



Malaysian films (2010–2019): Are we in the post-feminist era?

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ABSTRACT

A glance through film criticism in Malaysia yields sporadic popular criticism and mostly academic analysis of traditional iconic Malay films starring P. Ramlee as social criticism. In recent years, criticism of Malay films is focused on directors like U-Wei whose films like *Perempuan, Isteri & ...* (1993) and *Buai Laju-laju* (2004) have provoked political and social controversies. These films may not have achieved significantly in the Malaysian box office but the attention they drew towards the perception of women from the sociocultural perspective demands a critical look at Malaysian feminism through the female identification of the heroine in seven Malay films across nine years (2010–2019). These actresses were awarded best actress awards for their portrayal of the Malaysian woman by the established National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS). This paper specifically focuses on the representation of the Malay woman in films across award-winning movies and the portrayal of Malay women in these films against the established Malaysian gender movement (Hollinger, 2012). A qualitative approach of interrogating and critiquing the projected female images against the claims of Malaysian post-feminism in the fourth phase of “personal-choice feminism, leading to a paradoxical sense of individualism” (Ng et al., 2013) serves as the methodological core of this research. This research hopes to unveil the true Malay female semiotics projected through the silver screen of the function, form, and position within the past nine years of Malaysian post-feminist era.

Keywords: *Malaysian feminism, film criticism, female protagonist, stereotypes*

INTRODUCTION

In communication, films are widely acknowledged as a tool of social media dissemination or projection of ideas regarding a certain topic or idea. Stuart Hall (Eley, 2015) agrees that the information, or social knowledge exchanged in the intercommunications when there is interaction between people and the media is undeniable. The amount of influence that films have on the prevailing opinion of a category of people, distinguished politically, socially, or sexually demonstrated through the construction of dominant social cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Rudloff (2016) refers to it as a “representation” which engenders meaning through a process of time and represents the real world through these films although “it is not directly reality itself” (as cited in Dyer, 2013). For this research, the “representations” may reflect the situation especially in reference to a Malay woman’s place, perception of her (form), function and identity.

In 2009, Alicia Izharuddin critiqued *Lenjan* (1998) by Ismail Yaacob, *OPS Belantara* (1993) by Rodzee A. Razak, *Amok* (1995) by Adman Salleh and Aziz M. Osman’s *Femina* (1994) detailing the number of negative representations of the Malay woman in mainstream Malay films, despite modernity and perhaps because of the changing religious landscape that favoured the Arabs, which resulted in what she calls a “schizophrenic representation of the New Economic Policy’s (NEP) Malay (men and women) in Malay movies” (Izharuddin, 2009) produced in the 90s. These films asserted the current perception and projection of Malaysian woman through films, especially in Malay movies produced in the country and distributed widely to international bodies. The servile, weaker sex, subjugated by love and sacrifice for a man patented these patriarchal traditional perceptions of the Malay woman in the majority of the films and bred direct animosity to the feminist third wave raging in the Western world at that time. Kristeva’s (2012) ambiguous “abject self” introduced not only the feminine form that was fluid but the posterity of feminism that needed to be addressed. The consequences of the inculcation across a decade on society’s perception of the Malay woman and themselves became a quest and struggle for Malaysian feminists. Moreover in 2013, the fourth wave of feminism emerged (Cochrane, 2013), a movement that was concerned with providing a voice to the marginalised woman (Ealasaid, 2013). In this case, the Malay women who are ostracised by patriarchy traditional religious conceptions.

The changes in the perception of the Malay women in function, form, and position through Malay movies in the following decade is the focus of this research. Interrogating the Malay movies produced by FINAS in the last decade from 2010–2019 is to examine the cultural and social contexts due to an awareness of the impact of wrongful misrepresentation of the Malay woman in Malay films. The millennium portrayal of the Malay woman represented by seven best actresses (Table 1) who reprised the lead roles in these films and won accolades for their representation is the focus of this study.

OBJECTIVES

The analysis focuses on the function, form, and position of the heroine in each selected Malay film as well as the character arc to determine the construct of the (post)feminist woman projected by these films. The contestations in this feminist discourse will then be diachronically assessed to evaluate the type of feminism that is projected and affirmed through the film against the development of feminism in Malaysia.

