

A Study on Inter-ethnic Relations through Yasmin Ahmad's Films

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Abstract

The late Yasmin Ahmad was a well-known film director in Malaysia. Her films that portrayed the multi-ethnic and multicultural society of Malaysia had attracted large audiences within the country and had also won many awards in international film festivals. Some critics disparaged Yasmin's films for desecrating religions and threatening the local cultures, but others hailed her films for the portrayal of the spirit of inter-ethnic understanding. This study will outline the broad features of Malaysian ethnic relations and issues relating to ethnic identity and ethnic borders to place the analysis of the contents of Yasmin's films in proper perspective. This will be conducted through narrative analysis by examining the plots, roles and dialogues to understand how Yasmin represented inter-ethnic relations in her films *Sepet* and *Talentime*.

Key words: Yasmin Ahmad, inter-ethnic relations, Malaysia films, *Sepet*, *Talentime*

Introduction

The film is a medium to explore the social issues of a community or country. The process of film making is to construct a story to convey the intended messages to the viewers. The audience will decode the meaning of a film from the perspectives of their cultural backgrounds and understandings.

Malaysia is a nation with a rich diversity of ethnic communities. The Malays, Chinese, and Indians form the largest ethnic communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Across the South China Sea in Sabah and Sarawak, ethnic diversity is even more complex for apart from the Malays and Chinese, there are dozens of autochthonous groups. The film-viewing habits of Malaysians are characterized by the Malays watching largely local Malay and Hollywood films, the Chinese

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opting for Hong Kong and Hollywood films; and the Indians preferring Bollywood films. On certain but rare occasions, a local film that appealed to wide audiences comprising the major ethnic groups would be produced. One such occasion was in 2004 when Malaysian film director Yasmin Ahmad produced a film called *Sepet*. The late director was one of the outstanding film directors in Malaysia whose films often depicted the multifaceted society of Malaysia and won many awards in international film festivals. Yasmin passed away in July 2009 and left behind a legacy as a shining symbol that dared to question the *status quo*.

Sepet tells a story that revolves around the inter-ethnic relationship between a Chinese youth and a Malay girl. Depicting the multicultural life of Malaysia, the film touches on sensitive issues such as ethnicity, religion, social status and Malay special rights. Apart from good reviews from the local audience, *Sepet* has also garnered international acclaim such as the “Best Asian Film” award in the Eighteenth Tokyo International Film Festival 2005 and “Jury’s Honour Awards” in 27th Creteil International Female Film Festival 2005 in France. Her last film was *Talentine* which features an Indian as the main male character and depicts the life of Indians, the third largest ethnic community in Malaysia.

The overarching concern of ethnic relations in Malaysia is the maintenance of inter-ethnic harmony and stability at the societal level. Seemingly lacking are efforts to foster acceptance and accommodation at the individual level. Given Yasmin’s intention to question the existing state of ethnic relations, it was not surprising that her films have invited harsh criticisms from some quarters. For example, *Sepet* was dogged by controversy soon after its release. In a live programme on national television called *Fenomena Seni* (Art Phenomena) in April 2006, a forum was organized under the title of *Sepet and Gubra Corrupt Our Culture*. Yasmin had declined to take part in the forum that had prejudged the films in question as corrupting the Malay culture. A local journalist-cum-film commentator claimed that the films brought negative effects on the audience. Another film producer questioned the legitimacy of female Muslims having relationships with non-Muslims. At the end of the show, 59 per cent of the audience voted via SMS to confirm the negative effects of the films. One of the commentators had claimed that Malaysia belonged to the Malays and another claimed that the main male character in the film *Sepet* had no religion. Yasmin questioned why no action was taken on slanderous remarks voiced in public (Farah Azalea, 2008).

There were also voices of approval for Yasmin’s work. The Head of Publicity of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) felt that Yasmin’s films touched the hearts of many and provoked the audience to question the rationale of seeing others through ethnic stereotypes. It is claimed that Yasmin’s depiction of ethnic tolerance and acceptance provided a strong counterpoise to the frequent allusions to racial issues in the political arena.

Little academic research has been carried out on Yasmin’s films. A major source is the book entitled *Yasmin Ahmad’s Films* written by an independent film maker Amir Muhammad (2009). This book discusses all the works, including six films, twelve advertisements and two short videos directed and produced by Yasmin. As Yasmin’s films always close with open endings,

Amir tried to interpret the ambiguous endings by pointing out some clues that the audience might have neglected. For example, *Sepet*'s ending led the audience to think that Jason had died in an accident. However, Amir suggested that there are actually bullet holes appearing on Jason's shirt. Amir said that Jason might have been shot before the road accident. Since Yasmin's films usually contain more than one message, it is only natural that different viewers might have different interpretations. Therefore, Amir welcomed the audience to share their interpretations of the messages conveyed by Yasmin's films.

