimately kill her. Throughout various scenes, the narrative conveys the inherent dangers associated with the keris, highlighted by Wan's intuition regarding its lethal history—indicated by the phrase '*pernah makan orang*' (had killed people)—and the superstitious awareness expressed by her mother, who senses '*ada apa-apa*' (something is amiss).

In a related context, my argument aligns with Khoo's (2006) observations that the film reflects sentiments similar to those articulated in Mahathir's *The Challenge*. Specifically, Khoo (2006) argues that it presents instances of the West's decline, highlighting stereotypes of licentiousness such as public nudity, marijuana use, and homosexual relationships. Consequently, Wan Man's actions, akin to those of Hang Jebat, represent acts of mass violence as a form of protest against feudal systems for Jebat and Westernised society for Wan Man's amok.

Wan's violent acts against both foreigners and local individuals who have undergone Westernisation can be interpreted as an effort to purge the Malay heartland

of Western influences. Notably, Wan's unique form of amok does not extend to those like Pok Leh, who, having embraced and understood the Malay way of life, are deemed exempt from his wrath. This raises pertinent considerations regarding Anuar Nor Arai's assertion that Wan is '...not insane', as his decision to spare Pok Leh indicates a degree of consciousness, albeit in an unconscious manner. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this does not necessarily imply that Wan Man's amok exists within a fully conscious state or that his actions are as deliberate as those of a rational individual. Ultimately, Wan's rampage appears to be motivated by the possession of a superstitious spirit, complicating our understanding of his mental state during these violent episodes.

The existence of the Pok Leh character is particularly significant because it suggests the coexistence of both extrinsic and intrinsic Malay identities. Intrinsic Malay refers to an individual who embodies Malayness deeply, regardless of physical appearance or outward traits. Conversely, extrinsic Malay describes someone who appears Malay externally by birth but does not possess a profound or intrinsic sense of Malay identity. Despite his attire, Pok Leh aligns more with East Coast Malays, wearing a *semutar* and *kain batik*, and should not be regarded solely as an extrinsic Malay; rather, his dress is influenced by his internal identity. For Pok Leh, 'Saya sudah jadi seperti mereka. Bezanya hanya warna kulit sahaja. (I had become them. The only difference is the skin colour)'. Moreover, in a highly globalised and Westernised space such as Cherating, individuals—including those dressed in traditional Malay attire like Pok Leh—are often attired in modern or Hippie styles, with many eschewing traditional dress altogether. Pok Leh demonstrates a profound understanding of the Malay culture, exemplified by the scene in which he presents Natalie with old Malay texts that once belonged to him. This act reflects more than just knowledge or intellectual curiosity about the Malay language; it signifies his deep affection for the society.

His worldview is shaped by this emotional connection, as evidenced by his statement: 'Yes. I have been here much longer than you, married to a Malay, and love this country as much as I love my dear wife'. Natalie, on the other hand, lacks genuine affection and emotional connection. Instead, she exoticizes the Malay (Wan Man and his friend) and uses others primarily for sexual gratification. Based on the above analysis, there is a scene that endorses Pok Leh aligning with 'Malayness' during the night of Wan Man's rampage. This occurs after Wan Man kills several individuals at a bar, and the scene is set on the beach. In the dim light, with *serunai* music (a Malay traditional music instrument) playing in the background, Wan Man is seen fleeing from

the police while holding a keris. He encounters Pok Leh, and they exchange gazes without Wan Man attacking him. Subsequently, Wan Man leaves Pok Leh unharmed and returns to his hometown. Notably, Wan Man does not kill Pok Leh despite being biologically white, suggesting that he considers himself 'part of them,' indicating a sense of belonging or identity with the community.

The character of Pok Leh is notable for his association with Mahathir Mohamad. This connection is particularly relevant to the court proceedings involving Mahathir and Zahid Hamidi, the Deputy Prime Minister under Najib Razak and Anwar Ibrahim, in which Mahathir was victorious. Dr Mahathir provided testimony in a defamation lawsuit concerning Zahid Hamidi's statements made on July 30, 2017. Specifically, Zahid's remarks implied that Mahathir's full name was 'Mahathir anak lelaki Iskandar Kutty.' Mahathir clarified, 'I am not ashamed to say I have some Indian blood, but that does not mean that I am not a Malay' (Ida, 2024, para. 3). Mahathir also testified that he is a Malay in accordance with the Malaysian constitution. Superficially, Mahathir can be argued to align with Pok Leh, viewing Malayness as a process of becoming. Notably, he contends that he is a Malay, aligning with Article 160, which defines a 'Malay' as a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay customs. Conversely, although Mahathir sees himself as Malay, not in an essentialist way, Khoo (1995) argues that he 'is ready to see Malayness fading away'. Furthermore, Mahathir and Pok Leh do not share similar values. I assert that Mahathir is more of an extrinsic Malay rather than an intrinsic one, as Pok Leh is, because Mahathir depends on the constitutional definition, which, in many sociological and anthropological contexts, is quite a generalisation.

On the other hand, Khoo (2006) argues that Malaysian cinema of the 1990s encapsulates the concept of *Reclaiming Adat*, which is ...

'...in the modern constructions of culture by Malaysian writers and filmmakers, adat is not impermeable to patriarchal interpretations, in fact, patriarchy responds through various channels: through secular discourse of nationalism and the nation state through the conservative interpretations of Islam promulgated...'

(p. 5-6)

Therefore, the film's subject matter is not merely an exploration of the concept of *kepulangan* (homecoming). However, the very act of producing the film itself can be viewed as a manifestation of *kepulangan*. The film seeks to 'reclaim nostalgia' through the lens of *kepulangan*, which highlights the theme of essentialism. However, it is essential to note that *kepulangan* within the film encompasses more than just Wan's desire to return to his hometown; it also signifies a deeper reconnection to his roots and Malay identity. This journey of *kepulangan* is catalysed by a series of persuasive attempts from his mother, who implores him to come back home. In a desperate measure to convince Wan, she resorts to the deceitful tactic of falsely informing him of his father's death, urging him to return to their hometown.

The film *Amok* underscores the theme of *kepulangan*, evoking a restorative nostalgia that, on some level, rejects the ideals of progression. I contend that the film embodies a notion of anti-modernity, as it mirrors the leitmotif found in post-studio era cinema, where the *kampung* is portrayed as sacred and untouched by corruption. Nonetheless, Adman deliberately illustrates the 'Westernisation' that has 'occupied' the East Coast, an area traditionally synonymous with the Malay heartland and characterised by relative underdevelopment.

