Popular Culture in Asia
Memory, City, Celebrity

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Imagining Modernity in Contemporary Malaysia: Non-Western Soap Opera and the Negative Urban Morality

Azizah Hamzah and Md Azalanshah Md Syed

This chapter is concerned with how urban Malay women negotiate and imagine modernity mediated through imported television dramas. In the earliest phase of television broadcasting in Malaysia (during the 1960s and 70s), Western soap operas were reported as being the most popular programs among local audiences. This trend continued after the privatization of the television industry in the early 1980s. Many Western soap operas, particularly those from the United States, such as Dallas, Dynasty, Baywatch, and Beverly Hills 90210, were the most popular programs. However, the images of modernity in these American soap operas, with their emphases on consumerism, materialistic lifestyles, and sexuality, were criticized by local authorities as a threat to Malay cultural life. Therefore, from the early 1980s onwards, authorities sought to counter the perceived negative influences of American popular culture by promoting images of modernity from culturally proximate, non-Anglo-American locales. Nowadays, soap opera remains a popular television genre that Malay women utilize to engage modernity discourse.

Soap opera features various depictions of what is considered to be "negative urban morality," such as family feuds, divorce, unwanted pregnancies, and jealousy. Local authorities have contended that this could compromise urban Malay women's cultural resources, particularly pertaining to local customs, or adat, and Islam. Against this perception, however, our findings show that some urban Malay women negotiate
their cultural resources, particularly adat and Islam, to establish specific viewing competencies with which to engage soap-opera depiction of negative urban morality.

As a preferred television genre for articulating modernity discourse, soap opera is distinctive in structure and format. Soap operas are long-running serials comprised of elements of melodrama and realism, with narratives that tend to focus on domestic issues. Apart from recurring characters, the most important element in soap opera is the cliff-hanger, which provides suspense from one episode to the next.

Its narratives tend to be unresolved, although there are cultural differences in this respect. While most soap operas produced in the Western world typically feature open-ended storytelling, those from non-Anglo-American cultures are characterized by more closed-ended narrative.

Soap operas around the world share similarities in format, narrative, characters, and more importantly, the sense of the ordinary, although they may be conceived in various ways. In Asia most of the popular television serials produced in Japan, South Korea, and some Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries evoke a comparable grammar, including seriality, romantic themes, cliff-hanger suspense, attractive actors, and emotional background songs.

Soap opera as a modern genre

Soap opera’s dramatization of the “familiar” serves as a platform for engaging modernity discourse in many areas of the world. As Anthony Giddens observes, “Modern organisations are able to connect the local and the global in ways which would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies and in so doing routinely affect the lives of many millions of people.” The depictions of ordinariness in soap operas to some extent generate the context of the modern. This includes issues such as personal relationships, family breakdown, moral disruption, and depression. However, it is upon the family that the dialogue with modernity in soap opera often centers, especially the dysfunctional family. As ten Ang suggests, the concept of family is “constantly shattered” rather than romanticized.

While problems such as family breakdown, unwanted pregnancy, and dealing with homosexuality are not new in many areas of the world, the articulation of these issues in televisial form involves a sense of contemporariness. According to Dorothy Hobson, soap operas run “contemporaneously with the experience of the audience.” In fact, soap
operas are also formulated in terms of the immediate past and the near future in order to appropriate the viewer's experience of the real world.\textsuperscript{10} Hence, characters take part in seasonal events, such as Christmas and summer holidays, with the effect of enhancing audience identification. The sense of modernity emerges through the apparent ordinariness of the storylines.

Even allowing for differences in production, narrative, images, and reception, soap opera is often able to stimulate a pleasurable sense of recognition in audiences around the world.\textsuperscript{11} As Ang indicates, the viewing of the US soap opera \textit{Dallas} in more than 90 countries was a landmark in the history of world television.\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, the British soap opera \textit{Coronation Street} was exported to Australia and New Zealand and became a major hit in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{13}

Like Western soap opera, soap operas from other regions provide various depictions of domestic issues, such as family feuds, jealousy, and sexual issues. As Chua Beng Huat observes, audiences in Asia easily identify with domestic themes in Asian soap-opera narrative, such as conflict in relationships, the nature of family responsibility, and personal freedom.\textsuperscript{14}

Versions of soap operas such as telenovelas and trendy dramas also have an escapist appeal.\textsuperscript{15} Kōichi Iwabuchi, in his studies of Japanese soap opera consumption in Taiwan, notes that the popularity of \textit{Tokyo Love Story} (東京ラブストーリー) was mostly associated with what were perceived to be desirable "modern women" characteristics, including independence, courage, and open-mindedness.\textsuperscript{16} These characteristics provide escapism and facilitate thoughts of constructing a free space. The strong female character seen in Japanese soap operas is difficult or perhaps impossible to achieve in actuality. Soap opera is thus a potential vehicle of modern subjectivity as its audiences engage a desirable imaginary. The image of the almost impossibly strong woman provides audiences with the aspirational desire to subvert the patriarchy in various ways.

**Malaysian modernity**

As Joel S. Kahn has demonstrated, Malaysian modernity is not derived from Western modernity without interrogation and negotiation to make it more appropriate in the context of national and cultural aspirations.\textsuperscript{17} Norani Othman claims that "Malaysia is not exempt from the Islamizing agenda of various forces which invariably are perceived and represented as part of the political phenomenon of the