MALAYSIAN FEMINISM

Feminism arrived in a colonial atmosphere of *Tanah Melayu* tied to male reformers like Zainal Abidin Ahmad or Za'aba seeking freedom from the British colonials. In the early years of Malaysian feminism, gender history was referred to in terms of emancipation or liberation (Suleman, 2021) before being appropriately labelled “Nationalist Feminism”. This was followed by the second phase from 1958–1969 which saw the legislating of women’s rights, especially in terms of equal employment benefits and suffrage issues such as opportunities for education that saw it being referred to as the “Social Feminism”. The feminist movement became more pronounced as it was bound to human rights and became more radical and revolutionary in the “political third phase” which saw the setting up of NGOs that fought for issues that plagued women across different races such as Violence Against Women (VAW), Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO), Women’s Crisis Centre (WCC), Women’s Development Collective (WDC), the All Women’s Action Society (AWAM), Sabah Action Women’s Resource Group (SAWO) and Sarawak Women for Women’s Society (SWWS).

It was at this stage that the “patriarchy” was unveiled as the root of women’s problems and continuous persecution of women. The feminist agenda was to legislate rules to protect women, but the division brought on by different levels of education, religious predilection and ethnic consciousness segregated Malaysian women. The implementation of the NEP that was introduced in the 1970s drove the feminist movement into racially framed agendas. The rural Malay women were wooed by political parties such as United Malay National Organization (UMNO). Wanita UMNO successfully reaffirmed the traditional roles of a Malay woman, rejecting any form of secular feminist discourse helped along by the global revivalism of Islam. But while the rural Malay woman retreated into Islamic cultural constructions of a woman, there arose in the fourth phase of feminism an elite group of western educated women who rejected the patronisation of political parties with patriarchal agendas. With the advent of the Reformasi movement in 1998, dialogues between the racial and economic divides were opened among the women and a new phase of feminism developed. Labelled as the era of “personal-choice feminism”, this was the phase where women in every social economic and political arena, fought and legalised their presence within their constitutional rights. This paradoxical phrase is apt:

Women continue to retreat into their cultural community and become even stauncher defenders of patriarchal virtues such as the glorification of motherhood, domesticated lifestyles, and polygyny. What happened at this time was that the new discourse about women’s rights began to be modified to suit the ambit of economic liberalization and notions of bourgeois consumer ‘freedoms’ (Ng et al., 2013, p. 37).

Issues pertaining to suffrage and equal rights in the first to third phase of the feminist movement were all addressed through education, economic policies and legislation with women representing constituencies in the political arena championing the rights of the underprivileged regardless of gender.

It appears Malaysian women are in the “post-feminist” stage which is described as a paradoxical “conflation of feminist and antifeminist ideas” (Gill & Shani, 2017) because a sustained feminist movement appears no longer needed. However, the regression of women back to a state that first initiated the feminist movement as observed by Ng et al.’s quotation above, implies a contradictory state that suggests a flagrant need for a different wave of feminism.

Table 1 lists selected Malay films that earned the highest box-office revenues and subsequently, the female protagonists were awarded the Best Actress award, for their respective year. The high revenues infer not only the popularity of these films, but the support of the semiotics projected by the Malaysian women. This article undertakes the task to uncover the depiction of Malaysian women in these modern films from a feminist perspective and to question the truth of Malaysian (post)feminism as projected in these nine Malay mainstream films of the last decade through their portrayal of women, Muslim or non-Muslim, as affirmed through the best actress awards given by a team of experienced jury acknowledged by FINAS since the 1980s.

Table 1. Selected Malay films & best actresses (2010-2018/19)

No.	Film title	Year	Best Actress award	Box office	Director	Character played
1.	<i>Lagenda Budak Setan (LBS)</i>	2010	Lisa Surihani	4.28 *m	Sharad Sharan	Ayu Sidaratul Dursina
2.	<i>Janin</i>	2011	Siti Shahrizah Saifudin	-	M. Hitler Zami	Sutera
3.	<i>No awards</i>					
4.	<i>Ombak Rindu (OR)</i>	2013	Maya Karin	10.9 m	Osman Ali	Nurul Izzah
5.	<i>Istanbul Aku Datang (IAD)</i>	2014	Lisa Surihani	3.58 m	Bernard Chauhy	Dian
6.	<i>Manisnya Cinta di Cappadocia (MCC)</i>	2015	Nur Fazura	1.6 m	Bernard Chauhy	Ifti Liyana
7.	<i>Munafik 1</i>	2016	Nabila Huda	17.4 m	Syamsul Yusof	Maria
8.	<i>Adiwiraku</i>	2017	Sangeeta Krishna AV	17.3 m	Eric Ong	Cheryl Ann Fernando
9.	<i>Dukun</i>	2018/9	Umie Aida	10 m	Dain Said	Diana Dahlan