In addition to that, examining the concepts of amok and *Amok* from a Mahathirist perspective reveals several intriguing paradoxes. To begin with, Mahathir (1970) states that

'Amok is Malay word. It is a word now universally understood. There is no other single word that can quite describe amok. And the reason is obvious for amok describes yet another facet of the Malay character. Amok represents the external physical expression of the conflict within the Malay which his life causes in him. It is spilling over, an overflowing of his inner bitterness. It is rupture of the bonds which bind him. It is a final and complete escape from reason and training. The strain and the restraint on him are lifted. Responsibility disappears. Nothing matters. He is free. The link between past is severed, the future holds nothing more.'

(p. 151)

The quotes above are similar to quotes cited at the beginning of the film, which, at a particular juncture, are still open whether the director attempts to counter the statements or attempt to validate the statements. This is because we examine the nature of amok, which possesses Wan Man, the tiger's spirit, that has a relationship with the

dagger, *keris*, and his *silat* knowledge. When he is running amok, his gestures and actions are similar to those of someone who is under spirit control, and this resonates with Mahathir's (1970) statement,

'It is a final and complete escape from reason and training. The strain and the restraint on him are lifted. Responsibility disappears. Nothing matters. He is free. The link between the past is severed; the future holds nothing more'

(p. 159)

In a different context, the mystic and animistic elements associated with the concept of *amok* can be interpreted as a counterpoint to Mahathirism, which advocates for modernity and posits that the *amok* phenomenon has become obsolete. Mahathir states,

'Today, the amok is only a legend. Civilization has subdued the Malay. He still harbours his resentment, but he is better able to control it. He is better a better man for it. But it remains an essential part of his make-up. A basic part of his character.'

(p. 152)

The film challenges Mahathir's assertion that 'today, amok is only a legend,' given its contemporary setting. Furthermore, Mahathir's claim that amok has become merely a legend is inaccurate; historical accounts from modern Malaysia highlight incidents such as that of Prebet Adam, who infamously ran amok in Chow Kit ('Malaysian man', 2017). Therefore, it is important to note that the film takes a position that counters Mahathir's narrative. The statement exemplifies this, '...the ban on the film *Amok* was lifted only after the 'powers-that-be' (Khoo, 2006, p. 15), namely the prime minister and minister of home affairs, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, intervened...' (Khoo, 2003).

The response to the inquiry seems straightforward. The film, while incorporating various elements that diverge from Mahathirism, nonetheless demonstrates significant resonance with it by mirroring aspects such as the occidental worldview and ethnonationalism. Although the film does not explicitly champion nationalism, it subtly conveys this theme through its depiction of amok sequences. In these scenes, the protagonist, Wan, perpetrates violence against white characters,

including Natalie, as well as against his Chinese boss. This act of violence, executed with a keris—a symbol often associated with Malay nationalism—underscores the ethnonationalist elements embedded within the narrative. Moreover, the representation of amok transcends a mere Western perspective; it aligns with the Mahathirist viewpoint, which examines the subject matter through an essentialist lens akin to a colonial perspective.

Mahathir (1970) states,

‘Death is, therefore, feared by the Malays, but when the time comes they accept it calmly...But when this fear is paradoxically coupled with an acceptance of the inevitability of death, then blind courage in the face of overwhelming odds is common...The amok is partly the result of the Malay attitude towards death.’

(p. 208)

Syed Hussein Alatas (in Hilley, 2001) argues that the characterisation of Malays as having a propensity to ‘run amok’ serves as a problematic generalisation, comparable to the stereotype that all Malays are inherently lazy. In this context, Alatas not only challenges colonial narratives but also critiques the perceptions held by some middle-class Malays, including Mahathir Mohamad. Thus, a counterargument can similarly be applied against the stereotype of Malays as *pengamok*.

On another note, I contend that the representation of *pengamok* (individuals who run amok) within the narrative of *Amok* functions as a heroic figure, representing a direct manifestation of the saviour complex that significantly envelops Mahathir. In addition to *Amok*, Adman Salleh's first film, *Bintang Malam*, similarly depicts the *pengamok* as a saviour. This is particularly evident in the reactions of the village inhabitants, who display a lack of panic in response to Wan's amok behaviour. Notably, Wan's mother's reaction resembles a welcome to *kepulangan* (return) rather than alarm. The audience observes her preparation of Wan's bed and blanket, underpinned by her belief that ‘*Wan pasti pulang*’ (Wan must return). This notion may be inspired by the legendary figure Hang Jebat, who is often synonymous with the concept of amok. From the outset of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the motif of amok emerges as a recurring theme, signifying immorality and serving as an antagonist to the heroism embodied by Hang Tuah. Furthermore, a pivotal moment in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* occurs when Hang Jebat,

his childhood companion, runs amok and assaults Malacca. These images of the hero are somewhat linked to Shaharuddin's (2014) arguments that

'The Malay elite's prevalent conception of the hero is a combination of the feudal and materialistic types. The archetypes of the feudal hero loyalty that superseded ethical considerations. Hang Jebat is glorified because of his anarchic and erotic tendencies are mistaken for altruism...Instead of propagating Islamic values in Malay society, it praises the unethical philosophies and deeds of feudal heroes.'

(p. 18)

Shaharuddin (2014) contends that the glorification of Hang Jebat as a heroic figure is fraught with fallacies, positing that, 'In promoting Hang Jebat as a hero, it camouflages a particular form of false consciousness within Malay society. The Malays are deceived into believing that they have transcended feudal ideologies, when, in fact, they have merely replaced one feudal persona with another...' (p. 49). Furthermore, Shaharuddin (2014) asserts that the romanticised warrior archetype, imbued with supernatural prowess, is so deeply ingrained in the narratives of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat that these notions continue to captivate contemporary Malay society.