Another reference on Yasmin's films is an article by Khoo Gaik Cheng (2007) which suggested that the controversial inter-ethnic love story in *Sepet* has challenged the prevalent cultural and political hegemony in Malaysia. Gerald Sim's *Yasmin Ahmad's Orked Trilogy* (2009) discussed three films (*Sepet*, *Gubra* and *Mukhsin*) by examining the narrative contents and also techniques used in the films. Gerald suggested that Orked was the protagonist in all the three films, and by understanding Orked, we can understand Yasmin. In other words, from Gerald's points of view, Yasmin was telling her own stories through the character of Orked in the films.

This study will discuss two of Yasmin's films from the perspective of inter-ethnic relations and cultural and religious issues. The first part will outline the broad features of Malaysian ethnic relations and issues relating to ethnic identity and borders. This is followed by an examination of the plots, roles and dialogues in order to understand how Yasmin represented inter-ethnic relations in her films *Sepet* and *Talentine*.

Ethnic Relations

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country comprising communities of different historical, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds living and working together. It was during the period of British colonial rule that Chinese and Indians began to settle down, especially in the tin mines and rubber plantations. The Chinese were pioneers in developing commercial agriculture and tin mines mainly along the west coast states of Peninsular Malaysia (see Jackson, 1968). With the development of rubber industry, the British brought in large number of Tamil labourers (Leong, 2003). Over time, the Chinese population was concentrated largely in the towns, the Indians in rubber estates, while the Malays in the rural areas to engage in fishing and farming (Abdul Khalid, 2014).

Separation brought about by the realities of different historical background, geographical concentration of population, and distinctive occupational identities has effectively militated against ethnic interaction. It has been noted that ethnic relations in Malaysia have their own characteristics that are quite different from those found in other countries (Husin Ali, 2008). The "self" and "other" differentiation is very much determined by ethnicity which is defined by socio-cultural factors rather than physical characteristics. Ethnicity is further segregated by class distinction. Within a given ethnic community, there are the socially, economically

or politically well-connected elites as well as those who occupy lower-income and under-privileged positions.

Ethnic relations are not entirely confined to the majority-minority dichotomy by which a bigger group is more dominant than the other. The diverse ethnic groups that comprise Malays, Chinese and Indians, and the autochthonous groups of Sabah and Sarawak such as the Ibans, Dayaks and Kadazans differ in size and political clout, each exerting an influence in different territorial domains. These ethnic groups co-exist under a general state of stability but are subject to varying degrees of potential tension and discontent that may destabilize the status quo if such sentiments are left unchecked.

Despite having gained independence for more than half a century, Malaysia is still grappling with ethnic differences that interfere with the spontaneous inter-mingling among different ethnic communities. The nation-building process that stresses common values and similarities of being Malaysians has not been sufficient to foster loyalty and unity among different ethnic groups. In a multi-ethnic society, ethnic identity often works against the overall interests of national consensus or the acceptance or accommodation of different ethnic groups. It is also in the name of ethnic identity that each ethnic community would fiercely guard their respective interests.

In Malaysia, the consciousness of shared identity arising from a common ethno-cultural origin is further reinforced by legal and economic instruments. Constitutionally, the special position of the Malays and other natives is safeguarded. Among the key stipulations are the status of Islam as a national religion, the Malay language as the sole national and official language, and the supremacy of the institution of the Malay Sultanates. Article 153 of the Federal Constitution stated that it shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special positions of the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak.

In the 1969 general election, the opposition parties had denied the ruling coalition a two-thirds majority in the parliament. The subsequent tensions triggered a racial riot on 13 May which led to the declaration of a state of national emergency (see Horowitz, 1998; Kua, 2007). One of the lasting consequences of official reaction to the incident was the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970. A core provision in the NEP was to accord preferential treatment to the Malays and other natives to protect their interest. To facilitate the implementation of policies according to the NEP, the population was divided into Bumiputera (Sons of the soil) and non-Bumiputera to differentiate those who qualify for preferential treatment and those who do not.

