Malay women, non-Western soap operas and watching competencies

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Abstract
Soap opera is a potent cultural site for Malay women to imagine the meanings of modernity. Initially the Malaysian government promoted non-Western soap operas to circulate the state’s vision of alternative Asian-style modernities. Now the authorities have voiced a concern that some images and discourses of transnational modernity articulated even in non-Western soaps pose a threat to the cultural integrity of Malay women. This paper studies the significance of non-Western soaps to an understanding of gendered expectations and the progressive re-territorialization of the socio-political order in the context of an ethos of mediatized cultural globalization. Our referent is patriarchal Islamist state Malaysia. We conduct an empirical case study exploring Malay Muslim women’s negotiation and understanding of non-Western soap operas in Malaysia. Results from a series of guided in-depth interviews with 12 rural and urban Malay women enable us to understand how they negotiate their position as viewers of these non-Western soaps, given the criticism about the supposed immorality of these programs. We argue that Malay women act as strategic audiences who mobilize sophisticated viewing tactics that we call ‘watching competencies’ to negotiate the pleasures and potential conflicts of their access to non-Western soaps. This research indicates that Malay women are neither passive, vulnerable consumers of foreign soap, nor easily manipulated by those who claim authority; rather, they confidently assert their autonomy as consumer-citizens of a modern Islamic state.

Keywords
Soap operas, Malaysia, alternative modernity, audience studies, watching competencies, Islamic feminism, critical transculturalism

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Introduction: Malay women and alternative modernity

This article is concerned with the significance of non-Western soaps to an understanding of gendered expectations and the progressive re-territorialization of the socio-political order in contemporary Malaysia. Material taken from a series of 12, 2–3-hour interviews allow us to explain the relationship between a group of Malay women in the rural and urban area of Malaysia and their consumption of this television genre. Our objective is to open the space for discussion as to whether the fears and anxieties over women’s vulnerability to what is deemed to be degenerate transnational culture and the perceived depradations encouraged through exogamous representations of globalizing modernity’s aspirations are justified. While Malay women in this empirical research valiantly endeavor to maintain the status quo and to comply with government expectations on the rate of change, we argue that they are tactical users of the medium and on the defensive about their rights of access. Our respondents demonstrate a set of watching competencies that they employ when they consume non-Western soaps, which helps them to negotiate any questionable content that may arise from the penetration of new ideas, generated from the universalizing visions dreamed up in the spheres of globalizing modernity and represented for consumption in the showcases of non-Western soap.

The term modernity is elusive, allowing multiple interpretations. Modernity may be understood as a cultural ethos or period that breaks with tradition, producing a sense of ‘new’ and ‘old’. Scholars acknowledge an influx of new ideas and alternative modes of thought, as well as transformation of physical conditions and changes in lifestyle and economy (Barker, 2000; Chong, 2005; Giddens, 1991; Leonard, 1996). For example, modernity is not necessarily “after” tradition (although it is “before” it when it comes to reaching the future), it is “beyond” locality and acts as the “wider context” for it’ (Wade, 2007: 51). In addition, one may reject a unilinear model of modernity and emphasize the diversity of flows that contribute to the concept: ‘modernity means many things, and its arrival and progress can be traced using many and different markers’ (Bauman, 2000: 8). The tag ‘modern’ is used as ‘a mobile and shifting classification that serves to structure, legitimize, and valorize varied and often competing perspectives’ (Felski, 1995: 14–15). Modernity evidently varies according to history, geography, cultural traditions and the impact of local events, but the phenomenon has universally taken hold on the imagination and is apparently situated simultaneously everywhere (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1995: 2).

Modernity implies both heterogeneity and disequilibrium, and between points on the chart there are degrees of difference because some societies in this world will always remain traditional, insufficiently modernized and unable to produce modernity similar to Western countries (Kaviraj, 2000: 137–138). Scholars such as Moores (2000: 6) argue that ‘globalising modernity does not have the same universal significance for all the planet’s inhabitants, not even for those who live in the relatively affluent “first world”’. Modernity, then, is about relative and specific differences and ‘instead of speaking of modernity in the singular, we should better speak of “alternative modernities”’ (Taylor, 2001: 182). Therefore, it is
not surprising if non-Western nations strive to produce indigenous versions of modernity that seek to circumvent a Euro-centric dominance (Gaonkar, 2001: 15).

Malaysia seeks to enunciate an alternative model of modernity founded on its own unique location in time and space. Our research focuses on the role Malay women play in the action, bringing about the possibilities and the realities of a progressive vision for the nation-state. However, the role of women is problematized where a hegemonic and singular interpretation of Islam and of female morality and piety is firmly entrenched in the conservative echelons of Malay society: ‘the role of the Malaysian state in championing a version of Islamic modernity has greatly complicated the engagements of reformist Muslim women with the state in working for women’s (human) rights in families, and new forms of family’ (Stivens, 2006: 363). However, the conundrum is that modernity’s ideal state brackets out the possibility that any aspect of women’s lives should be immutably frozen in time by a pre-existing tradition (Bernama, 2006a; 2006b).

