Asian Soap Opera: Malay Women’s Habit and the Negotiation of Malaysian Modernity

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Abstract

This qualitative study is concerned with the continuing popularity of Asian soap opera among Muslim women in Malaysia. This has not been without its tensions, and the Malaysian authority has condemned these Asian soaps for compromising the Malay cultural imagination by imparting inappropriate images of foreign modernity which derived from the elements of consumer culture and urban lifestyle. Some have argued that Asian soaps might undermine the standards of Malay womanhood by ignoring their domestic duties in the private space. We want to argue, however, that Malay women are very discerning viewer and they develop critical watching competencies to negotiate the meaning of modernity in Asian soaps without necessarily ignoring their cultural values or being submissive and passive receivers of content but are instead, experts at negotiating of the seemingly conflicting values of modernity and tradition within their wider political, religious and cultural terrain.

Keywords: Asian Soap Opera, Malay Women, Watching Competencies, Malaysian Modernity, Family Values

Short Biography

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Introduction

The popularity of Asian soap opera\(^1\) has made it a significant new site for Malay women to engage with modernity through its images of consumerism, celebrity, and urban lifestyle. While these Asian soap operas were patronized by the government for countering Western influence, their immense popularity has now caused some anxiety among the local authorities for its potential corruptive effect on Malay women. The government initially promoted Asian soap operas as a channel to circulate the state’s vision of alternative modernity and counter Western influence, but it now voices anxiety that forms of transnational modernity articulated in Asian soaps also pose a threat to the cultural integrity of Malay women. The terms on which Malay women can engage with modernity has been dictated by the authorities to conserve traditional social norms. In this paper, we will examine one dimension of this larger criticism, which claims these Asian soaps are corrupting Malay women’s moral role in private space. Presenting feedback from Malay women respondents from our ethnographic fieldwork, we will argue that Malay women draw from their cultural resources of *adat*\(^2\), Islam, and the state’s discourse of Malaysian modernity to develop certain negotiation strategies that we call watching competencies.

Particularly in relation to this paper and its focus on the criticism about Malay women forgetting their role in the private space especially at home, we will argue that they exercise a watching competency called family values. In this process of negotiation, Malay women perform two broad tactics: understanding ideal motherhood and maintaining commitment to the primacy of family. Through these tactics, Malay women claim to have appropriate understanding of their domestic chores which in turn helps them negotiate the expectations upon them from society and this activity of watching Asian soaps which has often been criticised by societal authorities.

This qualitative study involved a sample of ten Malay participants\(^3\) in a series of in-depth interviews ranging over 2-3 hours each between January to April 2009. The interview was conducting in Malay and all the participants are varies from the housewife in the *kampung* (village) area of the southern Peninsular Malaysia to the professional working mother in the urban area of Kuala Lumpur. All are Muslim, married and have a number of children. All the participants are habitual viewers of
Asian soap operas. All participants were identified through purposeful sampling\textsuperscript{4} and snowballing technique\textsuperscript{5}.

**Asian soap opera and the vision of Malaysian modernity**

In Malaysia, the United Malay National Organisation\textsuperscript{6} (UMNO) is the political entity that dominates the political landscape of the nation and leads this debate of Malaysian modernity\textsuperscript{7}. UMNO have refused to copy Western modernity, but have appropriated the past in order to reinvent many traditional values particularly those of Malay adat and Islam to define Malaysian modernity. To the melange of these key ideologies guiding to the path to alternative modernity was added the Asian values discourse, which arose in the 1980s at a time when many East and Southeast Asian countries were in the heyday of their early economic success (Kessler 1999; Manan 1999). The integration of the discourse of Islam, adat and Asian values shows that Malaysian modernity seeks a unique version of modernity for a society by filtering normative models of modernity through the value systems specific to that society.