In the narrative of *Amok*, supernatural power emerges as a pivotal factor in Wan Man's descent into violence, characterised as a *pengamok*. He embodies both the role of a disruptor and a hero, actively resisting the prevailing forces of westernisation that pervade his surroundings. This duality frames him as a champion of nationalism, tethered to the concept of restorative nostalgia. Wan Man's actions, particularly his running amok, are interpreted by his mother not with alarm but with gratitude; she perceives that this violent manifestation signifies his reconnection with his cultural identity—his Malay heritage and spiritual essence—especially considering that the narrative culminates with his fatal confrontation with police. This leads to an intriguing contention: while some may argue that the depiction of a possessed *pengamok* in conflict with Western modernity contradicts the principles of Mahathirism, my analysis concludes that *Amok* ultimately supports and reflects Mahathir's interpretations of the amok phenomenon within the Malay populace.

7.4 In Search of *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*

Perempuan Melayu Terakhir (1999), directed by Erma Fatima, is a film that explores Haikal's journey, a theatre activist and lecturer, as he seeks to rediscover his Malay identity. To achieve this, Haikal, along with Zulaikha, a modern, westernised urban character portrayed by Nanu Baharuddin, travels to Terengganu. They stay at Pak Engku's resort, where Mustika, the fiancée of Pak Engku's son, is employed. During their stay, Haikal develops romantic feelings for Mustika, and vice versa. However, their budding relationship is complicated by Mustika's engagement to Engku Leh (played by Azri Iskandar, who has become a militant Islamist cult leader. As the romantic tension between Mustika and Haikal intensifies, Engku Leh's frustration and violent tendencies escalate. Haikal, who is on a journey to discover his Malay identity and seek inspiration for his new theatre project, ultimately decides to create a play titled '*Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*' (The Last Malay Woman). Throughout his journey, he comes to understand that women represent the frontier and the last hope for the preservation of civilisation and culture, particularly among Malays. He gains these insights through his relationship with Mustika, with whom he falls in love and learns about Malay heritage.

Building upon the points raised, I would like to emphasise the motif of juxtaposition within this film. One example is the scene where Ku Leh prepares to perform the azan, accompanied by the beduk's diegetic sounds fading in, followed by the gamelan as Mustika practices a Tarian Asyik dance. Another instance involves Ku Leh and his followers performing zikir, while Mustika lies on the bed, observing a Wayang Kulit puppet. Additionally, there is a scene in which Haikal drives and explains to Mustika the significance of women in safeguarding Malay culture; this is juxtaposed with a scene of Ku Leh meditating, who overhears their conversation. These juxtapositions underscore that the world of *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* is a paradoxical space where tradition and modernity coexist and collide. Perhaps it also reflects Malaysia during the Mahathirist era, a period characterised by a paradoxical mix or perhaps a tension between modernity and tradition.

The entire film functions as an academic exploration of Malay identity, juxtaposing traditional Malaysian imagery, Islamic-Arabic motifs, and Western influences. By the conclusion, this interplay coalesces into a cohesive representation of Malay cultural identity, exemplified through scenes such as Haikal's theatre performance, the wedding of Ku Leh and Mustika, Haikal's daughter holding a wayang

kulit puppet, and the final image of Sita Dewi being burned. Collectively, these elements underscore a 'back-to-the-roots' theme and reflect an essentialist perspective on Malay cultural identity.

7.4.1 Reclaiming Malayness, an Essentialist Journey

'I want to be a Malay Shakespeare.'
'There is no Shakespeare in the Malays.'

-Perempuan Melayu Terakhir (Erma Fatima, 1999)

His English theatre performance prompts Haikal to reflect on a sense of dissonance within his professional and personal identity. A colleague observes that the theatre seems to be 'missing something,' which he attributes to a perceived lack of Malaysian identity. This dialogue about the 'absence of Malaysian identity' is particularly noteworthy, as it highlights an essentialist pursuit of Malayness—yet, notably, there is no reference to Malaysian values throughout the discourse. This omission is significant given that the film was produced nine years after the launch of Vision 2020 by Mahathir Mohamad, an initiative associated with the concept of 'Bangsa Malaysia' and a more multicultural Malaysia. From this context, it can be interpreted that director Erma Fatima is suggesting that the definition of Malaysian identity is predominantly equated with a Malay identity.

Therefore, Haikal, the Westernised Malay main character, is the most suitable candidate to be the 'agent of essentialism', as he attempts to restore his nostalgia. Vision 2020, despite having the spirit and zeitgeist of progress and futurism, lays down specific ideas that succeed the New Economic Policy for the economic and National Culture Policy for art and culture, which still looks at the Malays and Islam as its backbone. Back to Haikal, the responses and reception from the audience on his show made him, who before believed, 'There is no other Theatre (tradition) that can beat the western theatre tradition', suddenly want to make a Malay theatre and want to be '...a Malay Shakespeare' although Zulaikha sarcastically reminds him, 'There no Shakespeare in the Malays.'

Haikal is a Western education graduate who spent seven years studying in London, United Kingdom. His late wife was a white woman who had a request and a dream that their daughter should grow up to be a 'Malay', but not a 'Haikal type of

Malay'. Haikal fulfils the request of his late wife; he lets his mother, who lives in a kampung in Kedah, take care of and raise his daughter. It is important to stress that Haikal is a Kedahan who came from a very Malay cultural family, and similar to Mustika, this background is quite late, putting some surprise to the spectator that this man is coming from another part of the Malay heartland, which is Kedah and from a rural and working-class family.

In this context, Haikal's journey back to his roots can be seen as a challenge to Mahathirism. According to Khoo (1995), Mahathir champions Malay identity but is also willing to see the decline of Malayness. Unlike Mahathir, who perhaps advocates a superficial Malayness, Haikal seeks to reclaim his Malay identity at a deeper, more genuine level. Haikal's journey represents both an exploration of reclaiming his Malay identity and a creative endeavour to identify what he perceives as the 'missing' element in his theatre text, namely, Malayness. In this context, it can be argued that his pursuits challenge Mahathirism, which emphasises modernity and virtue through science and technology. His decision to study abroad in the West and become a theatre maker, an unconventional academic path, can be seen as a counter to Mahathirism. However, contradictions in Haikal's identity still exist and are perceived.

This supports my argument about restorative nostalgia through a return to roots, or, in Malay proverbs, *sirih pulang ke gagang*. The narrative of Back to the Roots may not be relevant if the director portrays Haikal as coming from an urban, middle-class family. However, Haikal is the working class who, through government affirmative action policy, is becoming a Westernised middle class. Therefore, the sense of belonging that had been fading for years can reappear because there is a root within himself.

