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South East Asia Research

ISSN 0967-828X

Gaik Cheng Khoo
2006 C1
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Publisher: IP Publishing Ltd

Volume 14, Number 2, July 2006
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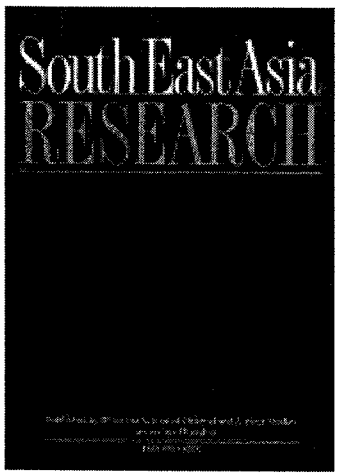

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'You've come a long way, baby'
Erma Fatima, film and politics[1]

Khoo Gaik Cheng

Abstract: **In the late 1990s, only two women filmmakers made a mark in the Malay film industry – Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima. Their films capture the attitude, spirit and vision of Mahathirism with regard to gender, sexuality, race relations and Malay(sian) identity. They show women who are comfortable with modernity and urban living, yet who have not lost touch with their *adat* (customary) roots, family values and community spirit. These cinematic positions metaphorically reflect the ideology of UMNO's 'moderate' stance on women and modernity as compared with the position of PAS and other religious 'fundamentalist' groups. This paper focuses on Erma Fatima and her career and films.**

Keywords: **women filmmakers; gender; nationalism; *adat*; Islam; Malay cinema**

In general, the Malay film industry produces commercial films, mainly for local cinemas, and secondarily for the Malay-language video compact disc (VCD) market, which extends to Singapore and Indonesia. While foreign film and cultural influences can be observed within these films historically[2] as well as in contemporary times, through imitation plots, genres and intertextual references and filmmaking styles, the current industry itself is quite insular, with the same few filmmakers producing formulaic fare that revolves around young lovers, some obstacle to the relationship and perhaps an element of crime. Common genres include the romantic comedy, low-brow comedy, action films

[1] I would like to acknowledge the Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF) for providing me with a travel grant to present this paper at the EUROSEAS Conference in Paris, 2 September 2004. Second, I thank the two anonymous peer reviewers of this paper, as well as Sophia Siddique Harvey and Rachel Harrison for their valuable critical feedback.

[2] See William Van der Heide (2002), *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*, Amsterdam UP, Amsterdam.

and family dramas that target the 18- to 35-year-old crowd. Few of these films aspire to achieve international acclaim, with the exception of the work of U-Wei Haji Saari and, lately, large government-funded 'blockbusters' such as the historical *Paloh* (2003)[3] and the mythological *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (*The Princess of Mount Ledang*, 2004) whose big budgets could not possibly be recuperated through mere local box office takings. In 1999, when *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (*The Last Malay Woman*) was released, the film industry was still in the doldrums due to the financial crisis and produced only seven films, half of its average number. Since 2000, there has been a parallel filmmaking movement of independents who work mostly outside of industry parameters. Their work has been attracting international attention.[4] This paper, however, focuses on the local Malay film industry, particularly on filmmakers who are interested in making films of artistic and social merit. It follows on from previous research on Malay New Wave filmmakers of the 1990s such as U-Wei, Adman Salleh, Mahadi J. Murat, Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima whose films dealt overtly with serious themes, engaged with Malay identity and did it without underestimating the intelligence of their viewers (Khoo, 2005; Zawawi, 2004). In the late nineties, only two women filmmakers made a mark in the Malay film industry – Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima.[5] Their films capture the attitude, spirit and vision of Mahathirism with regard to gender, sexuality, race relations and Malay(sian) identity. As I argue in *Reclaiming Adat* (2005), they show women who are comfortable with modernity and urban living, yet who have not lost touch with their *adat* (customary) roots, family values and community spirit. These cinematic positions metaphorically reflect the ideology of UMNO's 'moderate' stance on women and modernity as compared with the position of PAS and other religious 'fundamentalist' groups.[6]

[3] *Paloh* is named after a town in the state of Johor.

[4] See Khoo, Gaik Cheng (2005), 'Just-doing-it themselves: Malaysian independent filmmaking', OSIAN's *Cinemaya* (formerly *The Asian Film Quarterly*), April–June, pp 14–17; and 'Art, entertainment and politics', *Criticine: Elevating Discourse on Southeast Asian Cinema,* 14 October 2005, Website: http://criticine.com/feature_print.php?id=20.