In the contemporary mediascape in Malaysia, television has emerged as a dominant technological tool bringing ideas of modernity through popular culture to people. The government have seen this technology as a potential vehicle to disseminate the idea of Malaysian modernity into the society particularly amongst the Malay. However, this has not been without its tension. Popular Western soaps in the 1990s such as 21 Jump Street and L.A. Laws were denounced for their overtly sexual content and references to homosexuality (Kartigesu 1991: 105). This fear of corruptive potential of Western television soaps even led to discussions in the media, political gatherings and parliamentary sessions. Government voices, especially UMNO, denounced Western soaps as being detrimental to the cultural integrity, development and modernisation of Malaysian citizen (Bernama 2004; 2006; Kartigesu 1991).

Paranoia about the degeneracy of Western television programs especially soap opera led the government to encourage the production of local soaps, documentaries and musical contests to offset the western influence, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, RTM produced a local Malay soap opera PJ, imitating Dallas’ format, narrative style and content (Kartigesu 1994). But these local soaps and other programs, which often had repetitive themes and poor production values, did not succeed in
drawing local audiences away from Western soaps. Television channels still continued to be dominated by Western content (Hartati 1998 cited in Wahab 2006).

In another attempt to offset Western dominance in television content, the Malaysian Ministry of Information also encouraged the screening of soap opera produced by newly emerging television producers from Asian countries. Given the inability of local producers to create viable content, Asian soaps were seen as an easy source of content that would offset the Western influence on audience.

Under the political umbrella of the ‘Look East Policy’ launched in the early 1980s, the government advised the state run Television Malaysia to import and broadcast more television programs from Japan and South Korea. The government advised broadcasters to import programs from these countries, so that Japanese and Korean attitudes and ways of life could be brought into public and private life in Malaysia. There was commonly-held perception among Malaysians that Korean and Japanese people were industrious and enterprising people in the economic sphere, yet morally conservative and traditional in their outlook. The government sought to encourage the Japanese and Korean people as a viable model for Malays on the path to modernisation. In the 1980s, Japanese soaps such as Oshin and Rin Hanne Konma were dubbed into Malay and broadcast on local television. The stories depicted in these soaps were different from the consumerist middle class American lifestyle of Dallas. For example, the period drama Oshin tells the story of a young Japanese peasant girl who grows up and experiences different challenges in her life (Hussien 2001). Hashim (1989: 25) notes that RTM and TV3 also introduced a special afternoon slot called Chinese Belt, which showed many soaps from Hong Kong and China to attract local Chinese-speaking audiences in Malaysia.

The promotion of Asian soaps had a significant effect on the viewing predilections of the audiences. Japanese soap like Rin Hane Konma was ranked ninth among the nation’s ten most popular TV programs (Kyodo News International 1988) and usurped the place of American soaps like Dallas. In the mid 1990s till 2000s, the new brand genre of Japanese soaps called trendy drama became popular among the local audience especially women. Soaps like Beautiful Life, Concerto and Power Office Girl commanded high ratings and some were even shifted to the prime time slot at night (Hussien 2001).
South Korea was another significant contributor to the wave of Asian soaps. The most popular Korean production is Winter Sonata which commanded 1.3 millions followers per episode on a daily basis. The popularity of Korean soaps in Malaysia also sparked off appetite for Korean films, pop music and fashion. This phenomenon has been identified as ‘Korean wave’ (hallyu) (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). The Korean wave in soaps has continued with popular serials like Jewel in the Palace, My Love Affair, Autumn Fairy Tale, Joyful Girl and My Love Patsi. A good storyline, beautiful scenery, universal themes and attractive actors are thought to be the recipe for the success of Korean soaps (Farinordin 2003). The popularity of South Korean popular culture is also accompanied by a celebrity culture of adulation for their actors. The Korean pop star and actor Jung Ji Hoon, also known as Rain, is arguably the biggest star in Malaysia now. In the early 2000s, television soaps from other Southeast Asian countries began to appear on television channels in Malaysia. Romance soaps from the Philippines Pangako Sa’yo (My promise to you) and Sana’y Wala Nang Wakas (I wish it would never end) were not only being watched by large numbers, but were becoming a topic of everyday conversations among people (John, Damis and Chelvi 2003). The absorption of Filipino soaps into the daily lives of people was complemented by the tabloid press, which would circulate stories about the private lives of the lead actor and actress of Pangako Sa’yo, Jericho Rosales and Kristine Hermosa (Tiong 2006). The Thai soaps Phoenix Blood, Maid from Chicago, Heaven meets Earth and Soda & Ice also became popular with audiences, reaching the peak of their popularity in the early to mid 2000s. These soaps also capitalised on the exotic scenery of foreign settings like New Zealand (Yin 2003).

