

## **POPULAR TV FICTION, MEDIASCAPE, AND MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITIES**

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### **Abstract**

In Malaysia, a number of issues have transpired concerning the proliferation of TV fiction. Many of these complications include, but are not limited to concerns regarding feminism, patriarchy, economic imbalance, equity, power, social inequity, and religion. In this paper, we aim to locate TV fiction and Malay cultural identities across mediascape. Two primary objectives are central; firstly, this review embodies contextualization of TV fiction through examining some trajectories in which many popular TV fiction have been established. Secondly, this paper places Malay cultural identities in relation to the development and progress of mediascape. By examining these two central questions, we explore some of the many possibilities in which Malay cultural identities are explored, preserved, contested, and blurred in times of changing and challenging realities of Malaysian mediascape.

**Keywords:** Popular culture, postcolonial literature, Malayness, media, TV fiction

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The flourishing industry of popular TV fiction relies heavily on the roles of media (Mosco, 2009). Mediascape in Malaysia has evolved throughout the years. Following these changes, this paper, then, serves to consolidate and places this study within the context of TV fiction and Malay cultural identities. It begins by exploring the periods within which media and TV fiction intersect. After that, it places Malay cultural identities in view of this development. By examining these two lines of inquiries, exploration of some of the many possibilities in which Malay cultural identities are explored, preserved, and contested can be illustrated.

### **2 SOME EARLIEST READINGS ON MEDIASCAPE**

Censoring, promoting, and legalizing are some of the many roles mediascape plays in enabling the proliferation of Malaysia's TV fiction. British's enactment of Printing Presses Act and Sedition Ordinance

(PPASO) was initially founded as a basis to evict persons or organization whose acts, words, speech, and publications have seditious tendency (Lent, 1975, p. 664). Lent (1975) argues that during this time, "mass media" in Malaysia "had been patterned along linguistic and political party lines; their loyalties, for the most part, were to the motherlands of ethnic communities, not to the Malays" (p.66). Increased official control and restrictions on diversity of mass media follow through as a result of this law governing Malaysia's mediascape. Contingent to the development of mass media, the purpose of such acts is found to facilitate and control four important historical points in Malaysia (Faridah & Mohd Safar, 2005; Lent, 1975). Communist threats (1948), confrontation of the then Federation of Malaysia and Indonesia (1963), the separation of Singapore from Malaysia (1965), and racial conflicts (1969) are four important historical periods. It is these tumultuous realities that have chaotic effects on Malaysia and Malaysia's mediascape, somewhat forcing the involvement of government in monitoring means to provide media content. The acts of creating, distributing, and producing media content, including the adherence to such laws are subsequently legislated before establishing any media-related content.

Following PPASO, the framework of *Rukunegara* serves as a background to Malaysia's mediascape. The national ideology, or *Rukunegara* as it is often called, is deeply rooted in the idea of fostering the nation as democratic, liberal, and progressive (Malaysia Merdeka, 2013). *Rukunegara* has five important pillars that focus on religious, political, constitutional, legal, and cultural frameworks. Further actions on censoring, promoting, and legalizing media should be read together with *Rukunegara* to prevent seditious, malicious, and vile conducts across mass media spaces.

In line with the involvement of government, mediascape in Malaysia begins its way through formalizing Radio, Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) as one of the official governing bodies. Prescriptions as to creating, structuring, and maintaining content are all bound by RTM as one of the official forces. As Lowe and Kamin (1982) put it, many "decisions on local media content come from sources outside of the professional structure of the department" and "they emanate from the delicate political position of the country" along with "different emphasis on questions of religion, language, and culture" (p.31). The digressive narrative of the lack of agency in the process of planning, monitoring, improving, and distributing media content demonstrate the supreme position of government officials. As a result of differing "emphasis on questions of religion, language, and culture" (Lowe and Kamin, 1982, p.31), allocation of "30 percent participation of" (Foo, 2004, p. 29) Malays in mass media is to be observed. These relevant laws, ideological framework, and official regulating body, therefore, are useful to uncover endless possibilities regarding how Malay cultural identities are delineated in contemporary Malaysia's mediascape, as the following discussion will reveal. The next section expands on this.