*m - million RM

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research differs from the focus on controversial directors such as Mohd Nor & Abdullah's (2019) article on U-Wei's self-construal female protagonists. It neither focuses on one aspect of women and their sexuality (Ngo, 2015), nor is it an attempt to expose the gender issues raised in provocative Malay films (Zaharin, 2014). The results of this research bears more similarities to Nor Hashim's article entitled "*Isu gender dalam drama di filem: Persoalan terhadap pemaparan imej, peranan dan kedudukannya dalam seni persembahan filem cereka 'Malay' [sia]*" (2018). However, this research differs in its feminist approach using the feminist contestations to gain insight into the advancements or regressions implied by the history of Malaysian feminist movement. It also tackles Izharuddin's claims of "sonic desynchronisation" (Izharuddin, 2020) of a "*pontianak*" signalling the existence of corporality of feminist politics in Malay films. Bearing in mind most of the protagonists are of Muslim faith, Aurangzaib Alamgir's perspective of how patriarchy in Islam has encouraged the subservient, docile, and submissive stereotypes of the Malay woman (Md Noh & Muhammad, 2021) acts as the basis of the feminist interrogation that finds an

equivalent in traditional stereotype gender perceptions where women are measured or valued against men (Royer, 2019).

These stereotypes are formed through the repeated visual gender images rendered through all types of creative media of the specific social roles attached to these gendered constructs that bombard the senses, leaving the audiences no choice but to admit to its “truth” (Rajaratnam et al., 2020). Film’s ability to mimic with great clarity the illusion of “truth” and “reality” is powerfully constructed through scripting, acting, production and directing, all in the name of blurring the lines between reality and creation. The actions, and consequences, the actors and in particular, the actresses in the plot of these films are designed to evoke fear, love, sadness, and happiness that will impinge on our psychosis as memories, a lexicon of social dictators that is projected through a male point-of-view (POV) (Md Noh & Muhammad, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative interrogation of these characters created under the direction of the all-male directors and affirmed by a panel of experienced juries verified by FINAS is guided by Stuart Hall’s explanation of how we engender meanings through the representation of them in words, stories, and imageries, imbuing them with emotions and basically conceptualising them (Eley, 2015). When applied to the representations of men and women in films that have garnered millions of viewers based on their box-office collections (Table 1), the “construction of dominant social and cultural conceptions of femininity and masculinity” by these films into the minds of its viewers cannot be denied (Hisham, 2012). Film media like mass media (Fernandez et al., 2013) carry great influence on the audience individually and then collectively engender the response that largely depends on who dominates the POV. Therefore, a critical analysis of the function, form, and position of the female characters in these films considering the socio-cultural influence across the decade will yield the answer to the contradictory nature of the “(post)feminist” paradox in Malaysian feminism.

The critical analysis through a feminist perspective begins with the assessment of the function of the heroines in each of the nine films. Ranging from single attractive women, mothers, daughters, career women or mistress, the different roles of women are interrogated for their contribution to elevating women’s stereotypes that prevailed in the last decade such as the submissive or victimised wife, the suffering mistress, the sacrificial partner or the weak and choiceless daughter. The analysis continues with the examination of form which alludes to the individual parts of the heroine and how her inclusion contributes to the way the entire film functions and affects the viewer.

FINDINGS

Function

The function of the heroines or protagonists in the nine Malay films registered award-winning performances beginning with Ayu in *Lagenda Budak Setan* (LBS) (2010), Sutera in *Janin* (2011), Nurul Izzah in *Ombak Rindu* (OR) (2013), Dian in *Istanbul Aku Datang* (IAD), Ifty in *Manisnya Cinta di Cappadocia* (MCC), Maria in *Munafik 1*, Cheryl Ann in *Adiwiraku* (2017) and Dian in *Dukun* (2018) under the POV of all male directors. As the protagonist of these films, the message that was sent to the audiences at the beginning of the 21st century is that women have fought against these submissive daughter, wife and sister stereotypes just as Ayu (LBS) fought against her mother’s compulsion to marry the

man she had chosen, fought the jealous abusive husband and Nurul (OR) the victim of economically challenged women to become the more educated, financially independent like Dian (IAD) and Ifty (MCC). The female protagonists in these dramas progressed from being a tragically defeated Ayu (LBS) who despite being revived with a different identity still dies in the hands of the abusive ex-husband without ever reconciling with the love-of-her-life Kasyah, to OR's Nurul Izzah who finally settles down with the man who paid for her as a second wife, placed her and her baby in the hospital, rejected, scorned and ignored her penniless plight; to a clearly more independent Dian (IAD) and Ifty (MCC) in 2014–15. They were empowered with choices, albeit a choice of husbands in their capacity as betrayed women as well as a “sister” to a tragic victim of abandonment. Similarly, the progressive new Malay woman like Ayu (LBS) and Ifty are no longer uneducated defenceless “kampung” girls like Nurul Izzah (OR) but have evolved as Ayu did to become Emilia after her tragic accident, becoming an enterprising young entrepreneur able to employ their male counterparts and sustain themselves in a lifestyle of their own choosing.