[5] Rosnani Jamil, an older female director who began directing in the 1980s, continues to direct mediocre works. The rise of independent filmmakers in the new millennium has also yielded Yasmin Ahmad, a commercials director who has made three feature-length films, *Rabun* (for television), *Sepet* (2004) and *Gubra* (2005) that deal with social themes.

[6] UMNO is the United Malays National Organization, the main political party in the coalition National Front that has been in power since independence in 1957. PAS is the Islamic opposition party.

This paper focuses on Erma Fatima, whose meteoric career has in some ways paralleled the trajectory of the New Malay since the introduction of the National Economic Policy (NEP, 1971–90). The NEP years saw massive migration from rural to urban areas for work, with industrialization, modernization and the emergence of a broad Malay middle class. From playing supporting roles as good *kampung* girl-turned-prostitute, to starring roles as heroine, feminist and the director of *The Last Malay Woman*, to directing and producing big-budget government movies such as *Embun* (2002)[7] and finally, briefly acting as Chair of the Special Programmes Bureau of UMNO Puteri, Erma Fatima best captures the Virginia Slims maxim, 'You've come a long way, baby'.[8] Her rise to fame echoes the socioeconomic and geographic shifts of the New Malay. But like the notorious ad, has she indeed come a long way? Although her success may result from the negotiations women in the predominantly male Malay film industry have to deal with, even feminist sympathizers claim that she does women filmmakers a disservice by being such a poor role model. There have been accusations of her lack of respect for scriptwriters' original works, and her brief involvement with UMNO Puteri was regarded as a bargain struck with the political higher-ups in order to finance her direction of the production of *Embun*. At RM3 million, it was the most expensive state-sponsored film at that time. Erma Fatima's fleeting involvement in politics may reflect that the film industry is not immune to the political patronage that generally mars Malaysian culture and political economy.

Critics have traced the economic success of some New Malays to patronage ties with UMNO (Gomez and Jomo, 1997). Another critic even changed the name for the pro-Malay policy from Bumiputraism to UMNOputraism to reflect the hegemonic power of the party during Mahathir's period, which was characterized as authoritarian (Leee, 1987, p xi). This paper will briefly trace the rise of Erma Fatima's career and work, focusing more closely on a discursive reading of *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* and *Embun* than on the director herself.[9] I will

[7] *Embun*, literally meaning 'dew', is the name of the female protagonist of the film.

[8] *UMNO Puteri* is the young women's wing of the United Malay National Organization. *Puteri* means 'daughter' or 'princess'.

[9] The busy filmmaker was difficult to reach for an interview and did not return phone calls or acknowledge receipt of my fax. Also, during our brief phone conversation, she informed me that her earlier critically acclaimed 'teledrama', *Jangan*, had not been transferred to tape. This unfortunately meant that I could not view the film for myself.

demonstrate how the discourses of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's developmentalism and moderate Islam cohere with her gender politics in *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999), and discuss how nationalist feminism of the UMNO variety affects a revisionist history in *Embun* (2002).

Film career

Erma Fatima (born Fatimah binti Rahmat in 1968) began her career acting in the film *Rozana Cinta '87* (*Rozana Love, 1987*) in which she played a lesbian from a wealthy family, an unusual role that would become more prominent in the films of the 1990s. Her roles evolved to innocent *kampung* girls corrupted by urban life to become sex workers (*Bintang Malam,* or *Night Star*, 1991; *Hati Bukan Kristal,* or *Hearts Aren't Crystals*, 1990), to journalist (*Fantasia,* or *Fantasy*, 1993) and feminist young professional (*Femina,* 1994), just to mention some key roles.[10] She then took up directing and directed her first film, *Jimi Asmara* (1995) about the life and career of singer, Jimi Asmara, modelled after R. Azmi and set during the late 1950s, before the advent of *pop yeh yeh* (a musical trend popular during the 1960s and based on the Western pop songs of that period). The film did not do well at the box office and Erma, perhaps realizing her shortcomings, went to train in Indonesia where she took film production, directing and screenwriting courses from director Slamet Rahardjo.

Erma has demonstrated a boldness and earnestness in her attempts to deal with sensitive issues such as homosexuality (*Bulan dan Matahari,* or *Moon and Sun*) and Malaysia's treatment of immigrant workers (telemovie *Jangan,* or *Don't*). Upon her return from Indonesia, she made *Jangan* (1997), which was never screened on television because of its critique of official hypocrisy. (The censors had recommended a few cuts before passing the film, but Erma decided against the censorship in order to maintain the integrity of the work.) Nevertheless, although not widely released, *Jangan* won the Best Telemovie award at that year's Malaysian Film Festival.[11]

[10] *Fantasia* is a sci-fi film and *Femina* is the name of a women's magazine in the film.