Soap opera has been identified as a powerful tool to imagine transnational modernities. Malay women have unfettered access to non-Western soaps within the private space of their homes and use these programs to make meanings and signify exotic factors that could – if not checked – potentially challenge the state’s directives on a woman’s place, stirring civil and political unrest. In Malay society the authorities, as guardians and gatekeepers of traditional social norms, reserve the right to dictate the terms on which Malay women may engage with modernity. There is an obvious relationship of power inequality vis-à-vis the state and the women audiences in question, not to mention the conservative backlash from the women’s wing of powerful political organizations such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Representatives argue that foreign soap should be severely restricted on the grounds that Malay women will be tempted to deviate from the social norms of Malay adat (norm) and Islamic faith, two important elements that define Malay culture and identity.

The dichotomy is that while the government stresses the need for women to draw ideas and images from exotic sources, they simultaneously fear that the bonds of traditional culture will be eroded. These misgivings give rise to contrapuntal questions about the value of the cultural exchanges taking place at the grassroots level through the mediation of popular culture, as well as doubts about the legitimacy and wisdom of the kind of censorship that would constrain women to a naturalized feminine (subordinate) subject position.

**Islamically orientated feminism**

Social justice for women is therefore identified as an ongoing issue. For Abu-Lughod (2002), the argument, however, that non-Western women – from the most rural to the best educated and most cosmopolitan – could possibly be envious of the freedoms attributed to their Western counterparts is obviously suspect. In other words, she suggests, to speak in terms of Islamic feminism is not an oxymoron and modern cross-cultural sensitivity demands that any gender-based
analysis develops ‘a serious appreciation of differences among women of the world – as the product of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires’ (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 73). Respect for differences predisposes liberal acceptance of the fact that there are many paths towards social changes that will give women better lives.

We recognize a litany of common evils across the globe: war, oil interests, the arms industry, the drug trade, poverty, illiteracy, and the list goes on; however, the measure of a modern woman’s advancement still lies in literacy and education, decreased birth-rate, shared parenting/caring responsibilities, discretionary income, job opportunities, women in government and the professions, a flourishing presence in creative fields and freedom of choice. All societies are capable of significant new understandings and transformations in line with the times. The women in our study obviously believe that they can make significant gains ‘in part through an Islamically orientated feminist movement that challenges injustices and reinterprets the religious tradition’ (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

Re-territorialization

Modernity demands the re-territorialization of political and social norms. The Malaysian financial and political crises in 1998 produced new opportunities for Malay women to be actively involved in the public sphere. When Anwar Ibrahim was sacked from the government for launching the mass movement reformasi (reformation) – which challenged the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad’s reign (Mohamad, 2002: 94) – his wife, Wan Azizah, was appointed as president of the National Justice Party (KeAdilan). She led the party in the next national elections and the ensuing rise in public awareness showed that UMNO’s conservative politics were beginning to be challenged. UMNO hoped to divert disaffection and countered this movement by promising more gender rights (Mohamad, 2002: 95–96). In fact, UMNO nominated many women candidates to stand against Wan Azizah, hoping to signal that it was a progressive political party and that Malay women could engage in politics at the highest level. However, some critics argue that nomination of female candidates to any party platform were political maneuvers to out-do one another and these political developments did not necessarily mean widespread gender reform. Perhaps these superficial initiatives were nothing more than a means of co-opting the momentum of the pro-reformasi movement and bringing it within the fold of the UMNO with the promise of liberalization (Weiss, 2000: 420–421). Perhaps equality for women in politics and public life could not yet be taken seriously. However, the vision had reached the light of day – inspiration for future action.

A sign of the times: dress codes

Under the influence of Islamic revivalism, the tudung or headscarf was rediscovered and promoted by UMNO as the appropriate clothing for the modern but culturally
grounded Malay women. The rediscovery of the tudung is often touted as a symbol of women’s increasing political agency in their support of revivalist and politicized Islam (Stivens, 2000: 29–30). Stivens suggests, however, that the resurgence of the veiled middle class woman is a symbol of a distinctively Malay modernity (Stivens, 1998: 117). Islamic revivalism also rewrote the private space of home and family as a woman’s jihad, in which the family is configured as the central institution of the enlightened Islamic state and the mother the symbolic and moral pivot: ‘what is deemed suitable and appropriate for a contemporary Malay woman is to be “domestic” and therefore “feminine”’ (Healey, 1994: 111). However, our job as researchers and thinkers is to reveal exactly what must be unraveled and reworked to produce the ‘modern’ Malay and Muslim (Stivens, 1998: 116). How will relationships change and cultural boundaries shift?