In the horror category, protagonists such as Sutera in *Janin* (2011) began as the woeful heroine who transformed into the unmediated antagonist because of her own inner weaknesses. She was the cause for the demon haunting and attacking her neighbours as her distrust of her husband made her leave her new born unattended resulting in its death. From an antagonist, the film ends with Sutera killing the demon (her own child) to end the rampage as a sort of penance, a mother who is forced to kill her own child. Sutera is the personification of the “monstrous maternal” (Izzharuddin, 2020, p. 1003), only she is not manifested as a “*pontianak*” who causes chaos but becomes the indirect cause for it. Nevertheless, the woman is still the conduit to the immortal world where every form of monstrosity flows through to behove of the male species. Another horror flick *Munafik 1* finds Maria, possessed by demons from a talisman driven to murder the wife and child of the local healer, Adam. She is demonised, possessed, and victimised spiritually throughout the plot while the latest semi-autobiographical *Dukun* sees Diana, a woman shaman happily embracing her charges of manslaughter and murder because her physical death belies her “escape” through the possession of another character at the end. Maria's static characterisation and Diana's antagonist role fusing the unknown world of black magic with a women's spirit signals a tendency to stereotype women as precursors of the negative. In the Islamic conception, a Malay woman's body is weaker, therefore is open to all manner of possession by the spirit world and deviations (Izharuddin, 2020). However, the implied “escape” of Diana indicates the deliberate act of labelling the unknown female spiritual depths as a negative construct just as the female persona Maria is passive in function. The female protagonist is still a “passive” manoeuvred by the male directors to provide a seemingly liberated end to the plot.

Similarly, freedom from the cultural dictates of arranged marriages like Dian (IAD) and Ifty (MCC), the modern and younger of the female protagonists in OR and LBS are trivialised in the genre of “chick flicks”. Marriage as Mulvey (1989) points out is “a closure for narrative from the active masculine point of view just as a rejection of marriage still makes masculine heroism because the male inhabits the “active narrative” and is in control magnanimously sacrificing himself to be one with the female that vacillates between being a binary opposite to him or as Freud would have it, a foil for his ego. Although Nurul Izzah (OR) is victorious over his wife Mila, her victory is hollow as it appears to affirm the belief that a woman is only able to find happiness with a man. As observed by Izharuddin (2020) in her critique of the 90s Malay movies “the female characters are tamed into heterosexual relationships by their patronising but heroic leading men, restoring the patriarchal order typically known as “happily ever after” (2009, p. 2).

Form

Film form or structure refers to the composition or arrangement of scenes, sequences that make the entire film (Bakilapadavu, 2018) which is often the focus of film analyses in relation to the importance of particular scenes to the overall message of the film. The female protagonist in the nine films that are the focus of this research, promulgate social roles that are ironic and confusing in dramatic form because they are gendered roles from a patriarchal view. Ayu's (LBS) role is at once the abused wife and then re-emerges as Emilia having undergone plastic surgery due to burns suffered from an accident her husband indirectly caused. Splitting the persona into two "characters" is perhaps a technique to emphasise the transformation of Kasyah, the hero and underlines his abilities to remain faithful and true. After all the title of the film is in direct reference to Kasyah's redemption.