[11] It was also screened during a Film Appreciation series organized at FINAS in 2001, where local film critics such as Amir Muhammad and Hassan Muthalib were in attendance. I would like to thank Amir Muhammad for sharing his valuable insights on *Jangan*. All translations into English are my own. For a film review in Malay of *Jangan,* see Rosli, 1998.

The story revolves around Siti, a Malay part-time domestic maid who is married to an undocumented Bangladeshi construction worker, Rashid. The government's decision to deport all undocumented 'aliens' is a source of constant worry and tension for Rashid. At the construction site where he works, an accident happens and a worker is killed, but because he is an illegal immigrant, the supervisor covers up his death and disposes of the body. Film critic and filmmaker Amir Muhammad explained that the emotional strength of this scene lay in its visual language. There is a scuffle during which a city council officer pushes over an illegal drinks stall and the camera focuses on the multicoloured drinks spilled all over the road:

> 'This scene, witnessed by the woman while she is on her way to try and obtain a permit for her husband, reinforces a sense of official heavy-handedness which further intimidates her. She is then told by an upper middle-class friend that a permit is possible because this friend has an "inside person" in the department, emphasising the role of corruption and cronyism within governmental bureaucracy. This conversation in an expensive house also shows the privileged life that the woman had given up by marrying her immigrant husband, since she had been banished from a similarly comfortable existence a few years ago.' (e-mail, 16 August 2004)

The film ends when the immigration authorities deport Rashid back to Bangladesh, leaving Siti and their three children behind. The film asks questions about the government's treatment of migrant workers, and there are ironic cuts to then Deputy Home Minister Megat Junid at a press conference about crimes committed by immigrants, as if to highlight the disjuncture between what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the pedagogical and the performative, between the ideology and discourse of the state and actual on-the-ground practices. Plans to shoot her next film, *Bulan Dan Matahari,* in 2001 were shelved in order to make the big-budget nationalist historical, *Embun* (*Dew*). *Bulan Dan Matahari* is about a professional man who gets married in order to hide his homosexual identity.[12]

[12] Summary: although attracted to his wife's colleague, a dance choreographer, he cannot bring himself to have a relationship with him, as this man is close to his wife. In the midst of this emotional turmoil, his former lover returns and they resume their sexual relationship; they are caught by his wife (played by Erma Fatima). Seen

Like other filmmakers and actors in the country, Erma Fatima survives by acting in the theatre and on television, as well as being a director and producer.[13] She acknowledges that in an industry driven by youthful good looks, female actors, once married, 'tend to be forgotten'.[14] Thus, when she sensed that her career as an actress could be jeopardized, she searched for options that would allow her to have a long-lasting film career and eventually turned to film production and directing.[15]

Political career

Erma Fatima became an Exco Puteri UMNO member on 26 September 2001,[16] replacing younger pop singer, Erra Fazira who had stepped down. UMNO Puteri had been officially launched on 3 August 2001 as the female youth wing of the main political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The decision and announcement to establish UMNO Puteri was made at the UMNO General Assembly in November 2000. Its formation was regarded by critics as a sign of the failure of the existing women's wing, Wanita UMNO, to allow or make space for younger women leaders to rise through the ranks. However, other reasons for the establishment of Puteri included the need to attract younger, professional, urban and sometimes single Malay women constituents who did not necessarily identify with Wanita UMNO, which represented an older and more conservative group of women (mostly wives of UMNO members who played their roles as supportive spouses doing charity work, officiating at ceremonies, etc). There was also a perceived need to attract younger Malays back to UMNO after the fragmentation caused by Anwar and *Reformasi* in 1998. Under the leadership of Azalina Othman, UMNO Puteri focused on attracting female members under the age of 35. One of its strategies was to find a highly

through the eyes of the wife, the film's synopsis promises to 'capture the trauma and emotions of the woman when she discovers that her husband is in love with a man'. Website: http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Balcony/5275/filem/b/bulan_dan_matahari.html.

[13] Her film production company is BNE Studio Sdn Bhd.