### 3 MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITIES: SOME READINGS

The nature, shape, contours, and readings on Malay cultural identities are undeniably complex, and a comprehensive review of Malay cultural subjectivities is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, we can sketch some readings that may contribute to our brief understanding of Malayness. Some earliest and current attempts at defining, elaborating, and resisting Malay cultural identities could point to varying levels of literature. Although far from being definitive, they are relevant in describing Malay cultural identities that include, but are not limited to- *Bangsa Melayu*, *Bangsa Malaysia*, *Islam Hadhari*, *Melayu Baru*, *1Malaysia* and *Civic Melayu* (Maznah, 2011; Shamsul, 2004; Mohd Muzhafar, Ruzy, & Raihanah, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b). The nation-state then formulates Malay subjects as defined by constitution as those speaking the Malay language, whose religion is Islam and adherence is to the Malay *adat*. Two areas emerge out of this reading- differentiation and assimilation (Mohd Muzhafar, 2015). It is argued that while Malayness is defined through *Islam Hadhari* and constitution, it also brings differentiation, a reading that suggests a level which guarantees Malay cultural agency. It is also argued that Malayness is nuanced in such a way that it is created to preserve the notion of differentiation with the evidence of the National Economic Policy (NEP). On the one hand, the NEP is set up to uplift Malay subjects who are at socio-economically disadvantaged positions, helping them to expand their cultural and social realms. On the other hand, the NEP is read as creating a notion of differentiation among Malays, as it creates two spectrums- the Malay elites and the less ideal Malays.

Although *Islam Hadhari* and Constitution suggest readings of differentiation, other chants valorize assimilation. *Bangsa Melayu*, *Bangsa Malaysia*, *Melayu Baru*, *Civic Melayu*, and *1Malaysia* point to the multilayered identities irrespective of ethnicities. *1Malaysia* is unique in such a way that it emphasizes localization, paving ways for glocalization, suggesting plethora of ways Malay subjects can move successfully between his or her personal constructs of Malayness and the larger (Malay) community.

The socio-cultural worldviews of Malay subjects, as demonstrated elsewhere in the growing body of literature has illustrated that Malay *adat*, whose beliefs and values are intermingled with Hinduism and Islam (see for instance Andaya, 2002; Milner, 2008), has its specific values, that include but are not limited to politeness, veiling, gender relations, subservience, followership, forgiveness, repentance, and *derhaka* (Milner, 2008, Mohd Muzhafar, 2015; Mohd Muzhafar, Ruzy, Raihanah, 2015a, 2015b). *Derhaka* (treason) is a relationship of hierarchy of sorts- between god and subjects, kings and their subjects, and parents and children. Resistance to *derhaka* has some serious repercussions. However, arguments against earlier readings on Malay subjectivities have surfaced; being Muslims for some Malays may suggest the need to separate religion from Malay subjects (Dahlia, 2014; Maznah, 2011). Putting it differently, such shifts maintain that the questions of state and religion be treated separately, opposing the singly, unitary cocoon of Malay cultural identity, articulating possible convergence of influences and cultures, including the formation of *Civic Melayu*. Through these issues, readings supporting or antithetical to Malay subjectivities are exposed, useful for the present study on Malaysia's mediascape, as the following discussion will show.

#### **4 STRATEGIZING MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITIES: LOCATING POPULAR TV FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA'S MEDIASCAPE**

Now that the trajectory regarding some of the earliest readings on mediascape is established, current reading on mediascape points to varying layers of forces (Siti Zanariah, 2011). Film censorship board (FCB), governmental agencies, television station, mass media laws, and prime minister of Malaysia are fundamental as far as validation is concerned. For instance, The King of Malaysia, through deputy chairman elected from various ministries of Malaysia, verifies the content. FCB then receives such verification and validates by examining it together with whole gamut of laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), Printing Presses, and Publication Act to prevent the issuance of violent, horror, and sex content, including issues that may desensitize Malayness. Further approval and advising on scripts and sanitizing sensitive issues may be entrenched in the roles of governmental agencies and political comrades (Foo, 2004).

Having described the above trajectory, it is somewhat clear that as forces at-work vis-à-vis the government enforces and exercises media regulations via *Rukunegara* and other politically-motivated reasons, these gatekeepers extend these directives. Criticisms against TV fiction, particularly those concerning Malay cultural issues, are generally articulated by Malay political leaders. At one of the discussions, criticisms against *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*, a famous TV fiction, are raised at one of the General Assembly. It claims that popular TV fiction has neglected Malay women from domestic, every day duties (Mohd Muzhafar Idrus, 2015). Being one of the many examples, such criticisms against the flourishing industries of popular TV fiction go on to demonstrate that contextualization in which TV fiction is broadcast has to emphasize Malay cultural subjectivities. This and through above-mentioned examples, we are exposed to some of the many ways enforcement and regulations are adjusted to regulate peacefulness and harmonious conduct of mass media in practice.