The irony is having saved herself from an abusive relationship, Ayu is then tragically wrenched from accomplishing her mission of uniting with her lover by the very same man who abused her. Her character is later conveniently killed off to set the stage for the tragic hero, Kasyah to enact the classic lamentation scene at the cemetery. As the heroine, Ayu's character is tragic, an implication that women will never really be victorious or free from the confines and destruction of the patriarchy, even in the representative form. Nurul Izzah's character in OR (2012) is as dedicated as Ayu in LBS (2010), promotes physical suffering and mental torture for a woman to procure the love and regard of a man, as the goal of women. Ironically, the facet of a strong woman is not reflected in the protagonist but in Mila, the supporting character who in a poignant scene between her and Nurul Izzah, states that she is willing to release her husband ("*Saya lebih rela reda*") then suffer pain and disappointment. For the sake of the feminist progress, Dian (IAD) and Ifty (MCC), the younger modern woman protagonists reject the men who have betrayed them with another woman, regardless of the threat of social cultural sanctions when she arrives in Malaysia. She is the financially stable modern Malay woman who will not buckle under parental pressure to follow the tradition of marrying her brother-in-law who ill-treated her cancer-stricken sister. Her rejection of traditional social cultural dictates preferring to choose her own happiness over being the "second-wife" or "second-choice" in their relationship. This is a mark of progress from the protagonists of the first two films. But *Sutera* (2011), *Maria* (2016) and as recent as *Dian* (2018/9) in the horror film genre are still stagnated in stereotypical roles as catalysts of evil with their shallow portrayal of possessed individuals of weak faith and evil shamans. Only the inclusion of a protagonist of a different race in *Adiwiraku* (2017) provides a glimmer of hope that the feminine voice is universalised regardless of race or religion and that their portrayal deserves the same active space as much as the male hero on the silver screen.

Position

Cheryl Ann, the protagonist in *Adiwiraku* (2017), appears as the independent, ambitious, self-motivated, liberated woman on par with her male college mate, Constant. Her victorious portrayal is dimmed by the fact that she is still a "prop" for the purpose of a political theme exploited as an icon of selfless dedication to young school children of a different race. The political agenda overwhelms the true Cheryl Ann in this autobiography. The two-dimensional, sacrificial non-Muslim representation of a marginal Indian woman in Malaysia is still in its infancy, propagating the national political agenda of working together. However, it is an improvement compared to the source of all conflicts and the resolver of all conflicts that *Sutera* (*Janin*, 2011), *Maia* (2016) and *Diana* (2018/9) sacrificially perpetuated through their characters in the horror films genre. While Dian (IAD) and Ifty (MCC) are equally liberated as Cheryl, the narrow scope in which their

liberty is conceptualised lead to the labelling of the films as “chick flicks”, connotating a shallow, almost facetious perception towards the film and its focus, the actresses.

Character arc

The vacillations of the feminist concept are reflected in these protagonists, in terms of function, form, and position in the films as discussed above. There is a conscious effort at improving the “concept” of womanhood as revealed in the feminist themes that are reflective of rights to education, spousal abuse, protection, and career opportunities pursued in the third phase of feminist movement by NGOs such as Violence Against Women (VAW), Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO), Women’s Crisis Centre (WCC), Women’s Development Collective (WDC), and the All-Women’s Action Society (AWAM). However, there is a definite lag between real women and the “reality” that is projected in the film world. There are still the traditional stereotypes as highlighted in the films in the earlier part of the decade where two-dimensional characters such as Nurul Izzah (OR) the “woeful virgin” or Diana in *Dukun* (2018/19) who is the personification of the “wicked witch” perpetuated by a patriarchal agenda to vanquish the deviant abilities of the womenfolk. The men such as the hero Hariz (OR) is never censured for his shortcomings in the way he treated Nurul Izzah causing her to have a miscarriage and to take advantage of a poor relative by making her a powerless mistress, nor for his stupidity for the trick his adopted mother played on him. The classic cinderell[ic] transformation of Nurul Izzah from a poor relative to becoming Hariz’s wife, the son of a wealthy businessman, reflects the repetitive victimisation of women in films.

However, a definite projection of change is indicated from OR (2013) onwards. The secondary role Amylia, played by Lisa Surihani, a young successful modern woman chooses her freedom in a poignant scene between her and Nurul Izzah. From a secondary role, the newfound courage of the female protagonist is literally brought forward in the characters of Dian (IAD) and Ifty (MCC). Their characters are young Malay women who are independent, successful, and confident enough to overcome rejection, forgive and continue with life forsaking the traditional expectations of marriage. But the projection of the older generation of married women are not presented in a better light especially with Sutera (J), Maria (M) and Diana (2018/19). Sutera in *Janin* (2011) is held responsible for the entire fracas because of her carelessness and suspicious nature, while Maria is but a ghost who comes back to haunt her husband which she cannot let go in *Munafik 1* (2016).