[14] Interview with Zarina Abu Bakar (2002), 'PROFile Erma Fatima: a prodigy exclusive', *Prodigy: The Promuda Mouthpiece*, Vol 1, No 3 (Sept), Weblink: <www.promuda.com/?ch=12&pg=68&ac=167>.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Bernama Infotainment, Website: www.b-infotainment.com/2002/ekslusif/03/erma2503.htm.

visible female figure who had mass appeal; and nothing could have been more visible than the entertainment industry. Singer, actor and model Erra Fazira was chosen, but she resigned shortly after.[17]

It is not difficult to understand why Erma became the next candidate. A relatively young but ambitious filmmaker, her last film before her brief career with Puteri made her the obvious choice, as it clearly signalled her pro-Mahathirist ideology of a moderate Islam that does not conflict with development (more on *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir,* or *The Last Malay Woman* later). Her poem, recited during the UMNO Puteri inauguration, carries a discourse of ethnic nationalist passion that is rudely disjunctive with the politics of developmentalism in the past decade, which downplays racial difference in the service of national unity and economic development. Instead, it carries the spirit of UMNO politics from the early decades. The poem ends with, 'Because we have never forgotten/ This earth belongs to the Malays! The Malays will never disappear from this world!'[18]

Filming of *Embun* began in late July 2001. Even though she was not officially elected to UMNO Puteri until late September, uniformed Puteri members showed up on the *Embun* set during shooting on location in the state of Perlis. This coincidence between making the costliest state-funded film of the time and Erma's involvement in Puteri has led to speculation by industry insiders that a bargain had been struck between her and then Minister of Information, Datuk Khalil Yaakob (FINAS was under the Ministry of Information at that time).[19] The same cynics were thus not surprised by her resignation from Puteri a few months later (in March 2002). The ostensible but probable reason given was

[17] Numerous reasons have circulated as to why she resigned. Perhaps her star personality and media status – being linked to numerous leading male pop stars – proved to be too much negative publicity for the organization. Some reports suggested it was the difficulty of working with the strong-minded head of UMNO Puteri, Azalina, while a tabloid-like reporter Norzah Hj. Kepol who called herself Datin Laser, explained that Erra felt she could not earn as much in politics as she could in entertainment (Norzah, 2002, p 45).

[18] '*Kerana kami tidak pernah lupa/ Bumi ini hak orang Melayu!/ Tak akan Melayu hilang di dunia!*' (Norzah, 2002, p 271).

[19] According to FINAS director, Mohd. Shariff Ahmad, when Rohiman Haroon's script *Titisan Air Mata Embun* (*The Tears of Embun*) won a FINAS scriptwriting competition in 1999, FINAS recommended it to the Information Ministry to be produced. It was selected by the Minister himself, who agreed that it ought to be made into a film. This was how the film came to be produced. Filem Negara Malaysia (National Film Malaysia) does not have an allocation for making fictional features, so the cost of producing *Embun* (RM3 million) used money that was approved by the Ministry of Finances for the Ministry of Information (*MASSA*, 2002, pp 40–41).

that she wanted to concentrate on her filmmaking career, although conflict with the head of UMNO Puteri, Azalina Othman, was implied by the media.[20] While rumours were rife in the general political and social community about the source of tension between the two women,[21] other more cynical critics in the film industry speculated that her political membership had more to do with her own specific agenda to direct and produce *Embun* and that the catalyst of her departure was merely a convenient though less than graceful way to extricate herself from politics.

Erma's overt political agenda may have proved detrimental to the film, if not to her credibility as a thoughtful and intelligent filmmaker striving to inculcate a sense of artistic merit rather than solely commercial values in mainstream Malay cinema. While Amir Muhammad claims that sequences in *Jangan* wittily recall film history,[22] the treatment of *Embun* is less than subtle. The critical distance from government policy in *Jangan* is abandoned in *Embun* as Erma goes all out to propagate UMNO ideology. A Weblog from Sultan Muzaffar reads: '. . . the message of Erma Fatima's script, which I characterise as the scripture of Puteri UMNO, is an invitation to youths to join UMNO'.[23]

In the past, Erma Fatima has consistently dealt with issues of Malay identity from a female perspective. In particular, she gravitates to the question of women's roles in the new urban, modern socioeconomic and cultural landscape. For example, in a more obscure teledrama she produced, *Ku Kejar Kau Lari* (*I Pursue, You Flee*, 1998), the domestic

[20] Nash Rahman (2002), 'Past Puteri Exco members blamed for "exposé" on Azalina', 30 April, Weblink: http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/200204300015423.php; 'Perletakan Jawatan Erma Fatima Sebagai Anggota Exco Puteri UMNO Timbul Persoalan', *Bernama Infotainment*, March 2002; and 'Analisis Azalina Othman & Puteri UMNO', *Berita Harian,* 17 April, 2002, Website: http://www.mca.org.my/services/printerfriendly.asp?file=/articles/commentary/2002/4/ 99.html&lg=1.