As Malaysia's mediascape is bound by these agenda, many TV stations have opened following privatization policies in 1983. As a response, viewers begin to have more alternatives as new licenses are provided. Besides RTM, TV3 has been established since 1984. Subsequently, ASTRO opens in 1996, followed by NTV7 in 1998. However, not all TV stations remain open. Mega TV, for instance, opens in 1995 but shuts down later in 2001, including MiTV which is also closed. Meanwhile, although priorities have changed following the TV station openings, TV stations are still bound by the current laws. The current laws and regulation which are instituted by the then Ministry of Broadcasting, later changed to Ministry of Arts, Culture, and Humanities apply to the production of TV shows. With such laws, the proliferation of TV works is considered as effecting racial peaceful and harmonious features of Malaysia's recognition of cultural diversity (Yang 2005). To understand proliferation of popular TV fiction is to understand two of giant media conglomerates, TV3 and ASTRO.

Fleet Group, a helping hand of United Malay National Organization (UMNO), initially owned TV3. Later, as it needed merging and structural changes, Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd (MRCB), a public listed company headed by businessmen in the politics, took over the ownership of TV3 (Gomez, 1994). Simultaneously, (in 1984), the Privatization and Look East policies were also born. The Privatization Policy is established as a vehicle to "increase the ownership and control of government within the nation's economy." At the same time, the birth of Look East Policy instituted itself as a vehicle for "policies and implementation...from Japan and Korea with the intention of localizing such initiatives to suit content (Malaysia *Merdeka*, 2013). It is these two policies that pave ways for modernity that establish the broadcasting of popular TV fiction in Malaysia that are important to be understood; these policies prove relevance in understanding the works delineating the tension between Islamic morality and modernity as shown in popular TV fiction. In light of these policies, the actions of planning, distributing, monitoring, and

privatizing in the worlds of content management industries is also geared towards a localization of content, governed by media institutions.

ASTRO comes later, in 1996, concurrent with the launch of Malaysian Satellite System (MEASAT). Ananda Krishnan owns ASTRO. Today, ASTRO is a subscription-based service that runs more than 65 TV, 17 radio, and 5 pay per view channels and whole assortments of interactive features adapted and serviced by Western, Asian, and local programs. In the 2013 *Go Beyond: Annual Report* (ASTRO 2013), ASTRO writes the following concerning the development of TV fiction:

“Our 164 channels, including 28 HD channels, provide the best of local, regional, international and sports content; making ASTRO a comprehensive pay-TV proposition. We continue to build our regional relationships, sourcing content from Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Korea and Japan.”

With such appropriation by TV3 and ASTRO, one begins to get glimpses of how each one of these have prevailed over the years. The connection between local to global superpowers of TV fiction represents the shift of cultures that has been made possible, transpiring discussions surrounding Malay cultural identity, that preserve or challenge the elite’s scribes on Malay cultural identities. The borders- between Malayness and un-Malayness offer an approach that enlightens the split and attempts to reconcile the shifts. As argued by Singh and Schmidt (2000), the borders allow for “networks and associations that are transplanted and yet continually mobile extending outside the U.S. but also branching in multiple ways within its cities and countries” (13). Even Zeiler (2012) in online media report, *Content Asia*, has asked, “When will Asian programming flow West? It might take a while but the world in terms of content is becoming more global.” Taken together, concerns by Singh and Schmidt (2000) and Zilber (2012) reflect the ‘waxing’ and ‘waning’ of government forces that grant credence to (alternative) Malay social and cultural questions in which TV fiction has demonstrated.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This paper provides three important points concerning the lived reality surrounding popular TV fiction. Firstly, issues and themes on TV in Malaysia is observed against previous inter-racial tensions, and adherence to *Rukunegara*- a framework rooted in the beliefs of a united, democratic, just, and progressive society is to be observed. Secondly, five forces behind the structure of screening of the TV fiction- the censorship board, governmental agencies, the TV station itself, mass media laws and the prime minister of Malaysia, are exposed. Being the “gatekeepers,” the establishment of these hierarchical structures guarantee that government presence is vital, forming the bases for the opening of RTM. These gatekeepers, along with the initial intentions to govern political disputes and establish mass media’s code of practice vis-a-vis *Rukunegara*, help to place this review in context. The third position, which essentially what this paper argues, unveils mediascape resisting these government forces, generating pointers for liberalization.

Liberalization, in this sense- of Malay cultural identity, appears to have materialized as a result of advent of globalization, modernity, diversity, and the valorization of *1Malaysia*, revealing many TV adaptation programs, reality shows, and TV fiction, that destabilize Malayness and demonstrate transgressions of borders of culture. From scenes that show directness, intimacy, and sins to taboo and pre-marital sex, just to name a few, these TV programs may have evolved to signify alternative social realities. It is this point in which alternative Malay cultural identities intersect. The indulgence in alcoholism and cohabitation alongside forgiveness and repentance, for instance, are dominant and it is hypothesized that they become normalized in TV fiction in the long run. By displaying the forces governing TV fiction, we hope to enrich our understanding surrounding the components of TV fiction, Malay cultural identities, and mediascape in Malaysia.

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