The return to patriarchal order where women are ghosted and made grotesque which has been the Malay cinematic convention (Izharuddin, 2020), can be clearly seen in the depiction of Mona Fandey who infamously murdered a Malaysian politician (NST, 2020) in *Dukun* (2018/19). The two-dimensional portrayal of Mona in the character Dian, who is caricatured into a demon totally without humanistic aspects, can be perceived as both a personal attack on Mona who has been lifted to mythical heights, both creatively and journalistically in Malay femininity. The fact that her transgressions using mystical methods roused the local media to such a frenzy with rumours of her family’s objection to her depiction in the film and media reflects the impact of the negative semiotics on the Malaysian society’s perception of Malay woman. The fact that *Dukun* (2018/19) was screened ten years after the incident and managed to hit 10 million in the box office proves without a doubt the impact of films to affirm the “truths” and “realities” of semiotics represented in movies. It is obvious that the character arc that moved away from anti-feminist sentiments were present from the beginning of the millennia only for a younger generation but lapsed back to an even more traditional and disparaging projection of older married women who are evil witches, deviant, and without remorse and should be legally

punished for aspiring for power and independence. The revelations may be a warning against aspirations that are not condoned by a patriarchy that threatens to de-synchronise the cinematic conventions or it may be perceived as a slow progression of change that is taking place within the Malaysian cinematic arena.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps these vacillations reveal the difficulty in realising “authentic feminist projects” (Ng et al., 2013, p. 3) due to the dichotomy between Muslims and non-Muslims through Islamisation projects that are presumed to be “highly gendered” as compared to non-Muslims (Ng et al., 2013, p. 8). In his controversial study of the voiceless subaltern Malay woman, Mohammed Taib (2015) identifies Malay patriarchy and dominance when women are denied the agency to choose their life partner, education and confining them to the domestic sphere of subservience as wives who serve their husbands and children, mothers who do the same or condemning them with a distorted perception of sexuality. These are the very same perpetuations in form, function, and positions of the female protagonists in the nine films analysed especially in the earlier films from 2010 till 2013. However, there is a difference in the projection of the female protagonists from 2014–2015, specifically IAD and MCC which are directed by the same male director, Bernard Chauly. Both female heroines reject these agencies of becoming the sacrificial second wife and instead, embraced the freedom of choice for a life partner. But the following films from *Munafik 1* (2016) and *Dukun* (2018/19), which depict a voiceless subaltern Malay wife as the source of her husband’s possession followed by the personification of evil in the form of a modern witch, appear to delete the progress made by Chauly in prior years.

Perhaps the vacillation in the pursuit of an emancipated Malay woman on the silver screen is due to the patriarchal POV. The male POV controls these representations and no matter how much progress appears to be made for equality, it nevertheless appears as a male patient forbearance in a cinematic arena still scarce of women directors except for the late Yasmin Ahmad and Shuhaimi Baba. Many Muslim feminists challenge the religious establishments that encourage the subordination of women in the name of religion (Aurangzaib, 2014, p. 420) promoting the “subservient and submissive” ideal Malay woman whose single aim is marriage. In an interview with Sharifah Armani (Nafeesa, 2019) an award-winning Malaysian actress, she said that the stereotypes she would love to “smash” in the Malaysian entertainment industry are “the Malay woman who just wants to get married” and the “passive roles written for the Asian women”. She sums up the roles of the present forms and position of the female protagonist “as oracles or triggers forced to find changes within themselves” while the male protagonist saves them.

What is needed is an environment of post-feminism which is not dictated by time or the gendered POV of a film director but an “ideological environment” (McNair, 2010, p. 100). This is because “representation is vital in regard to real-world consequences for people concerning how they are treated and how it may restrict or delimit what people and their roles are within society” (Dyer, 2013, p. iv). Perhaps supportive government reforms such as the mandate of appointing a female director in all public listed companies by 2023 (“All PLCs to have”, 2021) might help to eradicate the film media semiotics of the Malay woman who is incapable of leadership which ironically has been recorded academically in institutions of higher learning only for the past two decades. Perhaps the construction of the female identity from the cultural and political terrains that has suffocated Malaysian feminism still has a long way to go, but nevertheless is a part of the feminist waves blighting the world through the frenzied activities that score small individual victories. There

are some victories for the Malaysian feminist movement as discussed in both the initial research into the movies in the 90s and more in this research through the portrayal of Mila (OR), Sutera (J) and Dian (IAD). Even though this progress is circumvented by powerful religion, social and political ideological forces that back the male progeny rendering empty victories especially in the Malay film industries, the presentation of an independent Malay woman who has a voice, a choice and courage to own herself, marks the beginning of a growing consciousness that is crucial for change to happen.

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