Although Korean soaps can be said to have been the most popular programs among audiences in the early 2000s, soaps from Indonesia currently claim the highest place in the popularity ratings. From 2006 Indonesian soap operas, locally known as Sinetron, were broadcast on most local television channels and almost wiped out any remnants of local Malaysian soaps which had survived the earlier onslaught of foreign non-Western soaps. The TV3 afternoon slot, which screened the Indonesian soap Bawang Merah Bawang Putih (Shallots and Garlic) from early 2006, attracted an astronomical viewership of about four million viewers per episode (Saharani 2007). The fantastical elements and riveting storyline based on supernatural themes attracted
the audiences in droves. This figure is believed to be the highest rating for any soap opera in Malaysia. Many reasons are given for the popularity of Indonesian soaps — from cultural proximity to good production values. But it has also been noted that it is the supernatural storyline of the soap based on local, indigenous folklore shared by people in Malaysia and Indonesia which has attracted local audiences in Malaysia. This is a subject that was never touched in the storyline of soaps from other regions and even banned on Malaysian television for many years (Bernama 2007a; Hamzah 2006; Saharani 2007).

This trend of ‘supernatural’ soaps from Indonesia continued with Bukan Cinderella (Not Cinderella) and Lontin, broadcast by Media Prima through its associate television station TV3. Apart from these supernatural soaps, Indonesian soaps of romance and family life like Ratapan Anak Tiri (Grief of the step children), Malim Kundang, Romantika Shanghai (Shanghai Romance) and Kenapa ada Cinta? (Why is love?) were broadcast on RTM. Kawin Muda (Early Marriage) was aired on a daily basis from Monday to Friday (Utusan Malaysia 2008). In fact, the popularity of Indonesian soaps has reached such an astronomical height that ASTRO, a local satellite television station, introduced a 24 hour Sinetron channel called Aruna which currently screens an array of Indonesian soap operas such as Maha Pengasih (The Most Blessed), Mewarnai Langit (Painting the Sky), Akibat Banyak Gaul (Too many relationships), Perempuan (Women), Samson Betawi, Roman Picisan (Lousy Romance), Suami-Suami Takut Istri (Husbands Afraid of Wives) and Titipan Ilahi (Gift from God) (Utusan Malaysia 2008).

**Malay women habit and the contestation over meaning of modernity in Asian soaps**

The Asian genre is promoted by the state as possessing cultural norms of family values, social etiquette and respect for the elderly, which it sees as lacking in Western soaps. Asian soaps are promoted as good, clean entertainment over Western soaps which the authorities perceive as promoting immoral habits and hedonistic lifestyles (Bernama 2007b). Although some Asian soaps like trendy dramas from Japan focus on youth fashion and lifestyle and Latin American soaps depict somewhat provocative sexual issues, they always end with family members reuniting and all discords in relationships being smoothed out. The popularity of Asian soaps from Japan, Korea,
Indonesia, and Philippines illustrates changes in the mediascape, the flow and consumption of cultural texts in Malaysia. The popularity of Asian soaps in Malaysia is perhaps unrivalled by any other form of mass-mediated popular culture.

The success of Asian soaps in garnering audiences in Malaysia has also made its impact on the cultural landscape of the nation too. Reports in the local press publish articles related to this near universal passion for Asian soaps which has absorbed into the lives of audiences in Malaysia. As a journalist for The New Sunday Times put it, ‘the unconscious humming of the theme from Winter Sonata as we cook and clean…’ (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003). The diligence and devotion with which audiences watch these soaps is quite staggering. As the reporter notes, ‘Many give the “are you crazy?” look at the suggestion of making a phone call during soap.’ Further the daily routine of family life is altered and constructed to facilitate time for these soaps. Not only are other social activities like gatherings interrupted, ‘many hosts are in disbelief when guests magically vanish from the party just before a soap is due to start’ (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003).