**Audience studies and popular culture**

The television industry is a new focus of scholarly interest, no longer simply a national system but big business – ubiquitous, networked for global roaming, designed to integrate with ideologies, business interests, societies and cultures. Marwan Kraidy uses his research into pan-Arab modernity and reality television (of which soap opera is a sub-genre) as a laboratory that sheds light on the dichotomies of transition from traditional to contemporary realities – micro-life under a bell-jar. The controversies surrounding television programs such as *Star Academy* are closely aligned to the debates on modernity and tradition, social change and cultural identity (Kraidy, 2006: 20; 2010: 15). Ideologies and politics – commercial, nationalistic, Islamic, for instance – connive over the production aesthetics of sub-genres (soaps). Reality television contributes to neoliberalism in practice by creating ‘modern composite citizen consumers’ (Kraidy, 2010: 214), but who might yet fail to find individual satisfaction because of the ‘dizzying complexity and difference of our world’ (Kraidy, 2010: 216).

Recent developments in cross-cultural research explore the idea of ‘critical transculturalism’, which focuses on the ways cultural traditions confront the inequities of transnational flows and industrial clout, unraveling the implicit ties between cultural fusion and the power source, with the aim of pulling the exchange back into line with the essentialisms of the local economy. Popular television culture opens the space where philosophical ideas meet daily realities, where societal mores can oscillate between customary expectations and the aspirational gyrations of modern influences (Sabry, 2010: 149). Malay women can feel empowered as the front guard, stalwart filtering-agents, controlling the assimilation of exotic cultural chips.

Soaps create spaces where women can roam freely through the *what ifs* of modernity – albeit vicariously – choose new role models and construct new identities. In this era of relative prosperity, new mobility and with the influx of women into employment, the state recognizes that Malay women are drivers in the all important ‘scapes’ of economy and capitalist consumption and so it follows that they have
become strategically important players, with franchise, who cannot be ignored. However, when Malay women engage with the concept of modernity through popular culture they are still pre-empted by the state whose disposition is to can-
alize its female subjects in an overt and conscious way (Stivens, 1994: 87).

Women’s magazines, for instance, publish articles that deliberately focus upon the reinvention of Malay traditions for a modern era – childrearing practices, household décor, managing male–female interpersonal relationships, the reinven-
tion of cuisine and so on – all designed to orient women to their role in the con-
struction of a modern middle class family. Recent magazines, however, move away from the domestic to incorporate certain risqué topics more likely to be associated with Western women’s magazines. Women in fashionable dresses and jeans are now presented alongside those in full purdah (Ong, 2006: 33). Ostensibly women have a range of choices to create their own personalized images.

We note, however, that current studies of Malay women’s magazines are limited and only examine the textual representations. Our research is grounded and explores the responses of Malay women audiences in situ at the grassroots level, valorizing their voices.

**Audience response and appropriation**

Our ethnographic work is founded on a ‘cultural studies paradigm’, building upon a renewed interest in qualitative research into audience response theories (Ang, 1985; Morley, 1980; Seiter, 1999). Stuart Hall’s work on ‘encoding and decoding’ is central. We suggest that media is polysemous, but meaning-making activities take place in context and through intersubjective interpretation:

...before this message can have an ‘effect’...satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to a ‘use’, it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings, which ‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behav-


We believe that the soap opera genre provides an interactive experience of learning that taps into each spectator at the level of individual need – melodramatic and visceral awakening to possibilities to be sure – but eliciting a committed personal response to both overt and covert messages about ideal citizenship that balances the claims of many overlapping, confusing and sometimes contesting vectors of family and community life.

**Cultural resources and ‘watching competencies’**

Watching competencies are second nature: the cultural resources absorbed from childhood and brought to the forefront of consciousness in response to the needs of the day. There is no precise or set framework demanding application, more an
inbred sense of what is the right and fitting response in the circumstances. Our respondents filter foreign soaps through personal interpretations of the cultural ideologies and expectations of the Malay world. Watching competencies derive from individual experiences and are biased by self-awareness and self-justification. We think that our theory of watching competencies appeals on holistic grounds, reflecting the cultural chips embedded in the psyche of mature individuals (and collectives). In a modern nation-state we assume that everyone without prejudice has a necessary part to play in the formation of a fair society. However, watching competencies are the back-bone for the whole spectrum of negotiable situations, as the processes bear on identity-formation, role models, responsible behavior, good citizenship and collective governance.

**Contradictory consciousness**

Previous scholars have suggested that soap opera can be a potential site for feminist resistance against the patriarchy (Brown, 1994; Geraghty, 1991), but the suggestion of resistance is now a banal concept in cultural studies (Morris, 1990). The contemporary context in media-entertainment is to play with desire and seduction rather than militancy and revolutionary theatricals.

We maintain that Malay audiences have come to exercise creative judgment in the face of foreign programs and that ‘a tactical reading is able to poach from textual content of one ideological persuasion to construct support for an opposing worldview. The moral polarity of a program can be reversed’ (Wilson, 2004: 110). Malay women may take pleasure in images of ‘modern life’ in the big cities – Tokyo and Seoul – but they still uphold Malay Islamic tradition and *adat* as their basic interpretational/ideological master frame. They may express interest in images of a transnational, consumerist modernity but re-interpret them to suit their worldview, placing primacy on the Malay cultural order. Critical analysis can only make sense when focused on grass-roots occurrents (Kellner, 2007: 149).

