

# The representation of Malay-Muslim women's identity in contemporary Malaysian cinema

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## Abstract

This paper explores the identity of Malay-Muslim women based on the religious foundation of Islam, feminism and gender in contemporary Malaysian cinema. The number of films produced in the contemporary era between the year of 2000 to the present have portrayed Muslim women characters of fervent spirit and intelligence, possess good values, authoritative, mentally resilient, and independent. Socio-cultural and political changes in Malaysia have encouraged major improvement towards Malay-Muslim women as representational subjects in contemporary Malaysian films. The Malaysian film industry has witnessed an increasing number of films with Islamic content especially towards the end of 1990s. The trend has become popular among Malaysian producers and been well received by the local audience. This scenario indicates a significant relationship between Muslim women and the Islamic related-issue, making it a substantial subject to be examined not only in a social-political context, but also in the cinema studies context. This paper will critically explore the representation of Malay-Muslim women in contemporary Malaysian cinema. The discussion will also consider how their representation intertwined with the religion and customs aspects which subsequently influence a trend in the representation of Malay-Muslim women in contemporary Malaysian cinema.

**Keywords:** *Malay-Muslim women representation; Islamic feminism; contemporary Malaysian cinema.*

## 1. Introduction

The paper is a study on the representation of Malay-Muslim women's identity in Malaysian cinema released between the year of 2000 to the present. Importantly, the study will take into account critical understanding on the portrayal of Malay-Muslim women in the cinematic space which is experiencing drastic transformation in the local scene. Hence, this paper will explore the portrayal of multi-faceted female Muslim characters with progressive identity in the form of strong religious spirituality to raise awareness of their liberated voice as opposed to the passive images represented in most mainstream Malaysian cinema. Importantly, despite Islam being the core identity of the Malays and is the official religion in the state of Malaysia which

embeds Islamic values in most context of Malay-Muslim lives. Prior portrayals of Malay-Muslim women with representations of visible religious identities were under-represented in Malaysian cinema. Such circumstance further reinforced the idea of remoteness of Muslim women's identity and Islamic related issues in cinematic frame that has generally been left at the margins of scholarly discourse.

Historically, since the first Malay film was introduced in the 1930s, most primary roles given to the Malay-Muslim women have been limited to certain roles till the present. Several researches performed by cinematic scholars in Malaysia revealed that the depiction of female characters from its inception was stereotypically developed in a number of persona (Seoh 1998;

Basri, Ibrahim and Samani 2010) and they are frequently 'sexualized' in their cinematic expressions through often sheer and revealing wardrobes with more likeliness of being partially naked as opposed to their male co-actors. This is further viewed by Basri, Ibrahim and Samani (2010: 38):

"Women were portrayed in two extreme poles - the good-hearted, demure, submissive, domesticated and 'ever-willing-to-sacrifice-everything' female; and the evil, scheming, conniving, home-wrecking, materialistic woman. Such characterizations not only added drama to the narratives, they also rhetorically functioned to propagate the conceptual metaphor of the desirable female as "pure, white and innocent" whereas the most undesirable one is "defiled, black and sinful"

This is further supported by Kueh (2000) has identified that a woman's character who is beautiful and physically attractive will commonly be represented as someone who does not possess intellectual capabilities; instead, they were represented as passive partners to the male character. Although such situation is not always the case, it is very common in many productions. Also, Kueh (2000) further observed that female characters are frequently represented as someone who do not have formal education given that their character are commonly constrained in the domestic setting.

Following this, Basri, Ibrahim and Samani (2010) asserted that, such stereotype and typical representation between modern women and traditional women barely resonates with the positive portrayal of Muslim women as a representational subject. In another upsetting revelation, modern female Muslim characters are commonly depicted as morally corrupt with the images of being sexy, immoral and materialistic. On the contrary, traditional female Muslim characters would usually hold the persona of religiously conservative, passive and unfashionable. It is also much regretted that many Malay-Muslim women roles are presented as subjects to endless violence and discrimination, as linked and reinforced to the ideology of monolithic Malay-Muslim society of Malaysia.