While Asian soaps may have been encouraged on these grounds of cultural similarity and non-western modernity, the authorities argue that the portrayal of family conflicts, violence, consumer culture, urban lifestyle, dysfunctional relationship might also instil inappropriate social trends. In a global world, which is enforced by the complexities of cultural flows from various locations, there are other sites that obviously help to form and construct identity. Arjun Appadurai in his seminal work Modernity at Large argues that the electronic media source is the prime vehicle to govern, shape and modify the popular imagination in contemporary life. As he states, ‘the electronic media decisively change the wider field of mass media and other traditional media. Such media transforms the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds’ (Appadurai 1996: 3). In this sense, Asian soap opera as a new site to engage with transnational modernity will help Malay women to expand their imagination away from the various levels of local culture, identity, and values to the global world. As it has been argued by Morley and Robins ‘places are no longer the clear supports of our identity’ (Morley and Robins 1995: 87). In other words, while being located in a specific cultural and physical locale, someone on the ground can
engage with images from a distance, as television is able to construct a new way of imagining space and place. A local press columnist argues:

The Ministry of Information must examine thoroughly this scenario and they must take immediate action. Our people should not be intoxicated with various problem and conflict of neighbouring countries even though we are culturally proximate. There are many differences between us and them in terms of culture and way of life’ (Hashim 2007).

Appadurai has located such a resistance towards outside influence in the development of ‘alternative fear to Americanization’ where ‘it is worth noticing that [to the] people of Irian Jaya, Indonesianization maybe more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans.’ He further elaborates, ‘for polities of smaller scale, there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale, especially those that are nearby’ (Appadurai 1996: 32). Authorities in Malaysia express such a fear about the cultural subservience of local audiences to the influence of content from foreign locations. While promoted as repositories of similar values there is also the fear of being overtaken by content produced from other non-Western locations (Bernama 2007b). Apart from these misgivings about the detrimental impact of the soaps in corrupting the traditional female duty to conform to these various cultural expectations, there are also concerns that non-Western soaps present an opportunity for excessive engagement with representations of transnational modernity, which may lure Malay women beyond the ambit of the national culture. In unison with the UMNO women’s wing’s condemnation of these soaps, the UMNO youth, representing male voices not only spoke about Malay women compromising their religious faith, cultural values and domestic duties but even deforming the national project of modernity for an enlightened middle class (Kosmo 2006). This is a larger concern about the dilution of national identity and the state losing its paternalistic hold over its female subjects.
Watching competencies and the negotiation of Malaysian modernity

This era of engaging with modernity through the pervasive culture of soap operas has unlocked the private space of Malay homes in remote villages and the urban locales alike. But contrary to the state’s perception about women’s vulnerability to foreign influences, our fieldwork has enabled us to form a more grounded and complex view of Malay women’s viewing attitude. We argue that the scenario cannot be summed up as a question of Malay women being manipulated as passive vulnerable subjects and completely ignore their domestic chores in the private space. We also want to argue that Malay women are not passive consumers who are just seduced by the lure of foreign modernity and who will simply emulate the images they see on television. As Barker (2000: 269) has claimed audiences are knowledgeable, dynamic and ‘active producers of meaning’ within their socio-cultural boundaries. Watching competencies can be conceptualised as a form of tactical negotiation through which Malay women interpret the soaps in a manner that helps them to negotiate potential conflicts. ‘Watching competencies’ involve an active mobilization of those resources through which Malay women watch these soaps and measure their adherence to tradition.

We suggest that, given the pervasive hold of cultural ideologies of adat, Islam and Asian values discourse of the local authorities that help to construct Malaysian modernity, Malay women negotiate depictions of modernity through such worldviews. But they invoke their own interpretation of the ideologies like Islam and adat imposed by the state’s directives, to reconstitute their own version of cultural resources. Tony Wilson has pointed out that Malay audiences exercise creative judgment in the process of reinterpretation of foreign programs. He argues 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). With watching competencies, we will show how Malay women may express interest in images of a transnational, consumerist modernity but re-interpret them to suit their worldview that places primacy on the Malay cultural order especially toward any issues which involved their task in the private space.