[21] These rumours revolved around accusations that Azalina had a lesbian relationship with the wife of a famous businessman. Many of the rumours and accusations of abuse of power have a moralistic charge. They appear to target Azalina's 'strong woman' personality and unconventionally 'unfeminine' image, and carry the taint of homophobia and envy. Particularly virulent are the articles posted on the Web by someone who goes by the pen name, Tok Perang.

[22] Amir observes, 'In one, the husband is coming back home on his bicycle when he has a paranoid fear that a police car is chasing him. The tense stop–start pseudo-chase of this dialogue-free sequence immediately recalls Janet Leigh's flight from the city in *Psycho* and is handled with great skill' (e-mail, 16 August 2004).

[23] '. . . mesej skrip karya Erma Fatima ini yang boleh saya sifatkan khutbah Puteri UMNO mengajak anak muda menyertai UMNO'; Sultan Muzaffar (2003), 'Zikir Ratna: Siapa yang keliru?' paragraph 2, 29 September, Website: www.smuzaffar.diaryland.com/zikir.html>.

dilemma faced by her character, an outgoing agent and talent manager, is to choose between a workaholic, uncommunicative husband and her former boyfriend, a playboy who re-enters her life and lavishes attention on her. Although easily dismissed as a genre piece (and therefore, restricted to a certain staid and conservative formula), the domestic teledrama was sociologically interesting in its exploration of the pressures of an urban two-income middle-class childless couple trying to juggle their deteriorating marriage and their individual careers. However, as we will see in *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* and *Embun*, where she shifts (back) into a more public and political realm, Erma treats ethnic, religious and gender identity in slightly different ways, arguably privileging ethnic pride and dominance over individual female desire.

Perempuan Melayu Terakhir (1999)

The second half of this essay focuses on close readings of *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (*The Last Malay Woman*) and *Embun* to shed light on how the discourse and strategies of gender and national politics unsettle each other, giving rise to further questions regarding definitions of feminism and its praxis in Malaysian popular imagination and national consciousness.

The Last Malay Woman captures a combination of the filmmaker's desire to work through some issues of identity that confront Malay society, which has experienced rapid industrialization, mass migration from the rural areas to the cities and towns, and economic and social development under the National Economic Policy (NEP, 1971–90). Re-evaluating the goals and weaknesses of the NEP in the developmentalist 1990s, New Wave Malay filmmakers such as Erma Fatima struggled with questions about how modernity in its myriad forms impacted on readings of Islam and its concatenations with *adat* (Malay custom), which, in turn, affected gender and gender relationships.[24] To counter the wave of resurgent Islam since the 1980s as well as a potentially homogeneous Westernization, these filmmakers and new middle-class Malay writers recuperate and feature *adat* in their works. *Adat* is

[24] See Gaik Cheng Khoo (2002), 'Shuhaimi Baba and the Malaysian New Wave: negotiating the recuperation of Malay custom/adat', in Plessis, J., Levitin, J., and Raoul, V., eds, *Women Filmmakers: Refocussing*, UBC Press, Vancouver; and Gaik Cheng Khoo (2006), *Reclaiming Adat in Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*, UBC Press, Vancouver.

manifested in the form of traditional cultural performance arts such as *makyong,*[25] *wayang kulit,*[26] magic, ritual healing and pre-*dakwah*[27] images of Malay *kampung* women wearing only a sarong wrapped around their busts (*berkemban*). Early Islam in the region was syncretic in its coexistence and adaptation to the local *adat* that incorporated animist beliefs and Hindu influences. However, a more rigid and 'purist' notion of Islam based on Wahabbi reform ideas and Shari'ah-mindedness emerged in the late nineteenth century as well as more recently in the 1970s (Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan, 2000; Nagata, 1986). The dynamics between the relationships of scripturalist Islam and syncretic Islam with *adat* were to persist into 1990s Malaysia and to be manifested in Erma Fatima's film *The Last Malay Woman,* in which the female protagonist Mustika has to choose between her religious fundamentalist fiancé, Engku Leh, and a Westernized Malay theatre director, Haikal/John, newly returned from London. Here, *adat* is gendered and essentialized as 'the last Malay woman', Mustika, a *makyong* dancer who is caught between Westernized modernity (John) and resurgent Islam (Engku Leh).