Primordial loyalties and affirmative action reinforce ethnic distinctiveness and give rise to ethnic boundaries. These boundaries are demarcated by ethnic communities for social coherence and exclusivity (see Barth, 1969). They also act as “economic boundaries” to enhance the position of certain groups in the competition for resources. In short, ethnic identity means emphasis on similarities among the groups and projecting their differences from other groups. Subsequently, ethnic identity involves the act of “drawing lines” to differentiate “them”

and “us”, and to create a self-defence consciousness. It is this intense consciousness of ethnicity that separates rather than integrates different ethnic communities into a coherent whole.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a good way to understand the messages hidden behind a media text. As Yasmin's films have many hidden messages yet to be discovered, this paper attempts to use the narrative analysis to deconstruct the structure of Yasmin's films, and study the symbols of the images in order to understand the representation of inter-ethnic relationships of the films.

Inter-ethnic Relations in *Sepet* and *Talentine*

Both *Sepet* and *Talentine* portray the love relationships involving two young persons of different ethnic origins. The protagonists in *Sepet* are Jason, a Chinese youth and Orked, a Malay girl; and Melur, a Eurasian girl and Mahesh, an Indian youth in *Talentine*. Love relationships across ethnic lines are not commonly seen in Malaysia. The possible combinations of relationships between the Chinese and Malays may be seen in Figure 1. The overall situation becomes more complicated if the Indians and other minority groups are included.

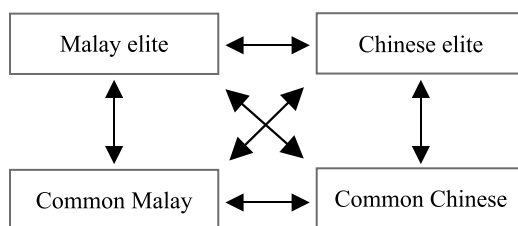


Figure 1. The Possible Combination of Chinese-Malay Relationships

Source: Husin Ali, 1984: 26

A common feature of these films is that the female protagonists are from the upper middle class. The families of Orked and Melur are closely knit and both families treat their domestic maids as family members. In contrast, the male protagonists are from poor families. Jason's father used to treat his wife badly and Jason peddles video compact discs (VCDs) to sustain himself. Mahesh has lost his father and he lives with his mother and sister. Mahesh is good looking but is deaf. The backgrounds of both the female and male protagonists may refer to real-life situations. The social standing of Orked may reflect the success among a section of the Malays who have benefited from the affirmative action of the national policy. The different social status of the protagonists seems to give rise to an unequal basis in gender relationships that also cuts across the ethnic lines (Table 1).

Table 1. Background of the Protagonists in *Sepet* and *Talentine*

Background details	Female	Male
<i>Sepet</i>		
Name	Orked	Jason Lee Seow Loong
Family background	Upper middle	Lower middle
Ethnic origin	Malay	Chinese
Religion	Islam	Buddhist
<i>Talentine</i>		
Name	Melur	Mahesh
Family background	Upper middle	Lower middle
Ethnic origin	Eurasian	Indian
Religion	Islam	Hindu

The Treatment of Inter-ethnic Relationship in the Films

First Step: Love at First Sight

Inter-ethnic relations in *Sepet* and *Talentine* started as a result of “love at first sight”. Orked first met Jason at the pirated VCD stall. They did not know each other but had formed a good impression towards each other. Mahesh first met Melur when he was assigned to fetch her, a contestant of the school talentime, to attend rehearsal and then bring her home. Yasmin used the concept of “love at first sight” to convey the message that love could transcend skin colour. In *Sepet*, Orked told her friend: “He doesn’t know me well enough to like me, but he’s in love with me.” There is one scene in *Sepet* which also highlighted the concept of love at first sight.

Jason: How long do you think it takes to fall in love?

Orked: A minute. How long did it take you to fall in love with me?

Jason: Much less than that.

Yasmin (2005) wrote in her blog:

“You don’t realize someone’s skin colour when you love them, only when you hate them there’s problem. Malays can like Chinese; Chinese can like Malays. Despite culture, religion, and skin colour, we are all the same. We don’t have to understand someone deeply in order to love them. We like who we like, we don’t have to explain to anybody. The key of falling in love and to love each other is to tolerate our differences. Love can cross all ethnic and cultural lines.”

As the relationship developed, Jason and Orked began to notice the differences between them. However, Orked was not worried that Jason was a non-Muslim. Similarly, Melur did not care that Mahesh was deaf. To her, when Mahesh spoke, “it was silent”; when he was silent, “it was as though he was speaking.”

Second Step: Obstruction

In both films, the development of love between the protagonists was overly idealistic. Realizing this, Yasmin erected obstructions along the way.

In *Sepet*, Orked’s father looked upon Jason, with his hair dyed golden and having an affair with another girl, as a hooligan. He naturally disapproved of his daughter’s relation with Jason. In real-life situations, a Chinese who develops good relations with the Malays may be viewed as having a hidden agenda for personal gain. Orked’s father thought likewise.