In a decidedly patriarchal social order, men in Muslim Malay society exercise power in all aspects of life as breadwinners, leaders and decision-makers. Malay women like the politician Shahrizat Jalil\(^1\), Wan Azizah\(^2\) and women’s right leaders Marina
Mahathir\textsuperscript{13} and Zainah Anwar\textsuperscript{14} have made their mark by assuming important positions in the nation. But notwithstanding these recent changes in the political landscape or public life, Malaysia has a male-dominated social order. As nurturers of families, Malay women have an array of duties such as child-rearing and housekeeping in the private sphere of the home. In Malaysia, the institution of family has been repeatedly invoked by the government as a key device in maintaining a harmonious society and producing a stable workforce in the overall strategy of nation building. But the challenges of modernization, globalization and economic development have often raised the dilemma of a decline in the institution of family in Malay society. As part of this larger concern about maintaining the institution of family in the face of challenges posed by modernisation, local authorities have often asked television stations in Malaysia to broadcast programs such as Asian soaps which represent family experience and uphold the primacy of family values (New Strait Times 2004). Within such a cultural landscape, Asian soaps have become the favoured television genre amongst Malay women audiences.

With constant scrutiny of its female subjects and their role within the larger strategy of modernisation, authorities monitor the content on television which audiences watch. Asian soaps are promoted to not only to counter Western influence but their family-oriented dramas are also seen as aiding this strategy of promoting family values from culturally proximate locations to Malay audiences (Bidin 2003). It seems paradoxical that Asian soaps are promoted by the government on one hand, but are also furiously debated in public discussions, on the other hand. Ambivalence about soaps of all kinds and contradictions in official positions seem to be the hallmarks of the debates around women’s consumption of soaps. Following our broader argument of the relationship as a scene of negotiation, we will show that women exercise a watching competency of family values, where they cite knowledge of their role at home, to negotiate their responsibilities in their domestic lives and their passion for the genre.

\textbf{Representing ideal motherhood}

The kampung and urban Malay women in our research are almost unanimous in their rejection of the criticism of the authorities that Asian soaps distract them from their role as responsible mothers. By way of opposition, they argue that Asian soaps project
images of ideal motherhood that inspire them to become good mothers in their actual lives. As some scholars have noted, the gendered text of soap operas is not merely oriented towards women, it is also laden with the ideological narrative of the ideal mother. Motherhood in soap operas is seen as ‘…a quality which gives women status and unites them, whatever faults they may have or whatever they may do’ (Hobson 2003: 92-93). Hobson notes, the character of mother is important in this television genre, presented in ‘the most poignant representations’ where the mother loves her children ‘…whatever their fault’ (Hobson 2003:94).

In the discussion, our kampung respondent, Bahiyah drew from certain Islamic Indonesian soaps to emphasise that watching these soaps inspired her to be ideal mother.

I love watching Indonesian religious soaps. Being a mother is not easy. You must be able to teach your children to behave properly and read the holy Koran in the right way. Besides, you have to understand them very well in terms what they need and what they really want to do. If you teach them holy Koran for example, you must be calmed and don’t ever shout to them (Bahiyah, 49, Homemaker, Kampung).

Bahiyah suggests that these Indonesian soaps even aid her appreciation of the larger role of a mother which is not merely a matter of rearing her children but also contributing to their education. This response reflects a mode of negotiation, where Bahiyah interprets the soaps to reflect her adherence to cultural resources of Islamic values and responsibility. She reinforces her awareness of the importance of her duties as a mother living in the kampung by drawing from the role of a mother as a nurturing figure who will go to any lengths of hardship for the welfare of her children.