Foremost is Erma Fatima's attempt to display, in motion picture terms, the Mahathirist ideology of the seamlessness between two conflicting discourses – that of Islam and developmentalist modernity – in the form of her heroine, Mustika, whose name interestingly refers to one 'who belongs to a sect or clan'.[28] Erma adopts unquestioningly the discourse of Islamic modernity that would conform to a fashioned hybrid capitalist modernity perpetuated by then PM, Mahathir Mohamad. Her uncritical acceptance of the notion that UMNO's version of Islam is moderate compared with the opposition's and fringe Islamic groups' versions as extremist, even violent, is a hegemonic view

[25] A traditional dance mainly performed by women that can induce a trance-like state.
[26] Shadow puppetry.
[27] Muslim proselytizing that began in the 1980s. See Nagata, 1986.
[28] Francis Loh Kok Wah defines developmentalism as 'the cultural consequence of the *dirigiste* developmentalist state, when citizens begin to enjoy improved living conditions as a result of the economic growth the state has brought about' (2002, p 21). In charting the discourse of democracy in Malaysia, Loh noted a shift away from the 1980s politics of ethnicism (forms of resistance on the part of non-Malays to the racial policies of the NEP) towards a politics of developmentalism during the early 1990s, a period of economic liberalization and high economic growth rates. Freedom became 'privatized', choices were limited to the sphere of consumers and consuming individuals, and the Chinese and Indian political parties withdrew from controversial and ethnically sensitive issues that the pro-Malay NEP policies had raised in the 1970s.

upheld by the mainstream media and other ideological and cultural state apparatuses (Hilley, 2001; Boulanger, 1993). For example, while holding up a model of Islam that espouses tolerance of diversity, the government simultaneously greatly restricts the practice of anything other than Sunni Islam, branding other interpretations as 'deviant' (Suaram, 2002, p 114). The film's position assumes Mahathirist Islam to be moderate, syncretic and compatible with *adat* as well as with nationalist capitalist modernity, while glossing over the fact that the UMNO government also competed with the opposition Muslim party, PAS, to win votes through its Islamization or Arabization policies in the last two decades (Suaram, 2002; Syed Ahmad, 2002).[29] Syed Ahmad Hussein (2002) adds that Mahathir's 1983 policy statement about assimilation of Islamic values into the administration 'was not about creating an Islamic state or implementing the *syariah*', yet it was 'the most purposeful expression of an Islamization process that UMNO had ever made' (p 88); and that further, by the early 1990s, UMNO's claim that Malaysia had become Islamic was believed by many, including Islamic scholars.[30] While Mahathir's position on Islam and the role of Muslim women may have been be moderate, it was only a matter of time before the Islamization policies that were instituted would come into tension with *adat* and capitalist modernity.

Early in the film, the Prime Minister is heard on television giving a speech during the 51st UMNO General Assembly, urging Malaysians to progress. He reminds them that 'Islam is not an obstacle to progress'. The PM says that 'our bigger and more honourable responsibility (as Muslims) is to make the Muslim community peaceful/happy (*bahagia*), the chosen (*terpilih*) and successful in this world'. This point is set up

[29] According to the Malaysia Human Rights Report 2002 issued by Suaram, a local human rights NGO, 'There is a long-standing 'out-Islamising' race between the opposition Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the dominant party in the Barisan Nasional (National Front) ruling coalition. This jockeying to be the Islamic party to uphold the vision of Islam and ultimately an 'Islamic-style state' has often been accompanied by a rise in policies and practices that violate international standards of human rights' (Suaram, 2002, p 111).

[30] See Syed Ahmad Hussein (2002) for a discussion of the Islamization of UMNO in the 1980s and 1990s under PM Mahathir. Syed Ahmad points to both symbolic and substantive programmes such as the establishment of the International Islamic University, Islamic banking, constitutional amendments to give increased powers to Islamic legal authorities, reforms of Islamic administration, laws and courts, and the methodical Islamization of law (88).

as the rational norm to contrast the stance of Mustika's firebrand fiancé, Engku Leh, who loudly proclaims at a rally that modernity is anti-Islam and anti-Malay for influencing their youths who have lost their souls and Islamic spirituality. The voice of moderate Islam later emerges in the form of Mustika, whose liberal Muslim identity is signified by her wearing a fitted *sarung kebaya* with a *selendang* (headscarf) instead of the loose *baju kurung* and *tudung*.[31] When Engku Leh accuses her of forgetting her faith by dancing the *makyong* and freely mixing with men, she protests: 'What, must I announce to the world that I'm a Muslim? To cover up completely. . . (*Berkopiah, berjubah, bertudung litup*)? That's Islam in your opinion?' In her opinion, 'art [dancing the *makyong*] is not a sin' and her faith, a private matter 'between [her] and God' rather than one that is policed and surveyed by the community around her or merely observed as superficial rituals. Moreover, according to her interpretation, Islam does not coerce or divide its followers and no-one has the right to judge or impose Islam on others.