Thus, based on the above circumstance, this paper will primarily look an overview of the representations of Malay-Muslim female characters whose persona are created to be highly religious educated, strong, vocal Muslim in contemporary Malaysian cinema. It has been much too long that female Muslim characters are portrayed as passive and with the all too familiar stereotype images which are currently represented in the narrative of Malaysian cinema. Therefore, this paper is significant because the cinematic representation in Malaysia is going through changes and making progress with time.

## **2. Islamic feminism as a theoretical framework**

With interests in the representations of female Malay-Muslim characters in Malaysian cinema, the study will take the theoretical framework to carefully consider elements of Islam and female persona in the Islamic perspectives. Among the elements that need to be cautiously discussed is the persona of Malay-Muslim women in progressive Malaysia which is made up of multi-ethnicity. Not only that, it also needs to be considered that modern Malaysia has the influences of the Western modernity which may not entirely share the same values or *adat* in the Malay culture. Another concerning matter worthy to be raised in this study is the discussion of the level that Malay-Muslim women are allowed to have or the role that they are able to play in the cinematic space. Another area that will be explored is how Malaysian film makers represent issues around the notion of Islamic identity while addressing matters around women in the country with the existing practices of secular law (with regard to criminal and civil justice) and the sharia law (laws of the land) which are becoming contributing factors in reshaping the local films.

Analysis on the representations of female Muslim character in selected films and their strong relationship with the state, religion and traditional culture will engage with feminist scholars that have substantial considerations with religion alongside social cultural intervention to situating the films and gender representations. In this vein, Hafez (2011) suggested that the social and historical accounts such as Islamic practices, modernity, local cultures, traditions, and the post-colonial and

nation state-building process of a certain nation must be taken into consideration when analysing the status of Muslim women given all of the mentioned are dominant factors in determining the status of Muslim women in specific local societies.

The justification for employing Islamic feminism for this study in the context of film studies is twofold. First, Islamic feminism 'speaks on behalf' of the Muslim women both collectively and individually (Badran 2009). Admittedly, within the Malaysian local context, the construction of female characters in Malaysian film are by much characterized and determined by the religious and sociocultural background. Therefore, in this research, it is argued that the depiction of progressive women characters in the form of highly religious educated, strong, vocal, independent have strong relationship with their religion and Malaysia's socio culture and politics. Thus, this study requires a theoretical framework like Islamic feminism that has connection with religion.

Second, current global interests on the images of Islam and Muslims have also provided a space in cinema studies from the gender perspective in relation to Islamic feminism. It was asserted by Badran (2009) that the global emergence of Islamic feminism is considered as a contemporary phenomenon engaging with the issues of Muslim women's rights and emancipation. Badran (2009) further explained that Islamic feminism is popularly viewed as part of Muslim women's socialist movement, which has begun to question the status of Muslim women in religion and society.

It is hoped that the employment of Islamic feminism within the context of Malaysian cinema studies will partially contribute to the advancement of film theory particularly in the local setting. Additionally, by exploring and offering an alternative and understanding on the vicissitudes of Malaysian cinema studies in the analysis of Muslim women in cinematic space will encourage further discussions and research in the local setting. However, it is important to note that the Islamic feminism is relatively new and experiencing continuous discourse in various applications among Islamic feminist and Muslim female scholars around the globe (Badran 2009). Thus, this theory offers an extensive areas to be discussed in the interest of Islamic feminism in the cinematic setting also

provides a platform for discussion on matters concerning on the status of Muslim women within the Islamic society.

### 3. The representation of Malay-Muslim women's identity

Throughout the observation of the Malaysian cinema setting for this study, it can be viewed that contemporary Malaysian films produced from the late 1990s to the present witnessed a proliferation of representations of female characters as in leading roles imbued with an Islamic identity. A number of successful Malaysian production companies such as *Grand Brilliance*, *Tayangan Unggul*, and *Metrowealth* have continuously portrayed female characters with visible Islamic attributes such as putting on the veil and pious as protagonists to propel the narrative forward. It is visible from films produced by these companies clearly exhibit female characters playing Islamic persona while highlighting their conflicts, struggles and triumphs across the Muslim world.

