

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**CINEMA OF POWER:
GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN
CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN
CINEMA**

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ABSTRACT

This research contributes to an understanding of gender and sexuality in contemporary Malaysian cinema by using a textual analysis approach to critically discuss and illuminate various dynamics of said topic on the silver screen. It applies anthropological methods to connect real-life events to stories depicted within selected films. There is an especial focus on six films from the years 2007 to 2011, ranging from box-office successes (such as *KL Gangster* and *Ombak Rindu*) and critically-acclaimed texts (*Pisau Cukur*) to more independent productions (*Dua Alam* and ... *Dalam Botol*). They are selected to showcase how such films can portray a shifting power dynamic, challenging heteronormative norms by employing criticism informed with an awareness of socio-economic factors. A significant part of the research revolves around conceptualising Michel Foucault's discourse of power, evincing gender and sexuality as entities and/or as negotiated exchange arenas. Further studies related to gender and sexuality in Malaysia will help to contextualise how different factors (such as race, religion, and socio-economic status) are utilised in the construction of a stratified hierarchy of gender and sexuality. Within this, alternative readings highlight how different forms of challenges to official discourses can be effected, even when situated within restrictive landscapes of identity formation and enforcement. These discussions include theories as proposed by the likes of Judith Butler, Farish A. Noor and others, revealing how such challenges for emancipation takes us steps closer towards more (ab)original interpretations and expressions of gender and sexuality. In doing so, it advances studies in Malaysian cinema, increasing the literature in critiquing evolutions of identity formation and emancipation as enacted by and through this discourse.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis proposes an analysis of power in the representations of gender and sexuality in Malaysian cinema. Such readings and considerations have often been situated in the restricting and disciplinary role films have played, engendering a more heteronormative performance of gender and sexuality off screen, without providing much room for alternative and marginalised identities to be explored on it. In particular, Khoo Gaik Cheng discusses Malaysian cinema as one of denial (2006), given its propensity to police public discourse and shape it to a more hegemonic outcome. While such restraints are acknowledged throughout this thesis, I argue that there remain much room for a more emancipated reading of gender and sexuality.

This shall be articulated and (re)framed through theoretical frameworks as introduced by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Gordon Gray and Farish A. Noor, amongst others, in identifying the link between the history of the region and its multiplicity of ideas and identities in this context of gender and sexuality. I also intend to showcase how the depiction and manifestation of multiple and alternative identities as explored through a purposive sample of films is not, as is commonly portrayed in mainstream media, a Western or foreign concept, but rather, one that is more closely aligned to pre-existing indigenous identities in pre-colonial times.

While the interest in Malaysian cinema is increasing apace, critical analyses conducted on mainstream and contemporary Malaysian films are far and few in between. The term mainstream here refers to films made available for public exhibition on a mass scale. Meaningful critiques can be found on a select number of films, but though these works are useful to further extrapolate in an academic setting, less critical attention has been paid towards the evolution of contemporary commercial Malaysian cinema, especially when it comes to the progress of the portrayal and representation of gender and sexuality, as well as the socio-political context(s) within which it is situated.