**‘Cultural proximity’**

Already concepts such as cultural proximity (Iwabuchi, 2002, 2004) and identification and distancing strategies (Chua, 2008) have opened the way to analyze the transnational consumption of non-Western soap and other popular culture, especially from Korean and Japan. However, these studies only focus on East Asian-Confucian societies and do not highlight the subtleties of engagement in specific or localized Islamic settings such as Malaysia.

Myria Georgiou (2012) writes about media consumption and its role in identity construction from the perspective of Arabic migrant women audiences in London. She suggests that the cosmopolitan location is a fertile site/laboratory for cultural and political juxtapositions. However, her major interest is the construction of ‘citizenship’ across cultural divides and the policy implications for plural and diverse societies.
Georgiou’s recent research on Arabic soap opera consumption among Arabic women in London discusses the attachment to a core culture (cultural proximity) – most typically evident in language and religious affiliations. However, geography, dress and cuisine also become a thing of nostalgia and soaps that reflect those cultural trappings fulfill the role of an ‘escapist’ genre or a safety-valve when people are alienated and homesick. The oblique popularity of Turkish and Egyptian soap opera rests on the recognition of common themes in settings that are both familiar and not – liminal spaces that effectively mediate the layers of cultural proximity and mitigate tensions through strategies of distancing and dispersal – buffering. That affiliation, however, is not a question of ‘choosing between either/or and more a process combining this and thus’ (Beck, 2006, as quoted in Georgiou, 2012: 880).

Her research also postulates that both the commonalities and the differences recognized through communal soap opera viewing open the way for Arabic female audiences to accommodate and transcend the cultural collisions of both political geographies and intergenerational relationships. Affiliations of choice take the place of certain aspects of biology and traditional culture endowed at birth. Georgiou labels this kind of relationship ‘critical proximity’; for instance, Arabic women in London sustain their cultural attachment with the Arab region but refuse to be associated with the hegemonic rule or gender interpretations of a particular (or previous) geographical location or point of origin. Georgiou also observes that watching soap opera, with its recurring over-emphasis on stereotypical Arab familial roles, ‘raises awareness about patriarchy and female oppression’ (Georgiou, 2012: 881).

While our study does not focus upon the juxtapositions of ‘here’ and ‘there’ so pertinent to Arabic female identities and the needs of the migrant to negotiate between zones, it is still about the collision of cultures. Our study juxtaposes the core dominant culture and stable referent – traditional Islam and Malay norms – in ‘critical proximity’ with the difference and diversity introduced through television access to foreign soaps. We have invented the trope of watching competencies to explain how Malay women cope with the multiple strange worlds presented on television and still remember that they live in the specific regional context of a Muslim country and an Asian nation-state.

**Research design and focus group**

The core participants of our ethnographic research are 12 Malay women. Six are from the city area of Kuala Lumpur and six come from the remote village of Kota Tinggi in Johore. All of these respondents are habitual followers of non-Western soap opera especially from Indonesia, Latin America and Korea. We also identified another 10 respondents in the urban area of Kuala Lumpur, who were keen followers of Indonesian, Korean, Japanese, Thai and Latin American soap operas. For the purpose of our interviews we did not select specific programs and invite discussions about them (as in the case studies conducted by Iwabuchi, 2002, 2004).
Instead, our study was designed to let the respondents talk about whichever non-Western soap they preferred. This strategy enabled spontaneous discussion about the personal and social issues at the forefront of individual consciousness, without honing in on popularity ratings and marketing ploys. We chose to limit the number of respondents because the initial fieldwork produced similar responses from all the women viewers and feedback quickly reached saturation point (Maxwell, 2005). A small sample group and one-on-one interview techniques allowed us to focus on the nuances of each response, foregrounding the ‘diversity of experience’ (Wilson, 2004: 18). We were not interested in the wider picture – an overall pattern of Asian soap consumption – but in the subjective experience of Malay women in the midst of the social upheaval and transitional angst brought about in response to state policies and directives.

Our respondents in the kampung (village) setting are full-time housewives in the age range of 35–50 years. These Malay women have a wide knowledge about the soaps they watch every single day. Of importance is the fact that it is the viewing habits of this particular subset of women which caused moral panic in the local authorities, especially UMNO, and who drew heavy criticism for a lack of commitment to domestic duty. Although none of the women are professionally employed in an external workplace, some of them run family groceries or small direct-selling businesses to earn extra income. Predominately, however, the daily routine revolves around housekeeping, cooking and looking after children. Since most of these women do not work outside the house, most of their afternoons are allocated to watching non-Western soaps on television. Unlike our respondents in the kampung, most of the urban respondents are engaged in work outside the household, but they are also aged between 34–50 years old. Many of them are well-educated and have been exposed to urban culture and lifestyle in Kuala Lumpur. Since most of them work during the day, they tend to watch non-Western soap operas at night, mostly alone. All of the respondents own at least one television set. They have access to all free-to-air local and Indonesian channels and some satellite television channels too.