In addition, I would like to draw attention to the visuals of Haikal's daughter. Since the character of a baby appears on the screen, there are several scenes or acts of 'changes hand' (*beralih tangan*) between Mustika and Haikal. I argue that this handing over, other than an attempt to make a romantic eyes-to-eyes scene, symbolises the next generation of the Malays. Since Sofia (Haikal's child) lost affection and care from her late mother, the idea that Mustika coming in substitutes her mother's position symbolising that the next generation will be safe under the hand of 'the Last Malay Women', and the 'Melayu Murtad', such as Haikal, who is guided by 'the last Malay women'. This *beralih tangan* motif continues in the other scene, when Sofia, the baby, is *beralih tangan* to Ku Leh, and under Ku Leh, the baby is in danger. That connotes

that the future generation will not be in a safe situation if they are controlled by an extreme and fundamentalist Muslim leader, and safer under the umbrella of a tolerant Malay.

7.4.2 The Other East, Another Essentialist Journey

'Kemodenan secara sedar ataupun tidak telah merenggangkan Melayu daripada Islam. Telah melemahkan jiwa Islam pada Melayu, Telah meletakkan dinding yang tebal antara hidup dan mati. Dunia dan akhirat. (Modernity conscious or not conscious had distancing Malay from Islam. It had weakening the spirit of Islam to the Malays. It built a thick wall between life and death. World and afterlife.)'

-Ku Leh in *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (Erma Fatima, 1999)

In this section, I would like to draw attention to Zawawi 's (2004) *On Erma Fatima's Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* and Khoo's (2002) *Cinema: Films Made by Women: Malaysia*, highlighting the motif of the Westernised man, Haikal, returning to his roots—symbolised by the phrase *'sirih pulang ke gagang'*. I interpret Haikal's desire to reclaim his Malay identity as an example of restorative nostalgia from an essentialist perspective and suggests this attitude aligns with Mahathirist ideology. Furthermore, the argument is expanded to include Ku Leh, who has become a fundamentalist Muslim, leading a cult and militant group fighting for Daulah (Islamic sovereignty), illustrating that the theme of returning to one's roots applies across different ideological positions.

An interesting point about Ku Leh is that he graduated from a university in the United Kingdom. In a scene, Pak Engku tells Mustika that he hopes Ku Leh will help grow the business after Ku Leh graduates from university. However, according to Pak Engku, what Ku Leh is doing after returning from the UK is 'destroying what we had built'. Conversely, Ku Leh believes that he is attempting to bring the truth and to restore his society and family to Allah. Since Pak Engku is a moderate Malay who accepts the syncretism of Islam and Malay traditions, he cannot accept Engku Leh's scripturalist views.

Throughout the narrative, Ku Leh is depicted as the antagonist. The director employs cinematic techniques effectively, beginning with Ku Leh, who is primarily shown from behind, to evoke a sense of mystery. As the story progresses, his face

becomes more visible, symbolising his true nature—his true face '*wajah sebenar*.' His act of violence, including attempting to kill Haikal with a sword, is portrayed as beyond his conscious belief and intent. Ku Leh even labels Haikal a 'satan,' accusing him of exerting negative influences on Mustika. Ultimately, Ku Leh's actions appear driven by jealousy over Mustika's developing feelings for Haikal. This is exemplified in a scene where he tells his father, 'Mustika, my fiancée, has started to oppose me... Mustika says I am narrow-minded and deviated'. This progression highlights Ku Leh's character development and the film's thematic elements of envy and misunderstanding.

On another note, there are similarities between Ku Leh and Wan Man in *Amok*, emphasising how both characters symbolically return to their cultural roots through their actions. Ku Leh, although a minor figure compared to Wan Man, demonstrates a significant reconnection to Malay identity. After his act of amok, he reaffirms his cultural roots by marrying Mustika and embracing Malay traditions. He notably adopts a Malay ritual known as *mandi bunga*. He participates in bersanding during the wedding ceremony—practices that contrast with his previous adherence to scripturalist and fundamentalist Muslim beliefs.

7.4.3 Mustika and the Malay Women's Dilemma

Although Haikal faces a dilemma in exploring Malay identity and Malayness, the central conflict of this film centers on Mustika, who is caught between two contrasting Malay men: Haikal, a liberal Malay influenced by Western ideas, and Ku Leh, a Malay influenced by radical Islam. The irony lies in the fact that both men embody aspects of modernist thought, as both Westernisation and Islamism are integral components of modernity. Islamism, in many senses, is a response to modernity that employs a secular lens. For example, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was a reaction against the secular, Westernised leadership of Shah Iran. Consequently, Mustika symbolises a guardian of traditional values confronting modernism through the portrayal of these two male characters. Mustika was previously engaged to Ku Leh before he went to study in the United Kingdom, and she observes that his demeanour and beliefs changed after two years abroad. In multiple scenes, Mustika exhibits emotional distress, crying and wailing over her circumstances and fate, which signifies her being in a state of dilemma. As a cultural figure, her emotional expression is often portrayed through traditional performance arts, such as the Asyik dance and gamelan music.

Besides, as an expression of her individuality, the cultural art form, particularly the *tarian asyik*, also signifies her stance regarding Malay-Muslim values. A significant scene illustrating the dynamics of power occurs during Mustika's *tarian asyik* training session with her students when several of Ku Leh's followers arrive. They intend to convey Ku Leh's message—that Mustika should cease practising this art, which he considers sinful. Mustika remains silent, turns her body away, and instructs the musician to continue playing while she resumes her dance. Notably, although the musicians are likely male, the director's choice to depict Mustika and her all-female students seated below Ku Leh's standing followers embodies gendered power relations. Despite this, Ku Leh's followers fail to dominate Mustika's agency, especially concerning her artistic expression. Significantly, Mustika's refusal to obey their instructions and her continued dancing serve as a form of provocation and protest.