Mustika is the perfect symbol and mouthpiece of Mahathirist developmentalism, being able to reconcile and balance the modern and traditional roles of the Malay woman, as well as to negotiate between *adat* and Islam. A business graduate from Kuala Lumpur, Mustika rebelled against her parents' wishes and chose to leave the opportunities of the big city in order to work in a resort in Trengganu where she has also taken up *makyong*, a traditional dance that is banned in the neighbouring PAS-controlled state of Kelantan because of its 'un-Islamic' elements, but which still embodies a sense of indigenous

[31] *Sarung kebaya*: a fitted, long-sleeved embroidered mid-length blouse made with voile, worn over a sarong, open at the front and fastened with linked brooches/jewelled pins called *kerongsang*. No longer as fitted as its original 1960s version, and 'considered rather bold for normal situations [today], the *sarung kebaya* has over the years been modified, and is now worn as a loose garment' (Ghulam, nd). *Kurung* literally means 'caged', although a *baju kurung* is ironically a loose, shift-like long-sleeved dress, worn over a long skirt. In the last few years, there has been a compromise of styles, resulting in the hybrid form between the two called *baju kebarung*. According to anthropologist Aihwa Ong, educated Malay women were the ones 'most likely to don dakwah robes [such as the mini-telekung/head covering] that soon became the Malay woman's working uniform, replacing the body-fitting *sarung-kebaya* of the days before the Islamic resurgence' (1995, p 181). See also Chua (2000, pp 283–285) and Nagata (1984, p xviii) on the effects of global Islamic awareness on the shift from the *kebaya* to the *baju kurung*. Current cultural trends suggest a revival of the *baju kebaya*, under the heritage efforts of the recently deceased wife of the PM, Datin Seri Endon Mahmood.

identity for her, as opposed to ballet and modern dance.[32] Her faith is quiet but strong: she does not drink alcohol and on one occasion, we see her perform her prayers. Additionally, she is a successful and well respected career woman: bilingual, confident and professional.

However, this aspect of her modern self is overshadowed by the problematic gender politics in the film. In fact, the film self-orientalizes[33] the fantasy image of the Malay woman (Mustika) in the title and the framing of the film when it presents this from Haikal's point of view. The latter is an ethnic Malay whose seven years in London has led to his own cultural and ethnic anomie and who is searching for his identity in Trengganu, the site of 'tradition' or the heart of the Malay homeland.[34] Haikal's search for his own notions of authentic identity and roots, and for a muse to inspire his move into Malay-language theatre, ends when he meets Mustika. It is she who inspires him to write a play entitled *The Last Malay Woman*. In his pursuit of her as a romantic partner, she becomes the last virgin territory left to be conquered: 'Women are "the last frontier" of Malay tradition', he tells her patronizingly without the least self-consciousness.[35] In effect, she

[32] Her critique of children being fed with ballet and modern dance from their early years echoes the kind of anticolonial or anticultural imperialist position that Mahathir was particularly famous for on the international stage.

[33] '[T]he modern Orient,' according to Edward Said (1978), 'participates in its own Orientalizing' (p 325). Likewise, Rey Chow claims that 1990s Chinese filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and his contemporaries participate in 'producing a kind of orientalism' that is linked to 'exploiting women' (p 151). Zhang's self-exotic films were accused of catering to the Western art film market. Most Malay films, though, cannot be said to be self-orientalizing since their intended audience is local. If self-orientalizing occurs in these films for domestic audiences, it is mostly in the Malaysian context of racialized stereotypes.

[34] See Benjamin McKay, 'Taking identity on the road: two recent Malaysian films', (paper presented at the New Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference: Where Big Budget Meets No Budget, Asia Research Institute, 3–4 May 2004, Singapore). Trengganu is the preferred representative of Malay heartland and tradition rather than Kelantan, even though both are on the east coast and both share strong identifications as being 'traditional' and antithetical to the urban and urbane centre, KL. It is preferred perhaps because Kelantan, long ruled by the Muslim opposition party PAS and punished by the federal government for its voter recalcitrance through the withholding of development projects in the state, is less accessible to KL filmmakers as location sites. Moreover, remnants of *adat* are already banned in Kelantan, whereas Trengganu, which has experienced both UMNO and PAS rule, and which has its share of hotels and resorts proves more accessible to filmmakers from KL looking for a rural location.