We accept that because we draw on a small number of respondents for our findings this research may only be relevant within this localized context.

Morality and self-discipline

The women in our survey overwhelmingly reject the notion that they are vulnerable subjects easily seduced by the lax behavior and lure of the opulent lifestyles depicted in soaps. Our respondents claim to be mature-minded citizens, well aware of their rights and responsibilities. They argue back from the moral high ground. For instance, some non-Western soaps show characters in sexual relationships, sometimes out of wedlock. Malay norms forbid men and women to form sexual relationships outside the institution of marriage. One respondent countered the criticism of poor role modeling with the suggestion that by watching bad behavior she could put her own life in perspective and make good moral judgments
about her own actions. She suggested that a tale of jealousy and dishonesty unfolding in the life of a young Indonesian couple in a soap opera allowed her to learn that modern relationships were delicate and problematic:

> You need to know your partner’s personality before you go any further in a relationship. I have always warned my children to know their partner very well in order to avoid any problem in the future in case they got married. Although these soaps are from Indonesia, the issues they depict could happen in our society as well. (Bainah, 49, Homemaker, *Kampung*)

Bainah identifies with the issues depicted in the Indonesian soap but she does not desire an uncontrolled romantic liaison in her own life. Instead, she demonstrates the distanced reasoning of a mature woman, warning her children of the pitfalls of extra-marital affairs. Bainah also re-interprets the events in the soap as aversion therapy in favor of the maintenance of a stable system of culturally sanctioned courtship and marriage.

The government has voiced concern about the corrupting effects of soaps on all Malay women, but urban women are often the prime target of criticism. *Kampung* Malay women are somewhat unrealistically perceived as being more ‘true’ to the Malay norms required by *adat* and Islam, while their urbanized sisters are thought to be ‘endangered’ (Dass, 2002). Our urban Malay respondents cogently argue that negative perceptions are not justified. They not only meet moral challenges through their exposure to the complexities of urban living, but also utilize events depicted on television to serve as cautionary tales that help them to cope with the overblown temptations and frustrations of city living. These soaps – with their portrayals of domestic troubles such as divorces, family feuds and unwanted pregnancies – are seen as an opportunity to learn about social ills prevalent in the modern world from the safe distance of a domestic armchair and a scaled experiment contained in a remote-controlled black-box.

Saedah – an urban woman – is savvy enough about life to suggest that the social problems depicted in soaps are of wide universal significance. She declares that as a woman living in the city it is important to understand the relevant problems (of urban development) through the fictionalized models represented in non-Western soaps. She says:

> I know that Korean and Filipino soaps show many habits of urbanized western lifestyle such as drinking, clubbing and pre-marital sexual relationships. I guess all of these things that we consider unacceptable are part of their lifestyle. But I also know that many Malay youngsters have adopted such ways too. I live in the city and I know what happens here. And, thus I think (urban) societies in Korea and Indonesia probably have the same social problems like us. I guess it would be very interesting if we could share our experiences and learn from them, even though it is just through the medium of their soaps on our television sets. I don’t think it is wrong. (Saedah, 36, Bank officer, Urban)
Saedah elevates soaps as a forum for the discussion of the common problems that inevitably exist across nations in this day and age. She sees television narratives as a window on the contentious aspects of bringing up a contemporary family and thinks that she can learn valuable lessons from the way other societies handle issues. However, she makes a clear distinction between reality and the laboratory conditions of reality television.

Both kampung and urban women suggest that certain social ills are endemic to societies everywhere and so cannot be completely blamed on exotic influences. Our respondents suggest that non-Western soaps may portray themes that are deemed to be culturally inappropriate; however, outright rejection of alien influences or an attitude of blind refusal to acknowledge the existence of certain taboo problems in Malay society is not the right way to tackle social ills.

These women argue that a modern state must take a more inclusive, conciliatory and broad-minded approach. Our sample group defends their access to non-Western soaps on the grounds that the genre provides a source of information and distance education that helps them to anticipate and negotiate the events for which there are no traditional precedents. They naturally express enjoyment in the capacity to make personal moral decisions and to take control of the quality of relationships and community life.

At the other end of the spectrum of responses, our study indicates that Malay women can be yet capable of taking up positions of complete opposition to liberalization and relaxed censorship. Halimahton is disgusted by the behavior of certain hyper-sexualized characters presented in Latin American or Korean soaps and unwilling to accommodate such content. She says that she would not tolerate any scene that shows a man and woman living together or even socializing without an officially sanctioned marriage:

For me this excessive romance scene is certainly not right. I will switch off my television if I see such scenes on my favorite Latin soap. I have to admit here that the kissing and hugging scene in Latin soaps are too much. I cannot accept this even though as a non-real because I know it is very wrong according to Islam.