Ku Leh's follower threatens that if Mustika refuses to stop her dance, they will be forced to take action. Mustika dismisses their warning, asserting that her actions are not a sin and indicating she will respond to Ku Leh's followers when she meets them the next day. The scene includes a noteworthy shot where Mustika is in the foreground on a hill, while Ku Leh's followers are in the background walking away, which visually emphasises a shift in power dynamics. This framing suggests that Mustika, as a principled woman, stands firm in defending her rights and her art, which her opponents perceive as sinful. The film uses visual cues, such as framing and focus, to underscore Mustika's dominance and resilience in the face of opposition, highlighting her moral and aesthetic stance against the threats. Mustika serves as a significant guiding figure for Haikal, symbolized in scenes involving a mirror. The first instance occurs during a training session, where Mustika instructs her students in the dance of Tarian Asyik. Haikal unexpectedly joins by mimicking the dance steps demonstrated by Mustika. She remains unaware of his presence until she notices him reflected in the mirror. In a subsequent scene, Mustika plays the gamelan as an emotional response to Ku Leh. In a subsequent, enigmatic shot, Haikal approaches and touches Mustika's hair, prompting her to realise his identity. This mirror reflection between Mustika and Haikal metaphorically indicates that Mustika reflects Haikal, and that Haikal continually emulates Mustika to understand Malay culture.

The character of Zulaikha, Haikal's friend, presents a more nuanced depiction of Malay women, embodying a blend of modernity and tradition. She is characterised as a liberal, westernised woman who, nonetheless, demonstrates an understanding of

Malay cultural sentiments. Although her screen time is limited, it is highly significant, illustrating the tension between liberal values and local cultural norms. The director employs minimalist scenes to convey this complexity effectively; for instance, during a journey to Terengganu, an azan (call to prayer) on the radio prompts her to pause momentarily from turning it off as a sign of respect. Notably, she continues to smoke despite the azan playing in the background—a juxtaposition that highlights her contradictory stance, reflecting both her sense of freedom and adherence to cultural practices. Another illustrative scene occurs at the beach, where Haikal awakens and searches for Mustika, whom he perceives nearby. Zulaikha comments that he might be daydreaming, observing that he sleeps close to Maghrib time, which is traditionally considered inappropriate in Malay culture influenced by Islam. Her remarks, delivered while she wears a bikini and asks for a cigarette, exemplify her paradoxical position, embracing modernity and Western influences while engaging with traditional values. This characterisation underscores Zulaikha's ability to navigate multiple ideologies and worldviews, embodying the complex identity of the modern Malay woman. This analysis highlights the contrasting characters of Zulaikha and Mustika in the film, emphasising their differing responses to moral and cultural dilemmas. Zulaikha demonstrates adaptability in negotiating conflicting values, whereas Mustika embodies traditional Malay ideals of loyalty and purity, reminiscent of Sita Dewi from the Wayang Kulit tradition. Mustika's character serves as an inspiration for Haikal's theatrical work *'Perempuan Melayu Terakhir'* (*The Last Malay Woman*), reflecting themes of cultural identity and moral integrity. He said,

'Mustika yang kata, seorang perempuan penting dan pengaruhnya sangat kukuh dalam institusi sesebuah keluarga. Perempuan adalah the last frontier budaya Melayu. Perempuan lebih artistic dan sensitive terhadap budaya dan tradisi. (Mustika stated that women are highly important and exert a significant influence within family institutions. They represent the final frontier of Malay culture, often embodying greater artistry and sensitivity to cultural traditions).'

Haikal's statement can be interpreted as affirming specific traditional values associated with women. However, it adopts an essentialist perspective by conflating cultural identity with gender roles, akin to the way environmental aspects are gendered, such as the personification of Mother Nature. The notion conveyed is that women need protection because they are considered the 'last frontier' of Malay culture. This is

exemplified in the final scene where Haikal, having transformed into a ‘Malay’, advises his daughter to demonstrate that loyalty and purity persist—qualities superficially linked to female virginity.



Figure 7.2 Mustika (Played by Vanidah Imran) and Haikal (Played by Eizlan Yusoff) in *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*.

Consequently, the concept of the ‘*Last Malay Woman*’ essentially serves to preserve women's roles for the subservience of Malay men. This reflects both conservative and patriarchal values. Ultimately, Mustika does not attain emancipation; she still faces the choice of submission to her man. Her decision to remain with her fiancé not only signifies adherence to ‘Malay women's values’ but also perpetuates an essentialist and conservative worldview. This aligns with Khoo Gaik Cheng’s (2009) critique that ‘the film does not go far enough in its feminist sentiments to challenge the patriarchal assumptions of both male characters who want Mustika to conform to their needs and desires’ (p. 5). The dialogue between Haikal and Mustika in a particular beach scene is noteworthy as it reveals that Mustika hails from Kuala Lumpur and holds a degree in business studies. Nevertheless, she has chosen to work in Terengganu. When Haikal asserts that Mustika would be of greater benefit in Kuala Lumpur, she retorts, ‘Kuala Lumpur already has many corporations and ballet classes’. This exchange is significant in demonstrating that Mustika represents the principles of Mahathirism, as she grapples with the dual roles of burden-bearer and saviour in her quest to introduce business and the arts to the heartland of the Malay community.

Her persona as a working woman balancing modernity and tradition aligns with Mahathir’s ideological framework. The concept of a strong woman appears to be significantly influenced by his late mother, Wan Tempawan. This impact likely stems

from his early childhood, during which he was closer to his mother than to his strict father. Mahathir explores this in *A Doctor in the House*:

‘I was closer to my mother than my father and as a result, she shaped my personality more. She taught me the values that I have upheld throughout my life, especially to be modest and not boastful about what I have done...She also taught me very clearly that if I wanted something, I had to work for it’.

(p. 15)

Mahathir was deeply influenced by his mother’s diverse skills, which encompassed poultry farming with chickens and ducks, cultivating jasmine and roses, and preparing traditional remedies such as *bedak sejuk* and *celak*. Her entrepreneurial endeavours not only generated income but also resulted in financial benefits for Mahathir’s assistance. Consequently, she became a figure of admiration and respect, significantly shaping his character. Furthermore, Mahathir's wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, is a distinguished physician and the first Malay woman to attain this profession. This exemplifies Mahathir's belief that ‘to remain aligned with the ideas and interests of their husbands, Malay women must be well-educated’, and his decision to marry a doctor underscores his commitment to this perspective. His worldview emphasises the importance of women’s professional development and encourages them to transcend traditional roles, while also supporting their alignment with their husbands’ aspirations.

The arguments here reflect only one aspect of the film related to Mahathirist views on women, a concept further clarified in Khoo’s (2006) examination of ideal femininity within Mahathirist developmentalism. Therefore, it is crucial to reassess Mahathir’s position on women’s emancipation. Although Mahathir is often associated with authoritarian traits, such as strict laws and a Machiavellian, male-dominated narrative, there has been a lack of scholarly critique exploring how Mahathir and Mahathirism influence female identity and feminism. Despite his ethnonationalist beliefs, generally seen as conservative, Mahathir's support for the educational rights of Malay women originates from his writings in the *Che Det* column and has persisted through policies promoting meritocracy, which replaced traditional gender quota systems.

However, I want to highlight the full article written by Mahathir, titled ‘Malay Women Make Their Own Freedom’ (1947), which is compiled in ‘The Early Years’.

Mahathir's initial assertion is that Malay women '...have been confined to the kitchen...' (p. 1) since '...the times when the Malays professed the Hindu religion...' (p. 1). He further explains that by the time they uphold the status quo—a 'ban on social contact between the sexes and non-religious education for women' (p. 1)—this is because 'for a time Malay parents stuck into traditions and eyed with severe disapproval any modernistic among their children' (p. 1).

The opening parts of the essays might offer some relief to many feminists; however, this view changes when encountering Mahathir's 1947 statement: 'To keep in step with the ideas and interests of their husbands, Malay women must be well educated. The time is at hand when young Malays can no longer tolerate nit-witted wives, and when a sound education is a greater asset to the prospective bride than reputation for shyness and delicacy' (p. 4). Mahathir then expands on the themes introduced earlier in this chapter, showing that his idea of 'the emancipation of Malay women' still fits within a conservative and patriarchal framework where women's achievements are still dependent on their husbands' expectations.

In this context, Mustika appears to align with Mahathir's perspective on women for several reasons. Firstly, her attainment of a business degree from abroad has enabled her to reconcile modern and traditional values, as well as integrate both syncretistic and scripturalist Muslim viewpoints. Furthermore, Mustika aligns with the Mahathirist ideal of womanhood by the film's conclusion, when she is married to Ku Leh, despite being portrayed throughout the film as an independent and educated woman. This condition is aligned with Mahathir's, 'To keep in step with the ideas and interests of their husbands, Malay women must be well educated. The time is at hand when young Malays can no longer tolerate nit-witted wives, and when a sound education is a greater asset to the prospective bride than reputation for shyness and delicacy' (p. 4). This is reinforced by the final scene, where the depiction of blood on the comforter (it symbolises her virginity, suggesting she remains untouched. This ending scene diminishes Mustika's struggle, and the portrayal of the entire film, which depicts her as the last guardian of Malay culture, is justified by her virginity and purity.

7.5 Conclusion

The Mahathirist Malay nationalism examined in this chapter primarily manifests through the concept of *kepulangan*, or returning to one's roots. This narrative not only appears to endorse an essentialist view of Malay identity but also aligns with

Mahathirist tendency to perceive race and culture in essentialist terms. Such perspectives, to some extent, mirror Western or colonial views of the Malay. The stereotypical characterisations of Malays as impulsive or lazy, along with Mahathir's Occidentalism, resemble orientalist portrayals of the East. Regarding *kepulangan*, it is crucial to highlight that the concern does not lie with returning to the roots itself, but rather with the origins from which this return is made. Both films depict characters returning from a supposedly opposite or non-essentialist understanding of Malay identity, contrasting with the essentialist notions often associated with Mahathirist discourse.

However, being an essentialist does not entirely align with Mahathirism. As Khoo Boo Teik notes regarding Mahathir's paradox, 'He is a Malay advocate, but he is ready to see them lose Malayness.' Consequently, Mustika's decision to decline work in the cities and remain in Terengganu could be interpreted as a counterpoint to Mahathirism. Conversely, his persona as a working woman, balancing modernity and tradition, resonates with Mahathirist ideals. Additionally, Wan Man's anti-Western stance in *Amok* can be seen as aligning with Mahathirist Malay and Malaysian nationalism, as well as occidentalism. However, Wan Man's choice to reject modern urban society in favour of mystical and animistic traditions at the film's end appears to counter Mahathirism. Overall, both films exemplify my central thesis: Mahathirism in selected films presents a paradox where they simultaneously uphold and critique Mahathirist principles. This paradox arises from the complex dynamics of hegemony, which operate through a balance between consent and coercion.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Throughout the thesis, I posit that the discourse of Mahathirism fundamentally informs Malaysian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the emergence of inherent paradoxes within these texts. By employing discourse analysis, I seek to uncover these paradoxes, illustrating the simultaneous coexistence of both alignment with and opposition to Mahathirism. Existing literature indicates that Malaysian cinema from the 1980s and 1990s has been extensively studied within the socio-political context. However, a notable gap remains: these studies largely lack an explicit focus on Mahathirism as a framework or ideological lens. Nevertheless, this absence is understandable, as the cinema of that era does not explicitly depict Mahathirism. Therefore, identifying a Mahathirist ideology may be challenging, if not impossible. However, through an extensive review of foreign research—including studies on the New Order regime and Indonesian cinema, Reganism and American cinema, and Thatcherism and British cinema—I have realised that what appears to be unideological is, in fact, more deeply ideological. Additionally, from these extensive previous studies, it has also become clear to me that films characterised as ‘anti-establishment’ or ‘subversive’ might not be as ‘anti-establishment’ or ‘subversive’ as they seem. This is due to the complexity of hegemony, which generates contradictory consciousness, hence producing a paradoxical standpoint in the films.

This thesis holds significant academic value for Malaysian cinema studies, particularly in its examination of the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s through an ideological lens. It offers insights into national cinema and its relationship with the ideologies of the ruling class during that period. This research can establish a foundation for future academic inquiries into ideology and hegemony within Malaysian cinema, encompassing the studio era, post-studio era, and the contemporary period. By illustrating how hegemonic structures can generate contradictory consciousness, it paves the way for future scholars to utilize discourse analysis to investigate and deconstruct hegemonic operations encapsulated in film texts. Additionally, it presents an alternative approach to studying Malaysian cinema. Future researchers might revisit earlier scholarly debates on ideological discourse, offering more nuanced interpretations that recognise the complexity, including the coexistence of multiple,

even conflicting, discourses within a single text. With regard to the framework of Mahathirism, future research could examine the persistence or transformation of its hegemonic influence in the post-premiership period. Although Mahathir is no longer the prime minister, his influence continues to shape the national political landscape and impact contemporary leadership. Consequently, instead of merely asserting the ongoing dominance of Mahathirist hegemony, further studies should critically analyse both its enduring aspects and its evolutions over time.

On the other hand, this research could lay a foundation for future studies of the post-studio era, opening up avenues for exploration such as nostalgia (including memories of kampung, the studio era, and nostalgic visions of Malaysia's past), transnational collaborations (e.g., Malaysia-Indonesia productions), genre analysis, historical contexts, and other related topics. Additionally, I believe this thesis offers a new scholarly perspective on Malaysian cinema in the post-studio era, contributing to a deeper understanding of the era.

Besides exploring the concepts and theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, I also analyse the history of Malaysian cinema through an ideological lens in Chapter 3. I examine how, since its inception, cinema has served as a popular and influential tool for maintaining existing social structures. It's influential because it can be the most personal medium for conveying discourse and ideology, especially since it reaches individuals who are illiterate or may lack interest in reading. Throughout the chapter, I recognised that the concept of 'hegemony' was present even before colonial influence, as evidenced by the 'social contract' between Seri Teri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun in the Malay Annals (*Sulalatus Salatin*).

Malay cinema during the studio era was characterised by a lack of radical or revolutionary tendencies, largely due to the repressive policies of colonial authorities. It is unfair to attribute the era's perceived passivity and 'artificiality' solely to the director's ignorance; rather, these traits stem from the necessity to suppress dissident expression under oppressive conditions, often conveyed subtly. Throughout the chapter, it is observed that the transitions from the colonial period to independence and from the Tun Hussein Onn era to Mahathir's tenure did not significantly advance the development of Malaysian cinema (in terms of quality, not ideologically). The establishment of FINAS as a protective 'shield' for local filmmakers failed to produce positive outcomes, as the existing system and arguably its worst aspects persisted. Additionally, the Malaysian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s is characterised as the

Mahathirist Era, reflecting the industry's orientation towards ethnonationalism and capitalism, with state interventions through censorship exemplifying Mahathirist authoritarianism. By comprehending the cinematic zeitgeist of the period and recognizing the political context of the film industry, one can establish a connection when analyzing the text as a product or consequence of hegemony. In other words, it provides a framework and insights indicating that hegemony is not generated in isolation, but rather through the prevailing political climate of the time.

In Chapter 4, I conduct a close analysis of two films by Rahim Razali, *Abang* and *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, highlighting two main observations. First, despite Rahim's concerns about the morality of wealthy families, his films do not portray the system itself as fundamentally problematic. Instead, they suggest that corruption stems from individual moral failings rather than systemic issues. Second, Rahim's conception of revolution, as reflected in the themes of Jebat and amok, remains confined to notions of 'stability'. This underscores a paradox in Rahim Razali's work: although he criticises Mahathirist neoliberal capitalism, he primarily attributes systemic issues to individual morality rather than to the structure itself. Nonetheless, Rahim is undeniably a significant director of his era, reflecting concern for socio-political issues affecting Malays. However, despite his films' association with Jebat, Rahim's viewpoints align with Mahathirism because of his endorsement of capitalism. Conversely, while Rahim's perspective on rural or kampung life may differ from Mahathir's, both envisage the kampung as complementary to modern Malay identity. I argue that this portrayal is part of hegemonic discourse, as it implies that despite Mahathir's developmental achievements, Malay 'essence' is preserved through the existence of the kampung.

The concept of a 'savior' emerges as a recurring motif in the selected Malaysian films, influenced in part by its association with Mahathir's historical image as a leader who aimed to rescue the nation from perceived political and social crises. This motif remains significant in the films discussed in the subsequent chapter, where it is represented through characters such as a doctor and a healthcare worker. These figures can be interpreted as embodying aspects of the Mahathirist ideal of the doctor-politician.

In Chapter 5, I highlight two key arguments: First, the projection of Mahathirism is illustrated through the depiction of 'doctor' and 'healthcare' workers in *Tsu Feh Sofiah* and *Bila Hati Telah Retak*. By portraying this profession, the film suggests the presence of 'clinical approaches,' where the narrative centres on how a doctor manages

their patient. In an international context, this ‘patient’ symbolises society (and the films themselves), viewed as an ‘organ’ or ‘tissue’ requiring treatment. Second, I argue that the concept of women's emancipation in both films transcends—and even opposes—the traditional ideals of women under Mahathirism. The protagonists challenge confinement to physical spaces and male-dominated domains, instead exhibiting agency and independence. Notably, Rohana and Tsu Feh’s roles as decisive women align with their functions as agents of social order. Their decisiveness enables them to resolve conflicts within their communities, emphasising the notion that the modern woman acts as a ‘saviour’ of the kampung population.

In Chapter 6, I emphasise that the central argument revolves around the portrayal of politicians in Malaysian films during the Mahathir premiership era, highlighting its complexity and sophistication. It is essential to note that the terms ‘complex’ and ‘sophisticated’ do not refer to the character of the politician, but rather to the complexity and sophistication inherent in the politics of representing the politician's character. That being said, although the selected films, *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlude*, depict politicians as antagonists associated with moral degradation and corruption, this portrayal is confined to individual characters rather than reflecting systemic issues or the broader political landscape. Consequently, while these films present negative images of politicians, they also serve to obscure larger criticisms of Malaysian politics and political institutions.

The depiction of corrupt politicians should not be viewed merely as an ‘anti-establishment’ stance. However, this critique tends to mask the underlying structural issues. In Malaysian films from the Mahathir era, such as *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Interlude*, politicians are depicted through scandals involving sexuality and dysfunctional family dynamics. These portrayals focus on individual flaws rather than offering systemic or structural critique, thereby diverting attention from broader issues.

A notable similarity between Chapter 7 and earlier chapters is the central role that morality plays in constructing the narrative conflict. In all instances, moral assessment is primarily directed at individuals rather than broader structural or systemic issues. Nonetheless, Chapter 7 introduces a nuanced modification in the presentation of this moral framework. While morality remains significant, it is no longer depicted merely as a dichotomy of ‘good versus evil’. Instead, the moral conflict is reframed as a contest between ‘Malay’ and ‘Western’ values, exemplifying a key element often associated with Mahathirist ideology.