Representations of female Muslim characters that dwell on various turmoil and triumph produced in the local cinematic frame are further affirmed by local film scholars as one of the most popular representations in the narrative of the Malaysian film industry produced in the late 1990s to the present. It was explained by Norman (2012) that contemporary Malaysian films began to construct female characters as protagonists with multifaceted religious identities in order to propel the narrative forward. Putting forward a few examples, Norman (2012) explained that the romantic comedy *Karipap-Karipap Cinta – Curry Puffs of Love* (2011, by Othman Hafsham) featured a modern semi-veil-clad graduate from Cairo's Al-Azhar University as its female protagonist. Films such as *Syurga Cinta – Paradise of Love* (2009, by Ahmad Idham) and *Nur Kasih: The Movie* (2011, Kabir Bhatia), explored Islamic themes in an explicit manner with the personification of female Muslim protagonists who are religiously educated and preserved the Malay traditional way of life confronting the modern way of life. A successful box-office film, *Ombak Rindu – The Pining Wave* (2011), depicts a female protagonist who is a conservative religious teacher (*ustazah*) who struggles to fulfil her desire to be reunited with her husband. *Tujuh Petala Cinta – Seven*

*Petals of Love* (2012, Azhari Zain) represents a *burqa*-clad female protagonist, while at the same time publicizing itself as an 'Islamic romantic film'. Another controversial film directed by Yasmin Ahmad, *Muallaf* constructs an educated young female Muslim as a central protagonist through the representation brand of Islam that promotes love, mercy and compassion.

With their Islamic identity and Islamic traditional background character constructions, this research found that the female Muslim protagonists in selected films are portrayed as someone who are religiously obedient and steadfast in their spirituality. In order to achieve their desire and freedom, the female Muslim characters are constructed as someone frequently struggling within the society that is highly patriarchal alongside multiple practices of Islam in the Malaysian context. The image of female Muslim characters is frequently represented in the multifaceted of Islamic identities, yet they are experiencing similar challenges and conflicts such as patriarchal biases and polygamy issues due to the different interpretations of Islamic teachings in Malaysia. In turn, the construction of Muslim female characters in contemporary Malaysian cinema appears more holistic; often time complex and dynamic instead of being stereotyped. Such development offers a more promising character in the narrative of Malaysian cinema.

With some visible changes and progress made in contemporary Malaysian cinema, much progress has been made in the persona of female Muslim characters in the narrative of Malaysian film produced between the 1990s to the present. Several researchers have made their criticism towards Malaysian films such as Seoh (1998) and Basri, Ibrahim and Samani (2010) for failure to adequately represent the diverse female characters, Malaysian contemporary filmmakers however have observed new ways to express distinct voices of Malay Muslim women in their films. At the beginning of 2000, there was an upsurge in the popularity of Malaysian films with 'Islamic content' that create the growing presence of Islam in popular culture (Weintraub 2011). With this change, there has also been an increasing positive portrayal towards the female Malay-Muslim characters as representational subjects.

Contemporary Malaysian filmmakers have begun to portray and construct Malay-Muslim women with diverse Islamic images and

characteristics as primary characters in order to impel the narrative forward. As mentioned earlier, *Gubra – Anxiety* (Yasmin Ahmad, 2006), *Syurga Cinta – Paradise of Love* (Ahmad Idham, 2008), *Muallaf – The Convert* (Yasmin Ahmad, 2009), *Salam Cinta – Regards of Love* (Azhari Zain, 2011) and *Tujuh Petala Cinta – Seven Layers of Love* (Azhari Zain, 2012), *Ombak Rindu – Pining Waves* (Osman Ali, 2011) and *Nur Kasih The Movie* (Khabir Bakhtiar, 2011) are among the films that represent female Muslim protagonists for the development of narratives and characters. In addition, to exemplify their important characters, the female images are used on promotional posters partly to signify the content of the film. Sufficiently, based on close observations, there is a plethora of films produced in 2000 featuring images of veiled women as the highlight in local films.