(Halimahton, 48, Homemaker, Kampung)

Halimahton adheres to the strict establishment norms of Malay culture – no sex before marriage is an inviolable law. She leaves no room for negotiation but turns off the television set. Her reaction illustrates the tight hold of Malay adat, Islamic values and the discourse of Malay modernity in her everyday life.

**Consumer culture the ‘halal’ way**

The storyline of any non-Western soap may have unique narrative themes, but the spectacular presentation of consumerism also generates much of the pleasure. In Malaysia, consumer culture is not promoted as a positive and salient feature of economic development. Fischer writes that consumerism in Malaysia is subject
to ‘intense political and religious contestation’ (Fischer, 2008: 35), governed by a strict code of what is permissible and what is forbidden by Islamic values. The Islamic code of ‘halal/haram’ (allowed/forbidden) consistently informs ideas and practices. Jemilah rejects the idea that Malay women are led astray by consumerist fads to the detriment of Malay cultural values. She says:

Malay women need to be updated with the current trends in clothing. If you wear a tudung, you can also wear a dress or outfit of the latest fashion with it. You need to be more creative without ignoring Malay adat and Islam. I work in a bank and I love to wear trousers. So, I have to think about how to match my tudung with my trousers. Well, you must not expose parts of your body but you can certainly take care to dress up nicely. (Jemilah, 36, customer relation officer, Urban)

Authorities may deem consumer culture to be a source of moral degeneracy and vanity – forbidden in Islam – but Jemilah, more sensitive to the position of a working woman, makes the point that she is required to adhere to the norms of a proper social image for a Malay Muslim woman in a modern workplace. Wearing the Muslim headgear tudung is her priority and the tudung seems to be – correctly then – at the foremost of her concerns in personal grooming. Jemilah may subscribe to fads of fashion required by urban lifestyle – like wearing trousers to her workplace – but she does not reject the demands of Islam or refuse to wear the tudung. In fact, other items of clothing are meant as a canvas to complement the tudung, the central piece from which she judges her own appearance.

Sumiamah from Kuala Lumpur is a regular viewer of Latin American soaps. She says that she would like to wear clothes inspired by the glamorous heroine on her favorite soap opera:

If I have a party or gathering amongst my family members alone, I would not mind wearing outfits like the ones Rosalinda has. Hey, I want to look glamorous sometimes as well! (laughing) I know it is a bit revealing but it looks so nice. Well, that is just my dream (laughing). I have kids to take care of. They are more important than expensive clothes. (Sumiamah, 38, Information system officer, Urban)

Sumiamah’s response reveals the multiple nuances of personal engagement, as well as the ambivalence of desires when wishful-thinking grapples with pragmatic realities. Sumiamah does not mind wearing fashionable clothes for special occasions within the private space of the home, since Islam allows Malay women to exercise such freedom amongst family members. She also claims her right to imitate her heroine in private, savoring the imaginary pleasures. However, she simultaneously rejects such pursuits as frivolous in reality, emphasizing her priorities as a mother who needs to take care of her children.

The use of cosmetics by Malay women is another controversial issue discussed in the local press (Pileh et al., 2001) as some of the ingredients may be haram. A number of the women in our study say that they watch non-Western soaps
specifically to get tips on personal grooming and make-up. However, these women can still cite strict adherence to cultural convention while using those cosmetics.

Norsiah uses cosmetics on a regular basis. She says that she not only dresses up but also puts on make-up to make herself presentable for her husband when he returns home after a tiring day of work in a plantation. She points to the lead female character, Thalia Sodi Miranda, in the famous Latin soap *Rosalinda*, as her idol and suggests that it is her wifely duty to please her husband in this manner:

I guess it is not wrong if we groom ourselves a bit to impress our husband. Who would want to live with a dirty and impolite wife? In fact, our tradition tells us to do so. Our religion encourages us to pay attention to personal hygiene. The problem arises when you over-indulge in such activities. People will talk behind your backs if you don’t pay attention to your appearance. And people also will talk if you put too much make up like soap’s star on television. So, it’s a matter of balance. This is very important, my dear (laughing). (Norsiah, 46, Homemaker, Kampung)

Although Norsiah cites the glamorous heroine of a Latin American soap opera as her ideal of feminine beauty, she justifies using cosmetics in a similar way to enhance her appearance as part of her traditional duty as a wife. Malay cultural conventions defined by Islamic law stipulate that women must cultivate their physical beauty not for personal vanity but only to please their husbands. Norsiah reasons in a tactical way, easily conflating her own consumerist drive with her perceived duties as a modern wife. She has no desire to outrage cultural convention and presents a balanced point of view on the issue of cosmetics, one which reconciles her idolization of a well-groomed and fashionable soap opera heroine with Islamic norms about appropriate feminine behavior.

Siti presents another educated perspective on the use of cosmetics. She is an urban woman with an interest in looking good but nonetheless she is extremely discriminating in her choice of make-up. Siti says that she not only avoids all products from non-Muslim countries but also checks products from Muslim countries for a genuine halal certification from Malaysian authorities:

I wish I could have fine skin like the Korean women [on the Winter Sonata]. I always wonder how they manage to retain their beautiful skin and look young. However, I have to be careful about buying cosmetics from abroad. We can never be sure about the ingredients of imported cosmetics. We need to find out how the item was produced, even if it was imported from Indonesia. That’s why I mostly use our local products. I feel reassured because it has a local halal certificate. (Siti, 34, Government Officer, Urban)

Siti is a discerning consumer. Cultural proximity with a Muslim neighbor like Indonesia is not sufficient reason in itself for Siti to buy and use products from that country. She is skeptical about the purity of the product and scrutinizes labels
for ratings and ingredients. She may idolize the heroines of foreign soaps but only consumes products that meet the local standards of *halal* certification.

**Social order**

Our respondents accept that pious attitudes and strict adherence to cultural convention in the public eye is the measure of worth, credibility and authority. They inhabit the moral high ground and value the symbolic social order as the source of strength when they refute negative allegations. Malay women also measure mature status by the capacity to be a good parent and role model.

*Kampung* woman, Selamah, says that she differentiates herself from her children by her understanding of social restraint and correct behavior:

> When my children watch cartoons on television, they often get too carried away with all the excitement and the images. I cannot imagine what would happen, if I allowed them to watch Korean soaps with their scenes of romance, alcohol, relationships. They are still *budak mentah* (raw children) and can be influenced easily. (Selamah, 49, Homemaker, *Kampung*)

Selamah looks down on her children as ‘impressionable’ and calls them ‘*budak mentah*’ or immature. She says that she would not give them license to watch the questionable content in Korean soaps because they do not have the adequate experience to distinguish between wholesome and decadent behavior. Our respondents are clear about the boundaries. Imah, another participant from the *kampung* setting, claims that her authority rests upon her immersion in the cultural knowledge of Malay tradition and her ability to judge content that may be contrary to Islamic knowledge (and consequently must be strictly monitored for immature children):

> I think the outfits that the Latin American soap heroines wear are inappropriate. They are against our tradition because you cannot expose parts of your body in public like that. I am really worried about our children getting influenced into dressing up like them. I can see some of them have already become spoiled and tend to ignore Islamic values. That’s why I do not allow them to watch Latin American soaps. They need to go to school first and learn what they are allowed to do and not allowed to do. And yet, do you think children will think the way we think? I don’t think so (sighs). Kids will always be kids. (Imah, 49, Homemaker, *Kampung*)

Imah rejects the revealing clothes worn by characters in some Latin American soaps – inappropriate by *adat* and Islamic standards. She criticizes these trends among young people and emphasizes the need for children to be properly schooled in the conservative mores of Malay culture. Imah rests her authority in knowledge and experience of Islamic traditions and the capacity for self-criticism. She rejects a subordinate subject position and claims the status of a mature guardian in her own
right. She identifies kids in general as the vulnerable subjects in need of the watchful control of mature parents like herself.

Other women in the study are even more emphatic about the need for parents to exercise control over children. Haizan is formally educated in a religious school. She feels personally responsible for monitoring children while they are engaged in watching soaps that may introduce misinterpretations of the holy Koran:

You can’t play around with the holy Koran. I don’t want to blame Indonesian sinetron for showing incorrect ideas about Islam, but we have to realize that our cultures are different. I was trained in a religious school as a child, so I am very familiar with our holy Koran and I still try to learn more of its lessons. Now watching this Indonesian sinetron, I often worry about my children. Sometimes they join me to watch *Mutiara Hati* in the afternoons and they keep talking about the supernatural practices as if they were real. That is why I always sit and talk to them whenever something is shown on television. (Haizan, 48, Boutique Manager, Urban)

Haizan does not denounce soaps but she cautions that one must watch them with a degree of skepticism. She believes that religious education is the source that will help avoid her to avoid misinterpretation of the Koran and aberrant conduct. She expresses concern that her children do not have a similar degree of experience to recognize the difference between true religious expression and the cheap magical tricks and sleights of hand performed by television technologies. Haizan suggests that her children are inclined to be carried away by the supernatural elements in Indonesian religious dramas, without considering their signification. She is convinced of the need to watch programs with her children so that she can rectify on the spot any misleading depictions through her own knowledge of Islamic practice.