With their family-centred drama, the typical storyline of Asian soaps revolve around family feuds, breakdown in relationships, and also rifts between children and parents. But another kampung respondent, Rogayah insists that these elements, in fact, provided her opportunities to imagine the challenges of modern society that strengthened the need for being a good mother.
I saw some ill-mannered children on an Indonesian soap causing a lot of problems. It is my responsibility as a parent to teach my children the value of respecting their elders. Soaps from Korea and Indonesia show that everyone in the world must abide by the same code of good behavior, no matter how successful or modern you are (Rogayah, 46, Homemaker, Kampung)

Contrary to the anxiety of the local authorities that the portrayal of family conflicts on the soaps will encourage Malay women to ignore their domestic duties, Rogayah reflects an act of oppositional reading. She interprets those elements not as aspirational images of a modern family life but as a cautionary tales about her role as a mother. These soaps with their story of trials of family life, with mother characters who go to the greatest length to preserve their families, inspire her to become an ideal mother against the challenges of modern life, even though they may be far from her own life as a kampung woman.

In the urban area, families are seen as being more susceptible to potential conflicts from dysfunctional relationships or misbehaving children. Discussions in the local press often allege that the busy lifestyles of families living in the city have caused parents to lose control over their children who consequently get involved in undesirable activities (New Straits Times 2002, 2004). But a number of urban women in our research claimed that in this scenario, Asian soaps have served as a means through which they learn about potential ills of urban lifestyle so that they can better monitor their children. According to one respondent in the urban area of Kuala Lumpur, Zurinah, Asian soaps has provided her a new space to learn about social issues and problem in the neighbourhood. She rejects any claim that Asian soaps might corrode family values and encourage family conflict. While she has a busy life as a mother for two children and mange her postgraduate studies, she does not see any logic behind this argument because Korean and Indonesian soaps has always been giving her Idea to maintain and strengthen family happiness and relationship.

It is extremely important for a Malay mother to be aware of these problems, especially when you live in a city like Kuala Lumpur. The soaps serve as a source of information to learn about contemporary issues like bullying, drug use, alcohol consumption, unwanted
pregnancies etc. Otherwise, as a mother I would have no idea of such issues and my children would run amok (Zurinah, 47, Government officer, Urban).

This perceived fear about increased freedom among urban children translating into deviant behaviour is perhaps misplaced. But in relation to Asian soaps and Malay women, Zurinah claims that these soaps reinforce the notion that child-rearing in the urban area is very complicated and that a modern mother should be equipped with the knowledge of such issues, in order to face any challenge.

On the other hand, in the kampung setting, Fatimah said that the characters of strong women on Winter Sonata and Intan helped her to be strong and confident to face challenges in her personal life and above all to fulfil her role as a mother:

Being a widow is not easy. I always advise my friends not to think too much about their late husband. What they need to do now is move on with their life and pay attention to their children, which is the most important thing in life. So, I suggest them to watch Sinetron or Korean soaps on television. Perhaps they can learn something from there (Fatimah, 50, Homemaker, Kampung).

Fatimah not only cites some female characters as encouraging her to face challenges in her own life, but also as a source to motivate her friends in the neighbourhood. Drawing from these confident female characters that can live independently Fatimah emphasises the need to pay attention to their children and that family life must continue under their guidance as good mothers even if they are the sole guardians of the household.

Another urban participant Maria articulated the need to maintain the most appropriate balance of care in the relationship of parents monitoring their children, which can be quite fraught at times. Interestingly, she again cited how watching a soap opera alerted her to this challenge.

Children will get spoilt if we don’t pay them enough attention. However, too much attention is not good too, as they will lose their respect for us. Just look at the character of Bawang Merah on the
Indonesian soap *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. Her mother just gives what she wants. This is against our adat (Maria, 36, Manager, Urban).

She cites the failure of the mother in an Indonesian soap, as a lesson that childrearing is all about creating balance in the relationship between parent and children. These challenges prompt her to pay attention to her duties as a mother and alert her about the dangers that may follow if a parent does not regulate her own behaviour towards her children. Citing another possible contention that could arise in parent-child relationship, Maria suggested that urban Malay parents should be cautious not to force their children into marriages. In Malay culture, parents traditionally organise arranged marriages for their children.