In *Talentine*, Mahesh’s mother objected to the relationship between Mahesh and Melur. Mahesh’s uncle, Ganesh, was killed in a conflict involving the Malays. This sorrowful experience had caused Mahesh’s mother to harbour negative feelings towards the Malays who were blamed for having destroyed her family.

Third Step: Unfruitful Relationship

In both films, Yasmin left the inter-ethnic relationships with open endings. Perhaps Yasmin herself was doubtful if the types of cross-ethnic relationships she portrayed would have any happy ending at all.

In *Sepet*, Orked read Jason’s letter when she was on the way to the airport. She was very touched. Encouraged by her mother, she called Jason who was speeding on his motorbike to get to the airport. Jason had met with an accident but the audience was not told of its final outcome. When Orked got through Jason in her second phone call, she professed her love for Jason. However, there is no clue as to whether the love between this couple would come to fruit because the audience were not told if Jason had survived in the accident.

Talentine has a scene showing Mahesh using sign language to tell Melur: “I love you so much, I don’t care what others say, my heart is always with you.” But Melur was not so certain: “What are you saying? You talk too much!” Having said that, they disappeared from the screen and the audience were left to guess the eventual outcome of their relationship.

Yasmin kept both endings open-ended and allowed the viewers to conclude whether the relationships would continue to develop positively or to no avail.

The Perception on Inter-ethnic Relations among Ethnic Groups

Despite the bonds of common citizenship, the attitudes among major ethnic groups are often swayed by negative perceptions of each other. Ethnic relations in Malaysia entail more than relations among different ethnic communities, they are complicated by official policies and religious beliefs. The NEP is imbued with a strong agenda of affirmative action. Islam is

the national religion to which the entire Malay society adheres. Although other ethnic groups are guaranteed the freedom of religion, the NEP and various religious beliefs have quietly but firmly erected distinctive boundaries separating the ethnic communities.

Sepet touched on an aspect of the special rights issue in the form of access to higher education between students of Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera origins. Orked scored five distinctions in SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) based on the public examination for Form 5 students. She was awarded a scholarship to further her studies in England. In contrast, with seven distinctions in the same examination, Jason was too poor to pursue further studies and took to selling pirated VCDs.

All ethnic communities are highly conscious of religious sensibilities in their relations with each other. Yasmin's films often featured scenes showing female Muslim in prayer in their white *jubah* (robe).

Most of the Chinese in Malaysia are Buddhists or Taoists. The Buddhists believe in "reincarnation" and "karma", but when Jason told Orked: "I think we've known each other for a long time. I remember you, but I don't remember you. I think we've met in our previous lives." Orked does not agree with Jason. This is apparently a contradiction of their concepts on religion.

One of the questions raised by Jason's friend in *Sepet* was why inter-ethnic marriages were easy a hundred years ago, but became complicated today when we were supposedly more civilized. In reply, Jason felt that "People think too much and act crazy in groups." In *Sepet*, Jason's friend reminded him that if he married Orked, he had to convert to Islam and change his name. In Malaysia, a non-Muslim who marries a Muslim is required to convert to Islam. Hence, this issue goes far beyond religious beliefs but also intimately concerns the interests of parents and family members. Inter-marriages as a means of fostering inter-ethnic relationships is therefore impractical and rare for both individuals and communities of different ethnicity.

In *Talentine*, racial issues seem more complex. Ganesh's obsession with a Malay girl when he was young did not come to fruit because Mahesh's mother objected on the basis of religion. She believed that if Ganesh married a Muslim, the family would lose him.

Family objections, however, did not dissuade Ganesh from loving the Malay girl. It was only when she passed away that he finally took an Indian wife. While holding the wedding ceremony, there was a Muslim funeral next door. This triggered off a clash and Ganesh was killed in the incident. This plot actually reflects the Kampung Medan incident that occurred in 2001.¹ Incidents such as these, though rare, have damaged the relations between the Malays and the Indians, and feelings of such bitterness are difficult to appease.

Apart from Ganesh's tragedy, we see a repetition of love that goes beyond the ethnic boundaries. Like Ganesh, both Mahesh and Melur also faced objections from the families. Apart from racial conflicts, marriages based on customs and caste system also prevent the likelihood of Indian developing close relationship with other ethnic communities.

Finally, deviating from the “love” theme, we see rivalry between the Chinese and Malay participants in the talent competition. Though the conflict was resolved later on, such rivalry is not uncommon in our daily life and not all conflicts can be reconciled amicably.