Following the cinematic transformation, Gray (2015) explained that the status of female characters represented in the narrative of Malaysian cinema is a result of sociocultural and political ideologies in Malaysia. Gray (2015) pointed that, popular media like films interconnected and provide insights into the relationship between media, politics, religion, and society in the Malaysia. Cheng (2006) postulated that, Malaysian filmmakers reflect an interest to recapture the Malay custom (*adat*) while constructing a dynamic, modern, postcolonial identity that differentiates itself from the idea of Western culture.

In relation to the portrayal of female representation, Cheng (2006) further detailed out that the progression towards 'more Islam' in Malaysia is propagated by the fourth Malaysia Prime Minister, which was obvious in 1984 when he declared his political agenda to 'Islamise' the nation and introduce the concept of 'moderate Islam' in contrary to the Islamic practices in the Middles East. Consequently, the Malaysian government through the *Malaysian Censorship Board of Malaysia – Lembaga Penapisan Malaysia* (LPF) began to actively censor films that display content that are contrary to the teachings of Islam, an attempt later brought tremendous impact to the Malaysian entertainment industry. The movie *Fantasia* (1992) directed by Aziz M. Osman was the first to feel the pinch of movie banning for several images represented in the film is considered as un-Islamic. Following this, in 1998 the national *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM) announced that

only images considered to be Islamic will be given air time (Gray 2002).

The idea to Islamise the nation promoted by the fourth Malaysia Prime Minister became more visible at the end of the 1990s, when the image of Muslim women with Islamic identity is not limited to the cinematic space, but is also evident 'behind the scenes' when Muslim popular celebrities such as actors and singers 'transformed' themselves into the more apparent 'Muslim identity' by wearing the veil (*hijab*) to fulfil Islamic way of lifestyle. With this change, female celebrities who are fully veiled outside the screen, will also maintain their 'Muslim identity' when on screen. This includes no physical contact or intimacy acts between Muslim female and male actors. This is done to honour the actress who has already moved towards a more Islamic way of lifestyle. To delicately handle the changes and requirement for the Islamic portrayal in the cinematic frame, film companies need to explore for alternatives in showcasing intimate scenes between female Muslim characters and male characters without compromising the cinematic creativity.

While 'Islamic identity' is an obvious example of how Muslim female characters are represented in films with Islamic content, there are plethora of religious symbols represented as part of the film form and mise-en-scene, creating distinct cinematic visualizations. The film form such as mise-en-scene such as camera angle, colour, lighting, setting, costume, storyline and music among others are arranged to create religious sphere and setting. In this sense, films with Islamic messages frequently begin with passages from sacred texts often time from the Quran verses, sermon, and images of holy structure, suggesting that something highly moral is to be learned from the film. This can be

clearly seen in Malaysian cinematic space whereby the trend in Malaysian contemporary films would feature Arabic words and Quran verses in their dialogues in order to emphasize the sacredness of the Islamic tenets. The plot is associated with Islamic music and theme songs and often time is contained with religious messages. Ahmad (2010) categorised this type of films as an 'Islamic film' or 'religious Malay film' or 'Islamic cinema' due to the use of obvious Islamic symbols in contemporary Malaysian films.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The contemporary Malaysian films produced from the 1990s and to the present, have an 'active' depiction of Malay-Muslim women's identity possessing good values, is physically and mentally strong, religiously intelligent and independent. This study also found that, the female Muslim characters is represented as someone who draws empowerment and strength from overcoming the daily challenges and assault of the patriarchy society and become significant roles in the film narrative. They act as an agency to act independently and make choices within the institution such as religion, the state, the local socio-cultural setting and politics that is patriarchal. Such progress is considered a new style of representation establishing an energetic and powerful medium that reflects diversified versions of Islamic practices as evident in Malaysian social milieu.

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