I know our Malay adat tends to persuade us to find someone for our daughter. I do not think that this is right. I am not saying that we must forget our Malay adat about parental decision in marriages, but we have to understand that nowadays the lives of our children are very complex. You need to think about job, money, house, etc. I guess, if our children rely too much on us, for everything from finding a marriage partner to making decision in their life, they will never become independent (Maria, 36, Manager, Urban).

She argues that parents need to guide their children’s matches but not exercise autocratic control over their choices. This would curb their capacity to be independent adults, which is extremely important in modern life. While this response may indicate that Maria is rejecting strict norms of adat, her argument essentially reinforces her concern as a mother in fostering familial harmony. She does not see individual choice in marriage as a free pursuit of romantic love. But seeing the potential conflicts that arise from unsuitable marriages on the soaps, she argues that it is her duty as a mother to negotiate her children’s wishes with parental consent so that all potential conflicts are avoided. She also sees such freedom of choice for the children as fostering a sense of independence that she as a mother must encourage in her children.
Maintaining commitment to primacy of family

Soap operas are often criticised for their melodramatic family conflicts of feuds, divorces, sibling rivalry and extra-marital affairs. Certainly these are precisely the elements that worry the local authorities in Malaysia, who allege that soaps have a corruptive effect on local audiences. However, in our fieldwork, Malay women in the kampung and urban setting seem to present an oppositional reading of such elements. They read such conflicts as potential disasters that must be avoided at all cost in their own lives to reinforce the primacy of family unity. Emphasising the primacy of family unity over the lure of wealth and social mobility, Fatimah claimed:

I know many of us nowadays, especially the younger lot, treat wealth as being more important than love. But wealth will only make people suspicious and greedy, thereby causing conflict in the family. Look at what happened to the family in Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, some people are willing to murder others just for money (Fatimah, 50, Homemaker, Kampung).

The potential conflicts serve to strengthen the concept of family values in face of the challenges of modern life. She also criticises the tendency of younger generation to be more materialistic. Apart from interpreting the familial conflicts on the soaps as potential disasters that must be avoided, they also find the triumph of family unity in the storyline of most soap operas from Asia highly gratifying. Juriah noted that in the midst of the drama of middle class family life on the Indonesian soap, the story finally depicts the triumph of family unity at the end. According to her, ‘family is very important. In fact, if you watch the Indonesian soap Bawang Merah Bawang Putih you can see how family becomes the centre of the story. I find it very heartening’ (Juriah, 35, Homemaker, Kampung).

Further she cited some Japanese soaps and how they re-emphasise values of togetherness and unity too. As a kampung woman who strongly attached with family values, Juriah treats Asian soaps as another domestic routine that she has to fulfill everyday. Although she is not well educated, Juriah sees non-Western soaps as the easiest way to get inspired for maintaining commitment to primacy of her family. She says: They (Japanese) love to do everything together as a family. In fact, they even
take a shower together. I don’t think we are allowed to do it. We still have our limits even though within family members (smiling)’ (Juriah, 35, Homemaker, Kampung). Asian soaps contain depictions of modern middle class family in familiar and foreign cultural settings. But Juriah uses this opportunity to see the lesson of family unity within the story regardless of the cultural or religious background.

In fact, an urban participant Qaisara, made a subtle note about how these non Western soaps show the need for family unity that is somewhat lacking in the Malay cultural order. As a boutique entrepreneur and busy with business routine, Qaisara has to spend most of her life in her boutique everyday. Although her children had grown up and living separately, she always being touched with the family scene in the non-Western soaps.

One thing I like about Korean culture is that Korean people are still close with their families. Even if the children are grown up, married and able to make decisions independently, they still seek their family for consultation. This does not happen so much in Malaysia anymore. Young Malays do not live under one roof with their parents anymore (Qaisara, 48, Boutique Manager, Urban).

Contrary to the fear of decline of Malay family values, she even claims that she learnt more about family unity by watching a Korean soap, which she finds as somewhat lacking in Malaysia.

Qaisara made an interesting point talking about familial bonding lacking in Malay society, when compared with depictions of family life in a Korean soap.