Stereotypes that Deepen the Ethnic Boundary

Ethnic stereotyping of one community by another is not uncommon in the country. Similarly, it is a common practice in Hollywood movies in which the black people or Asians are portrayed to conform to the images held by the mainstream society. The construction of stereotypes is to ridicule or degrade a target ethnic group. British colonial officers such as Raffles and Swettenham had characterized the Malays as generous and loyal, but also conservative, lazy and god fearing. The Malays perceive the Chinese as hardworking and aggressive, but dirty because they eat pork and do not practise circumcision. The Chinese excel in business, but they could also be deceitful. In terms of appearance, the Malays often describe the Chinese as “*sepet*” (single eyelid). This stereotype is prevalent enough to justify the use of this word as the title of one of Yasmin’s films. The Indians are often thought of as being alcoholic, and suffer from body odour (Husin Ali, 1984: 68-75).

Yasmin’s presentation in her films was to avoid stale stereotyping. Jason had golden hair and sold pirated VCDs, but he also read and wrote poems. One of Jason’s friends looked like a hooligan, but he was in fact a piano player. Jason told Orked that not all Chinese were dishonest and not all Malays were lazy. When the Indian temple built by Ganesh was destroyed by the Muslims, though Ganesh chose to forgive them, Mahesh’s mother felt that they had little sense of sympathy.² Arising from these bitter experiences, she objected to both Ganesh and Mahesh’s relationships with Muslim girls. The message that Yasmin was trying to put across was that people did not hate each other because of their ethnic origins. It was “prejudice” that posed the biggest obstacle.

While interaction among ethnic communities could be the best way to overcome stereotyping, the way the population is distributed permitted little direct contact. Different historical and cultural backgrounds too militated against frequent interaction. Living in the same locality does not always promote inter-ethnic communication or understanding as one community has little in common with the others. Jason’s friend confessed that it was not that he did not like the Malays but that he “never really thought about them”.

Conclusion

By narrating the love stories between Muslim females and non-Muslim males in *Sepet* and *Talentine*, Yasmin was exploiting the medium of the film to advocate tolerance and acceptance among different ethnic communities. By narrowing the focus of the stories on two female protagonists who were Muslims, Yasmin was probably projecting her own experience into the films through which she hoped to reach out to audiences in the cities and towns of

Malaysia. However, as the dialogues were mainly in Malay, the films were viewed largely by Malay audiences rather than by the Chinese or Indians.

The theme of both films was about love that cuts across ethnic and religious lines, and also between social classes at the middle upper and lower levels. The message put across is that inter-ethnic relationships do develop under dissimilar ethnic backgrounds and on a socially unequal basis. Love, however, is a motivating force that can overcome ethnicity, cultural and social differences. Through “love at first sight”, the young generation does not have to understand each other in order to fall in love.

The portrayal of inter-ethnic relations reflects the reality of Malaysia’s multi-ethnic and cultural society. Real-life situations are replete with harsh realities of prejudices and discrimination. Yasmin adopted the rational approach of not allowing inter-ethnic relations to develop in a linear fashion but rather subject it to a circuitous process with many hurdles. The love affairs of the protagonists were met with various obstructions arising from considerations of ethnicity, religious and cultural differences and stereotypes. Yasmin had to abide by the unpredictability of the outcome of inter-ethnic relations by leaving an open-ended option at the ending of the love stories to allow the audience the liberty of free interpretation.

Through her films, Yasmin had indeed boldly tackled the complex issues of ethnic-relations and advocated tolerance and accommodation. Discontent with conditions in the past had flared into violent clashes, fuelled by ingrained prejudices and lack of effective communication. Going beyond the love stories that broke through the thick wall of ethnic prejudices, Yasmin’s underlying message was to appeal to all to discard the negative stereotypes towards one another in order to promote harmonious inter-ethnic relationships. Yasmin saw an urgent need to eradicate ethnic boundaries to enable different communities to interact and communicate freely in order to create a harmonious society.

Notes

- 1 On 4 March 2001, an Indian family in Kampung Medan on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur was engaged in a funeral ceremony while a Malay neighbour was holding a wedding ceremony. This was followed by a violent clash between Malays and Indians. Around 200 people were involved in the incident, of whom three were killed, 37 injured and 153 were detained by the police. Some cars were put on fire and weapons such as wooden sticks and *parang* (long knife) were recovered on the spot. The incident had also spread into several other settlements (Ang, 2006).
- 2 The desecration of religious buildings has occurred on several occasions. In December 1977, around 28 Hindu temples in Melaka and Perak were blasphemed. The most serious case happened at Kirling Subramaniam Temple in a small town in the state of Selangor, when some Muslims stormed into the temple and led to a violent clash with the guards of the temple. Four persons were killed in the incident (Gabriel, 2000: 130).

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