In Chapter 7, the Mahathirist Malay nationalism analysed here primarily manifests through the concept of *kepulangan* or the return to one's roots. This narrative not only appears to suggest an essentialist view of Malay identity but also reflects Mahathirism's tendency to interpret race and culture through an essentialist lens. Such a perspective, to some extent, parallels Western or colonial portrayals of Malays. The generalisations associated with the Malays—such as being prone to ‘amok’, laziness, and other stereotypes—mirror Mahathir’s Occidentalism, which bears similarities to Orientalist views of the East. Regarding *kepulangan*, it is crucial to emphasise that the concern lies not merely in the act of returning but in identifying the origins of this return. Both films discussed illustrate characters who return to their roots from backgrounds that oppose the essentialist Malay identity.

However, being an essentialist does not entirely align with Mahathirism because, although Mahathir is a Malay advocate, he is willing to accept the loss of Malayness. It suggests that Mustika's decision to migrate away from urban centres and remain in Terengganu may be interpreted as a challenge to Mahathirism. Conversely, her role as a working woman who navigates between modern and traditional values embodies aspects of Mahathirist ideology. Wan Man’s portrayal of anti-Western sentiment through *Amok* could resonate with Mahathirist Malay-Malaysian nationalism and his form of occidentalism. However, the idea that Wan Man chooses to distance himself from modern and urban society, culminating in a mystical and animistic worldview, counters Mahathirism. Therefore, both films support my central argument that Mahathirism in selected films exhibits a paradox: they simultaneously uphold and challenge Mahathirism. This paradox arises from the influence of hegemony, which operates through a balance of consent and coercion.

As a final note, I would like to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which may or may not significantly influence the conclusions of this thesis. First, the selected films for this analysis do not encompass the entire post-studio era of Malaysian cinema. Popular films such as A.R. Badul’s *Si Badul* (1979), *Prebet Lapok* (1979), and Yusoff Haslam’s *Sembilu* (1994), *Sembilu II* (1996), and *Maria Mariana* (1996) are excluded from close analysis because they lack the Mahathirism trope. However, this does not suggest that excluded films do not capture the zeitgeist of the Mahathir era; it simply indicates that the trope of Mahathirism might be minor in these films. These reasons are applicable too to the significant films of the era, such as U-Wei Haji Saari’s *Isteri, Perempuan dan...* and Nasir Jani’s *Kembara Seniman Jalanan* and *Rozana Cinta* ’87,

where the decision not to analyse them is not due to their artistic merit but because of the minor presence of the discourse of Mahathirism.

Furthermore, this study does not claim that the selected films are prototypes of Mahathirist or Mahathir-era cinema, but rather that they reflect the hegemony of Mahathirism. The selected films—*Abang*, *Matinya Seorang Patriot*, *Bila Hati Telah Retak*, *Tsu Feh Sofiah*, *Ringgit Kasorrga*, *Interlud*, *Amok*, and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*—present contradictions in their portrayal of both upholding and opposing Mahathirism. However, these selected films do not encompass every trope of Mahathirism; they at least contain one or two of its tropes. For instance, *Abang* and *Matinya Seorang Patriot* explore Mahathirist capitalism through the tension between modernity and tradition, indirectly addressing the erasure of Malay identity as a conflicting discourse in the context of capitalism. *Bila Hati Telah Retak* and *Tsu Feh Sofiah* incorporate Khoo Boo Teik's (1995) framework on the 'Doctor-Politician' archetype. These films depict the medical officer character as a representation of Mahathir and Mahathirism's modernity, emphasising that these figures are not solely healthcare providers in rural areas but also serve as agents of morality, modernity, and social order restoration. Conversely, both films critique the emerging Malay middle class, which is portrayed as materialistic and spiritually degraded, thereby implicitly criticising the capitalist project of Mahathirism.

Ringgit Kasorrga contains critiques of the elite class while highlighting its political character, indicating that it addresses the capitalist trope associated with Mahathirism. *Interlude*, perhaps the only film among the selected texts, explores themes of authoritarianism. This trope is often absent from the cinema of the era, which is one reason the film is essential to examine. On the other hand, *Amok* and *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* both explore questions of identity. These narratives delve into themes of nationalism, particularly examining the trope of Malay nationalism, and align with and counter Mahathir's form of Malay nationalism. Interestingly, these oppositions and critiques serve to reinforce the hegemony of Mahathirism. That being said, because hegemony is maintained not only through coercion but also through the dynamics of consent, which explains the existence of what can be described as 'contradictory consciousness' within these films.

Throughout this thesis, the selected films may initially be interpreted as embodying and reflecting the hegemonic values associated with Mahathirism, rather than as the hegemonic apparatuses of Mahathirism. However, despite not being

considered part of the apparatus, the selected films still serve as reproduction, articulations, expressions, and normalizations of Mahathirism itself. In this context, the films have become mediums for expanding the discourse surrounding Mahathirism. The fact that I was able to recognize the ideology at the preliminary stage of this study while viewing films from those eras indicates that the selected films have functioned as tools for advancing the domain of Mahathirism. The discourse then involves, based on my understanding of hegemonic effects, an analysis of the paradoxes that shift my perspective towards the domain of Mahathirism itself. Indeed, this thesis itself is a form of reproduction of Mahathirism discourse, even as it attempts to trace the hegemony alongside its critics and contradictions; the discourse continues to be operated, reproduced, and uttered.

This thesis aims to provide an academic perspective on Malaysian post-studio cinema, with a specific focus on films from the 1980s and 1990s, due to their complex textual and political characteristics. It demonstrates that the cinema of this period exhibited significant variation across themes, genres, and discourses. In addition, the popular Finas slogan, '*Filem Kita, Wajah Kita*' ('*Our Film, Our Image*'), vividly reflects the cinematic trends of the 1980s and 1990s. Although it was not fully inclusive—given its Malay-Muslim-centric portrayal that aligned with the National Culture Policy—it still served as a reflection of '*Wajah Kita*' ('*Our Image*'). It represents an era in which class and cultural dominance were centralized within the Malay-Muslim community, and the industry itself was shaped by Malay-Muslim aspirations influenced by Mahathir's capitalism. Furthermore, this era's cinema developed a distinctive style that set it apart from its predecessors, the studio era and the digital era. From the preceding discussion, the characteristics of Malaysian cinema in the 1980s and 1990s do not emerge in isolation; rather, they are shaped by the political context. The cinematic works reflect this political environment, embodying the concept of hegemony. Therefore, I conclude that Malaysian cinema is constrained by the hegemony of Mahathirism, given that Malaysia was under Mahathir's leadership for over two decades, which also indicates that Malaysian society itself is a Mahathirist society.

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