There is another Korean soap called What happened in Bali. It highlights the importance of the role of father. After some mishaps in Bali, the heroine was so afraid that her father would figure out what happened. Well, the role of father is really important because he is responsible for keeping the pride of the family. I do not think that Malay fathers are that close to their children (Qaisara, 48, Boutique Manager, Urban).
What is interesting to note here is that she talks about the role of the father in nurturing a sense of family unity on a Korean soap. While Malay women are consistently blamed for degeneration of family values, she subtly notes the need for fathers to be more proactive in family life in Malaysia. This can also be seen as an expression of subtle criticism of the behaviour of Malay men as fathers and the paternalistic attitude of authorities that only criticise women about their familial responsibilities. The local authorities often accuse Malay women followers of these soap operas of dereliction of familial duties. We have shown that women exercise cultural proficiency to show their awareness of their domestic duties through strategic interpretations of these soaps. They derive pleasure and inspiration from the soaps the dominant ideological narrative of ideal motherhood embedded in most Asian soaps. They interpret the depictions of conflicts of middle class family life on Asian soaps in strategic ways to reinforce the significance of familial unity at all costs. Taking up such attitudes, Malay women negotiate the expectations in the domestic sphere and their activity of watching these Asian soaps.

Conclusion

By locating this conflict over definitions of modernity in Asian soap operas, our study identifies the arena of popular culture as a potent site for the construction of meanings of modernity in Malaysia. With regard to the criticism of local authorities that Asian soaps harbor detrimental values in the areas of female responsibility — familial duty in the private space of the home, we have chosen to foreground a watching competency by the name of family values. We have shown that with this tactic of family values, Malay women cite their awareness of their responsibilities in the private sphere and interpret the soaps in a manner that complement those responsibilities. We have shown how the tactic of family values is exercised with regards to the responsibilities of upholding ideal motherhood and maintaining commitment to primacy of family in the private sphere.
Endnotes


2 Adat refers to traditional Malay customs that guide social behavior and life matters in everyday life.

3 This study focuses on Malay women rather than women from other ethnic groups because they are the main audience of these programs and Malaysian modernity is largely defined by the mandate of Malay culture and Islam. While all the criticism toward the popularity of Asian soaps consumption has been championed by UMNO, it is fair to say here the comments about the danger of this television genre can be linked only to Malay women.

4 According to Maxwell (2005: 88), with purposeful sampling we can create a research design ‘selecting those times, settings and individuals that can provide you with the information that you need to answer you research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative selective decisions’

5 A common qualitative strategy to search potential participants. As recommended by Steven Taylor and Robert Bogdan, ‘snowballing – getting to know some informants and having them introduce you to others’ (Taylor and Bogdan 1998: 93).

6 UMNO or United Malay National Organization was founded in 1946. It has been in government in Malaysia through national coalition party, the Barisan Nasional or National Front, since independence. See Crouch (1996).


8 The sense of foreignness of location, clothes and urban icons in these soaps have constructed consumerist desire among audiences. Please see Chua 2004; 2008.

9 While the popularity of non-Western soaps in Malaysia will create an interest toward in the analysis of ratings in order to illustrate audience share for different genres of programs on television, to identify, in particular, how these shows are regularly viewed by the Malay audiences especially women in specific age range, I have to argue here that the constitution of popularity, as claimed by many popular culture theorists, is not straightforward. In fact, what constitutes ‘popular’ should be understood in terms of cultural features of the environment as well as methodological setting. Please see Md Azalanshah Md Syed 2011.

10 Trend-based youth-oriented drama. It has been called trendy drama because of various depictions of urban lifestyles and popular culture consumption. See Iwabuchi (2002).

11 She is the Malaysian Minister of Women and Society Development.

12 She is the President of People’s Justice party, one of the strong political opponents in Malaysia.

13 She is the daughter of the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Marina Mahathir is well known as a leader and activist for the local feminist movement and NGOs.

14 She is a feminist and NGOs activist and prominent leader of the Malaysian Muslim feminist association, Sisters in Islam (SIS).
References