Ropikah is scornful of any authorities that treat her as an immature child in need of control and correction. While some Latin American soaps have invited sharp criticism from the authorities on several grounds – overt sexuality, excessive consumerism and selfish role modeling – Ropikah dismisses soaps as nothing more than frivolous adult entertainment. She laughs off the suggestion that any inappropriate content may incite correspondingly indecent sexual behavior. She quotes her age as a factor in her engagement, pointing out the fact that she has lived long enough as a married woman to learn wisdom and self-control:

There are many bedroom and kissing scenes in *Marina* that I believe are against our Malay *adat* and Islam. Well, I am married and these subjects are not a big issue for me. It’s normal you see (chuckling). I am too old and I know how to control myself (laughing). Sometimes if the romance scene in *Marina* is too long or graphic, I feel quite embarrassed and irritated. Then I just switch to another channel. (Ropikah, 48, Homemaker, Kampung)

Ropikah accepts that sexual themes are against Malay cultural values but she can hardly claim to be as innocent as a child about the way the world turns.
She watches the soap for its narrative content and accepts the romance scenes as part of the storyline. She has a fine sense of humor and appreciates life’s ironies, but nonetheless when she thinks that the sexual content unnecessarily overwhelms the storyline, she expresses her discomfort and even disinterest. Ropikah is immune to the lure of inappropriate content.

Suriati, however, resents being told by others that watching soaps is a frivolous waste of time. She asserts that she is well aware of her responsibilities as a mature adult and does not need any patronizing guidance from an external authority:

Why are you telling me this? (laughing). I watch Indonesian sinetron (soaps) for relaxation, after I finish all my housework. I don’t think these shows will make me forget my everyday responsibility as a Muslim. When it is time for prayer, I stop watching the soap and only continue after I finish my prayer. The most important issue is for you to be able to manage your time. (Suriati, 46, Homemaker, Kampung)

No matter how she chooses to spend her leisure time, Suriati is adamant that she has the capacity to meet her personal, religious and cultural obligations as a mature Malay woman. She argues that she can manage her home without surveillance and that she is able to watch these soaps and still fulfill her duties in a balanced and proper manner.

**Conclusion: a grassroots manifestation of alternative modernity**

The Malay women in this case study elaborate the significance of watching competencies as an important conceptual tool in broadening our understanding of how women negotiate between modern and traditional values. The modern–traditional dialectical values take place within an overlap of localized patriarchal political setting and enticing globalized popular cultural flows setting – a sociocultural environment prevalent in many modernizing and developing nations. Moreover, the tactical negotiation needed in watching competencies allow women to actively mobilize their cultural resources, both globalized modern resources and localized traditional values.

The transference of symbolic values and meanings associated with the product (soaps) both reveals and tests the ideals of Malay culture – gender roles, middle class family values, willingness to perform traditional duties and social obligation both at home and in global contexts. Malay women are deployed by the powers-that-be in a polarized symbolic discourse, as the exemplary metaphors for dutiful domesticity, ideal womanhood and protectors of iconic national identity. Malay women are under surveillance. Knowledge is power and any abstract discourse will have a fallout on the everyday lives of women.

The capacity to negotiate at all through the medium of non-Western soap reveals something important about the malleable and hybrid nature of Malaysian modernity, as it takes shape in response to the particular needs and
demands of the times. At the grassroots level there is a subtle, fragmented process of reception built into human nature that circumvents any unilinear ideologies of human accomplishment or becoming. Modernity in Malaysia is judged through the perspective of tradition and involves processes of negotiation and renegotiation with past ways, as present trends come under scrutiny and constant revision, as we discover the best means to move forward together.

In order to examine the collisions between modernity and traditional ways we have taken Malay women as the object and subject of our study and manufactured the concept of watching competencies to measure the elasticity of cultural boundaries, as our respondents negotiate through the fantasy scenarios depicted in soap opera. Audience research tends to produce oversimplified theories of ‘active audiences’ and ‘participation’, and conclusions that generalize and do as little to elucidate the situated behavior of individuals (Gray, 1999; Morley, 1980). The object is to move beyond models of oppression and resistance. In cooperating with our study, Malay women bravely make themselves visible in the performance of their daily lives, warts and all. Nevertheless, these women acquiesce in the use of traditional cultural resources to creatively engaging with the contemporary media world, to critique global influences and filter the influx of transnational ideas.

There are some broader conceptual themes that emerge here in the fluidity of Malay women’s engagement with consumer culture that show how they exercise their agency as mindful consumers aware of the limits and boundaries of ethical consumption imposed in the local culture. They refuse to submit to the patriarchal authorities that completely stigmatize modern consumer culture and counter this with their own understanding to show that they are well aware of the norms imposed by Islamic and Malay morality and only enjoy the pleasures of consumer culture within those limits. Contrary to the picture of mindless consumers just submitting to the alluring images of consumer spectacle, we must pay heed to the subtle processes through which consumers find emotional resonance and meaning to their own lives as they negotiate over what they should or should not consume. The broader point here is perhaps to neither castigate consumerism as something that enslaves people nor valorize it as a domain of free choice. Instead, we must examine how people navigate the allure of consumerist spectacles and fads to make choices that can be legitimated within the expectations and constraints of their cultural environs.

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Note

1. Rosalinda is a famous Mexican telenovela.

References


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