[35] See Annette Kolodny (1975), *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC. Kolodny discusses the gender and sexualized metaphors used by the Puritans to describe the land (America) as feminine, virginal and fertile for conquest.

becomes all that he projects on her, all that is lacking from his life as a widower and a single father, estranged even from his child. In Mustika, he hopes to find an anchor to stabilize his family and to realize his dead English wife's wishes to raise their daughter according to Malay custom and tradition. At the same time, Mustika provides exactly the kind of identity and roots he seeks for himself. In his own inability to show his dead wife 'the way of Islam' as she had requested, it is then up to Mustika to show Haikal the way of Islam (which she inevitably does, proving that it is not only Haikal but also the filmmaker who orientalizes and idealizes her role). In a time of great social flux, women are forced to become signifiers of fixity who provide centredness and stability by remaining immutable and unchanging. Despite the progress and development that Mahathir advocated for women as well as men, Malay women are nevertheless constantly bombarded with conflicting media messages and images about their gender roles (Stivens, 1998, 2000). Moreover, judging by this film's rather confused mix of ideologies regarding the role and significance of modern Malay women, Erma Fatima herself does not escape the hegemony and interpellation of such entrenched patriarchal ideas.

In an essentialist argument that Haikal presents to Mustika, women are regarded as the keepers of culture/tradition. They are 'often required to carry the burden of ethnic representation when constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively' (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p 45). For Haikal, 'Women are softer, more artistic, sensitive, more knowledgeable about customs and traditions'. Moreover, he maintains that 'a woman is a guru of custom and tradition. The woman is like a guardian/heir (*waris*), acting as the pillar of the family. Her womb produces children. Her hand guides the child to walk, her fingers scoop and feed rice (*menyuap nasi*), her voice soothes the child to sleep.' While Mustika looks sceptical, it would seem that the film's overall ideology supports this notion. Visually, the camera adopts Mulvey's 'male gaze' (2000)[36] in representing Mustika when she first appears: a low-angle shot of her

[36] Feminist psychoanalytical film theorist Laura Mulvey first posed the controversial idea that female images on screen had a passive 'to-be-looked-at-ness' that catered to the gaze of male spectators who identified with the active main male screen characters in her groundbreaking essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (1975). The camera, motivated by the desires of the male viewers (and ostensibly male camera operator and director), fully exploits the exhibitionism of the female body by fetishizing and breaking up the woman's body into fragmented and less threatening parts to assuage male anxiety about her absence of a penis.

approaching Haikal on the beach, bare feet peeping beneath a long skirt blowing in the wind, her hand gently picking up loose papers on the sand, flown from Haikal's lap as he has fallen asleep. This is accompanied by the soft guitar music that will eventually become the initial musical motif for her romance with Haikal.[37] Narratively, all the female characters, even the liberal and broad-minded Zulaika and Haikal's English wife, abide by customs and know of or want to learn about Malay beliefs and know how to act accordingly when in that environment. The film's heroine, Mustika, always teaches by example, showing Haikal the path back to Malay Muslimness by answering his 'Good morning' with '*Wasalaikum salam*', chiding him for not attending Friday prayers, walking away in disgust when she finds him drinking beer, and not entering into conflict about it in front of the tourists. Even Haikal's five-year-old daughter Sofia, at the end of the film, shoulders the burden of being *waris* (both heir and guardian) of tradition. She admonishes her father not to begin eating dinner until she has given thanks to God. In this case, 'culture/tradition' is identified not only with Malayness but more strongly with Islam.

While Haikal may first have been attracted to Mustika when he saw her performing the *makyong* to the haunting melody of the *ulek mayang*, thinking she was the symbol of authentic Malayness he came to find in Trengganu, it is precisely the authenticity of *makyong* (and other cultural performances as signifiers of Malay *adat*) that is disputed by Pak Ungku, her fiancé's father who runs a resort that holds cultural performances:

> '*Kuda kepang, makyong, wayang kulit*...you think all that is Malay? You thinkthat's Malay culture? Haha. I myself can't interpret what it is that's Malay. Sometimes I'm embarrassed to admit I'm Malay when we can't even answer what is Malay. [. . .] presenting this form of art at the resort makes me look Malay? *Wayang kulit*, isn't that an epic from Ramayana? *Menora*, from Thailand. *D o n d a n g sayang* originates from the Portuguese. *Boria*, from Persia. So where is the Malayness, