

CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING MALAYSIAN INDEPENDENT FEMALE DIRECTOR YASMIN AHMAD'S FIRST FILM, *SEPET*

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In 2004, Malaysian female independent film director, Yasmin Ahmad, premiered her first feature on the big screen, *Sepet*.¹ It drew enormous attention, with both good and bad reactions from across the country, and the film was an instant hit.² It was a breath of fresh air for Malaysian cinema, which is known for its emphasis primarily on entertainment. *Sepet* was filmed using a very different filmic style from those to which Malaysians are accustomed, but it was the issues that Ahmad addressed that drew strong reactions from the public and the media, and, eventually, from the government. In fact, a forum on the film, which was organized by Ministry of Information and was aired on national television, labelled Ahmad a “corrupter of culture”.

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² The English translation of the word ‘sepet’ is ‘slit-eye’, which is most commonly associated with Chinese eyes. The film was released on 24 February 2005. It was produced by MHZ films and directed by Yasmin Ahmad. The executive producer for *Sepet* was Rosnah Mohd Kassim, and the producer was Elyna Shukri.

In this paper I will give an exposition of some of the main features of this film, emphasizing the film's interest in exploring the richness possible in multi-racial encounter. I will suggest that sometimes the stratagems adopted by Yasmin Ahmad are transgressive of dominant Malay Muslim values, endorsed by the Malay Muslim establishment in Malaysia, and that this explains some of the attacks on the film. I will also explore the ambiguous ending of the film, suggesting that the ways the relationship between the couple remain unresolved at the end of the film is a stratagem used by Ahmad to avoid extreme criticism. Additionally I will be arguing that in some senses, Ahmad is attempting to open up the issue of multiracial encounters in a way that she might see as exemplary for Malaysia, and that to have made the film conform to Malay conservative values and standards would have inhibited the openness of her exploration.

Malaysia being a multicultural society, citizens have always been exhorted to handle issues of multiculturalism delicately and in a very positive light, so as to not pose a threat to racial harmony in Malaysia. Very often, representatives from the three main races in Malaysia are represented in advertisements, television programs or films, together, to represent the harmony and unity amongst the various races in Malaysia. Therefore, the fact that Ahmad used a Malay girl and a Chinese boy as her main characters was lauded and encouraged. But Ahmad did not just depict the typical stereotype of the harmonious Malaysian society. She took a different twist by challenging her audience to ignore the differences not only in race, but in religion, between her characters.

This film is an interracial romance between an intelligent Malay girl, Orked, who has an interest in Chinese movies, and a young Chinese man, Jason, selling VCDs and DVDs part time in a night market area in Ipoh. The relationship develops gradually with the couple beginning to see each other in transitional spaces such as fast food chains identified with neither races. Jason is from a poor family, with an abusive father and a mother who refuses to be submissive when given the opportunity. Orked is from a moderately wealthy middle class liberal Malay family, and her parents are supportive of her interest in Jason, when they learn of it from their servant. Eventually Orked meets Jason in a Chinese coffee shop which also sells roast pork, and there she is introduced to his Chinese friends, who are presented as thoughtful and engaging young people. In this scene there are perceptive discussions between the young people about how Chinese and

Malays see each other. Orked declares her surprise at Jason's talent in writing poetry and Keong's ability to play the piano, both forms of high brow art which are not commonly found ways of representing young men with Jason and Keong's background. At the same time, Jason and his friends are a little troubled by standover gangs who also populate and intimidate their milieu. Even in early scenes in the film, such as the 'love at first sight' meeting in the market stall, the language used is a mixture of Malay, Chinese and Chinese slang, and English. Many scenes are taken up with exploring varieties of multiracial encounter, and there is one very well written scene in which Orked defends her choice of boyfriend (a slant eye) against the mockery coming from a Malay male fellow student at the university.

The plot develops in such a way where, while both Jason and Orked are clearly compatible and mutually strongly attracted, Jason has another girl interested in him and he gets her pregnant, thus creating a crisis in the relationship for Orked, which leads to a stand off between the two. Orked eventually wins a scholarship to study in London. She leaves for the airport, not having communicated with Jason for some time. Jason simultaneously is heading for the airport on his motor scooter, in hope at least of seeing her there. Orked calls him on her handphone, at the instigation of her mother, but the film cuts to a shot of Jason lying unconscious on the road, blood flowing from a wound on his head. Despite this, the film ends ambiguously with Orked in conversation with Jason's voice on her handphone, reassuring her they will meet at some time in the future.

The themes of the film and its real concerns are clearly foreshadowed in the opening scenes of the film. In the first scene we are introduced to Jason, casually reading a poem to his mother in Mandarin. Jason's dyed hair resembles that of a gangster or a rebel. The poem is by the Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore. This is an unusual moment, with a rebellious looking young boy having an interest in Tagore's poems; and unusual also in cinema anywhere to find a mother and a son who are sharing an intellectual interest. This scene of the Chinese mother, clad in a *baju kebaya*³ while conversing in Malay and having her son respond in Chinese, shows the differences that Ahmad wants to project in her film. The poem by Tagore celebrates a mother's

³ A Malay type costume.

unconditional love towards her child, regardless of his poor choices and shortcomings. As the film progresses, we are able to understand that the poem exemplifies Jason's relationship with his mother. The scene concludes with Jason's mother stating that it is strange that this poem is from "people of a different culture and a different language and yet we can feel what was in his heart". It is significant that this scene immediately follows a recitation of the Koran in Arabic by a Malay girl clad in a *telekung*⁴. Once she finishes, posters of Japanese star Takeshi Kaneshiro are seen on her wall. This conflicts with our typical expectation of a religious Malay girl⁵

Shortly afterwards we see the same young man, in a different context, where he is with friends involved in DVD piracy and surrounded by electronic gear. He puts on music and dances to it. The music is traditional Malay popular music, with a discernible Arabian or Middle Eastern influence. Jason dances to it, fully identifying with its rhythms and suddenly appearing to be involved in Malay popular culture, even if in an exaggerated way. In his youthful excitement, he wants to involve his Chinese friends in this musically induced feeling state, and dances provocatively in front of them. This interest in being able to momentarily translate oneself between two cultures, emphasized both with seriousness and humour, via popular culture, is a recurrent motif and experience in the film, and I will discuss other instances of this later.

It is established fairly early on that Jason's mother is Peranakan Chinese.⁶ This is suggested via her accent and her style of dressing. Later on this is confirmed for the audience in the dialogue, and the issue is further developed in quite lengthy conversations between Jason and his friend Keong, half way through the film, with both agreeing that it is strange that the mingling of races to create Peranakan Chinese goes back to Malacca's Sultan Mansur Shah's marriage to Hang Li Po in the 15th Century, but that now the idea of mixing races is considered so much more difficult. Clearly Ahmad's project in this film is to make romantic encounters

⁴ A prayer outfit worn by Muslim women. which is usually white in colour, and covers the whole body except for the face and the palm of their hands.

⁵ Beh, Chun Chee (2006), "The Portrayal of Multiculturalism in Malaysian National Cinema: A Case Study of Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet*", *Asia Culture Forum 2006-Whither the Orient*, p. 4. Online at: <http://www.cct.go.krdata/acf2006/cinema/cinema-Session%201%20-%20Beh.pdf> (accessed 21 July 2008).

⁶ A term used to describe the descendents of the very early Chinese immigrants to the Nusantara region, who have partially adopted the Malay customs.

between people of different races more attractive and accessible. Stylistically she does this through having her characters respond positively to the popular cultures of each others' races, so the film is deepened and filled out with quotations from different kinds of popular culture from different races.

As an artist, Ahmad has an imagination that responds vividly and with delight to cultural differences, which she enjoys and can represent clearly and energetically in set piece scenes, often using music or some aspect of the popular culture of another race and often with a generous and positive sense of humour. Ahmad likes the Chinese, she does not simply accept or tolerate them; she is also fascinated by the way they organize their lives. The further point is that it is not just that Ahmad herself responds positively to cultural differences, but even more importantly, in many scenes she shows that her Malay characters also respond well to cultural differences.

In one scene which could be described as erotic, Orked's parents are depicted dancing exuberantly to Thai pop music, dressed in nothing but their sarongs, while feeding each other grapes as they move romantically to the music. Traditional Chinese pop music is played in the background in the scene where Orked and Jason have their photographs taken together at a local photo studio. Orked's mother and maid are often shown sitting in front of the television watching foreign soap operas and getting completely engrossed in the dialogue, although as the father pointed out, they do not actually understand the language and are dependent on the Malay subtitles to follow the story. At another point these two are shown humming to a traditional Chinese tune whilst observing Orked's meeting with her boyfriend outside their family home.

Orked often uses her limited Chinese vocabulary whenever conversing with Jason or Keong. In the scene where Jason introduces Orked to Keong for the first time, Jason points out that Orked and Keong have one thing in common, and that is their taste in John Woo films. Aside from John Woo, other iconic figures such as Wong Kar Wai, Takeshi Kaneshiro and P. Ramlee are used to describe the characters' interest in various types of film and art. Keong shows his knowledge of Malay cinema when he comments that Malay movies today have deteriorated greatly since the period of P. Ramlee in the 1950s.

The way Ahmad handles some of these issues, mainly the sensitive ones such as religion, race, language and multiculturalism, was what offended some people, Malays mostly. Any misguided interpretation of Islam, the official religion, will not be taken lightly in a film. Hence, most filmmakers who try to approach sensitive subject matter will choose to play safe. The sensitivities of Malays and Muslims become an important priority, and to offend their faith or belief in any way would have its consequences, which would usually mean a film being banned or widely criticized by religious scholars, the media and in Ahmad's case, even the government.

The understanding in Malaysia when non-Muslims want to marry a Muslim is that they will have to convert to Islam before the marriage can be considered legal⁷. But this need to convert, as a stage in the evolution of a relationship, is at no point raised in the course of the relationship between Orked and Jason in the film *Sepet*. The film engages with Malay and Chinese languages, religions and popular culture, but appears to deliberately ignore the requirement for conversion. This gives the film an unusual freedom in the way it shows the relationship developing, but it may also be the reason why at the end of the film, the expected outcome, a happy mixed race couple, does not occur.

Whatever problems the young people in this film need to confront in the course of their relationship, never once is their difference in religion presented as a problem, for either of them, or for their families. At one point in the film, Jason's mother realising that Orked is Malay, insists that Jason introduce Orked to her. Even when Orked's father voices his disapproval of their relationship, it has nothing to do with the fact that Jason is Chinese, but rather with the fact that Jason had got another girl pregnant. When they speak of their future together, again there is no mention of Jason converting to Orked's faith. In a discussion I had with Yasmin Ahmad in

⁷ At the inaugural law conference, "Overview of Recent Development in Malaysian Law", organized by the Law Faculty of Universiti Malaya and LexisNexis, adjunct professor Mehrun Siraj highlighted issues such as conversion in her paper, "Conversion to Islam and its effect on a non-Muslim marriage". Online at: <http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2006/1/16/lifefocus/12795576&sec=lifefocus> (accessed 21 July 2008).

March 2008, she explained that she wanted her audiences to forget that Jason and Orked were of different race and religion, as early as ten minutes into the film.⁸

Adat or tradition is something that the Malays regard very highly. There are certain conventions that a person has to abide by in order to be considered a proper Malay, according to *adat*. For example, the Malay language, a decent dress sense and polite manners are deeply embedded in the Malay culture. Malay women especially are often portrayed in Malaysian films and television programs in such a way that they uphold these qualities and traditions. There is a certain degree of conservatism where the Malays are concerned. This is because *adat* and Islam are integral to Malay identity and exist in complementary fashion.⁹ In Malaysia, Malays are automatically considered as Muslims, hence Islamic law and traditions applies to Malays in accordance with our *adat*.

Therefore, issues such as a woman's *aurah*¹⁰ which is an Islamic concept, is also essential in forming the proper Malay identity. In a Muslim woman's case, her *aurah* is her whole body except for her palms and face. While not every Malay woman covers her head in a *hijab* or Muslim head scarf, most of them would want to be seen dressed decently. Any over-exposure of her *aurah* would be heavily criticized as being morally indecent. In *Sepet*, although when they are in public the main female characters are always dressed in the traditional Malay outfit, the *baju kurung*, when they are at home they are otherwise only *berkemban*, which translates as wearing a sarong around their midriff. Although these characters are played by actors, both the characters, and the actors (Malay and Muslims in real life), are supposed to uphold their values and traditions on screen. The over-exposure of these women in their home environment in *Sepet* made a few very uncomfortable, and it was widely written about in the press. In *Sepet*, Orked's parents are depicted openly touching, dancing closely, lying in bed together and are often dressed

⁸ Yasmin Ahmad, personal communication to the author, Melbourne, 29 March 2008.

⁹ Khoo, Gaik Cheng, (2006), *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysia Film and Literature*, UBC Press, Vancouver, p. 5.

¹⁰ An Arabic word which means shame and humility, and it refers to parts of human body which have to be covered from the sight of others.

in nothing more than a sarong, which led the film to be accused of having “pornographic elements”.¹¹

One of the main components of *adat* lies in the language. The Malay language, also Malaysia’s official language, is regarded very highly, and is often corrected to achieve the highest standards.¹² Proper pronunciation, spelling and grammar are essential when using the Malay language in both print and electronic media. Any deliberate misuse of the language will be banned from being published or produced. However, the irony stands that Malaysians, coming from various racial backgrounds, tend to merge their respective languages when conversing with each other. Most commonly, the Malay and English language are combined in a conversation, and this is termed *Bahasa rojak*, or mixed language.

The characters in this film converse in *bahasa rojak* almost throughout the length of the feature. In the first scene where Orked and Jason meet at a night market, Orked converses with her Malay girl friend in both English and Malay in the same sentence. Then she modifies her accent when speaking to Jason, and speaks in Chinese slang, which is very common in Malaysia. But that is not considered the proper way of speaking the Malay language, and this too was heavily criticized by critics of the film. It appears that the Malay language is regarded as having been degraded, when used in such a manner.

Ahmad is bold and confronting when tackling racial and religious issues. A scene to which objection was taken was a brief scene where Orked’s mother and maid have a candid conversation about both Orked and Jason’s future as students, and they bring up an issue that has rarely been spoken about in public in this manner before - the special rights of Malays. They point out the fact that Orked was awarded a government scholarship to study abroad with a result

¹¹ Diani, Hera (2006), “Noted Malaysian filmmaker Yasmin confronts prejudice head-on”, *The Jakarta Post*. Online at: <http://www.kabar-irian.com/pipermail/kabar-indonesia/2006-September/011748.html> (accessed 21 July 2008)

¹² Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Malaysia (The Council for Language and Literature Malaysia) is the government body responsible for coordinating the use of the Malay language in Malaysia. Its basic mission is to enrich the Malay language as a language of knowledge and intellect, and a uniting language that will uphold national traits and build the nation. Online at: <http://dbp.gov.my/lamandbp/main.php> (accessed 3 October 2008).

of only five 'A's, whilst Jason failed to obtain a scholarship, even though he scored seven 'A's. During Orked and Jason's break up, Jason talks on the phone with Keong, and he reveals his future plans to be with Orked. In this conversation Jason mentions that one day he will persuade Orked to get a part time job, so that she could return the scholarship and give it to those who really need it. This unequal distribution of educational opportunities between the different races in Malaysia has been one topic that has been discussed very widely, but with great caution, as the government has warned that it could pose a threat to racial harmony. But never before has a significant Malay film director so openly addressed this issue. In that very short scene, Ahmad was the first Malay filmmaker ever to represent the voices of non-Malays on this issue.

As a result of all of these 'transgressions', in 2006 in a forum aired on a local television program Ahmad was labelled a "corrupter of culture", for defiling Malay Muslim culture in her movies. The forum was entitled "*Sepet and Gubra* Corrupt Our Culture".¹³ Film critic and journalist, Akmal Abdullah, was concerned that the message and portrayal of interracial relationships in her films might have negative influences on her audiences and possibly corrupt the Malay culture altogether.¹⁴ Abdullah, together with film producer, Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman, questioned how a pious Malay Muslim girl could fall in love with a Chinese *kafir* or infidel, who was also a criminal.¹⁵

Ahmad has revealed that prior to the forum a representative from the Ministry of Information rang her and invited her to the forum, which she flatly refused to do.¹⁶ She responded that the title of the forum alone was condemning enough, without her having to go into the details of the film. After the forum was aired, Ahmad commented that it was nothing short of a public flogging, but that if anything, the forum helped boost ticket sales for *Sepet*. She

¹³ On 23 April 2006, RTM1's live program called '*Fenomena Seni*' (Arts Phenomena) held a forum called "*Sepet dan Gubra* Mencemar Budaya" (*Sepet and Gubra* Corrupt our Culture). At the end of the program, 59% of the audience, voting through SMS polling, agreed with the assertion made by the seminar title.

¹⁴ Beh, "The Portrayal of Multiculturalism in Malaysian National Cinema", p. 3.

¹⁵ Bissme S, "*Sepet and Gubra* draw controversy", *The Sun*, 26 April 2006. Online at: <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=13943> (accessed 23 June 2008).

¹⁶ Yasmin Achmad, personal communication, Melbourne, 29 March 2008.

revealed her disgust at the statements made by the film producer at the forum which read “Malaysia Melayu punya” (Malaysia belong to Malays) and the fact that the journalist labelled Jason an infidel. She mentioned that none of these statements received any form of reprimand from the authorities, who do have a responsibility to criticise racial vilification, and she questioned the message that is being conveyed by the statements made on television. In her blog Ahmad stated that the fact that the journalist branded a person of another race as infidel is highly ironic, for Malaysia only has 18 million Muslims, while there are 40 million Muslims in China (the 40 million Muslims in China being mainly Chinese).¹⁷

Sepet appears to be an affectionate portrait of Malays as Malays, and Chinese as Chinese, which shows a huge respect for the differences in culture within the various races in Malaysia. The Malay culture is very evident in Orked and her family’s lifestyle choices, sense of dress and speech. In Jason’s case, although his mother is of *baba nyonya* descent, and speaks Malay fluently, Jason converses in Cantonese to both his parents. Although he is dating a Malay girl, his Chinese roots are deeply embedded in the way he speaks and eats. Jason epitomizes the typical Malaysian Chinese person, who can converse in Malay, English and Cantonese, and at times he mixes all of them up, as when he is talking to his best friend Keong. Keong, who is Hokkien, speaks the Hokkien dialect when conversing with Jason and Jason seems to understand him although he is not presented in the film as able to speak the dialect. Even when Jason brings Keong to meet Orked for the first time, they choose to meet in a Chinese coffee shop, a very common hang out for Chinese in Malaysia, for these shops are allowed to sell pork openly in this Islamic state. Orked’s momentary reaction to the pork she sees as she enters the shop, although humorously presented, also represents the real way Malays view pork, which is *haram* or forbidden in Islam.

But above all, the most talked about scene which received a huge reaction from almost everyone watching the film was the way the film ended. Here was where Ahmad steered away from the conventions of linear narratives, which are so common in Malaysian films. As described earlier in my outline of the narrative, Ahmad left the ending hanging, leaving it to the

¹⁷ Online at: <http://yasminthetortellor.blogspot.com/2006/05/my-recent-article-uncut-version.html>, (accessed 16 June 2008).

audience to decide what had happened, which created massive confusion amongst people debating this film. The actual ending was not revealed until the sequel, which was released about two years later.

Towards the end of *Sepet*, we see Jason on a motorbike rushing to the airport to meet Orked before she flies overseas. The scene, which cuts back and forth from Jason rushing to Orked crying in the car, suddenly takes a surprising turn, when, within seconds, we see Jason lying unconscious by the roadside bleeding profusely. The immediate assumption is that he has passed on, or was seriously injured. However, as the scene cuts to Orked phoning Jason to confess her feelings, the other end of the line is picked up and we hear Jason's voice.

Hence, many interpretations and arguments followed, as there was a forum on the film. Some suggested supernatural elements, which again could be extremely controversial. Some banked on narrative logic, resulting in bizarre interpretations, such as Jason did not die but was just seriously injured, hence the strain in his voice when speaking to Orked. This viewer failed to see that Jason was unconscious in that shot. Another one suggested that it was Jason's best friend, Keong, who picked up the phone and conveyed the message to Orked on Jason's behalf, as to not upset her. Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan in an article on this forum, "*Sepet: Sisi Semantik, Sisi Sinematik*", argues that those contributing to the forum were too dependent on ideas of a clear narrative logic, to a point where they show they do not understand that the use of narrative and cinematic codes at this point in the film were intended to produce a sense of ambiguity.¹⁸

Feminist film theorist, Barbara Creed, has suggested that transgressions of patriarchal law in mainstream cinema are always either prevented, or punished if they occur.¹⁹ Creed cites the case of Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Mildred, played by Joan Crawford, leaves her husband and her unsatisfactory marriage to pursue a career. Mildred's beloved daughter dies tragically at the end of the film. Patriarchal ideology would require that somebody who transgresses does not get away with it, and Creed suggests that the film *Mildred Pierce* provides

¹⁸ Abu Hassan, Badrul Redzuan. (2006), "Sisi Semantik, Sisi Sinematik", *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, vol 3, UiTM.

¹⁹ Creed, Barbara. (1987), *Feminist Film Theory: Reading the Text*; in "*Don't Shoot Darling!*" *Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Greenhouse, pp. 280-313.

an ending in which the transgressor, Mildred, is punished at the end of the film. In the case of *Sepet*, Jason not converting to Islam would be a transgression. Clearly, Ahmad has seen the dangers of showing this young couple marrying without Jason converting to Islam, but she does not want to include this religious requirement in her film.²⁰ Ahmad's way of resolving this is to prevent the relationship from clearly continuing at the end of the film. Here it is not so much a case of the transgressor being punished, but of the film avoiding the moment of transgression.

Ahmad's films are very personal as she often uses names of her family members and she reveals that most of the casual and laid back attitudes of her characters are what her family is really like. Ahmad, whose two marriages were both to non-Malays, knows interracial marriages well. It is important for there to be a filmmaker with this background in Malaysia, for mixed families are very common in Malaysia. Ahmad has surely done well, as all her films have been hailed at international film festivals. Back home none of her films have shied away from controversy. *Sepet* has a sequel, *Gubra* (2006), the colloquial Malay term for anxiety or panic, and a prequel called *Mukhsin* (2007). Ahmad did not budge from her position when making *Sepet*, and has continued using the same style while approaching different subject matters in her later films. However, a film she made in 2008, *Muallaf*, which means 'the convert', was banned altogether in Malaysia, presumably for its challenging subject matter: converting to Islam, and leaving Islam.

²⁰ Yasmin Ahmad, personal communication, Melbourne, 29 March 2008.