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

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Abstract

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

Key words:
Asian soap operas, Malay women, Islam, watching competency, television consumption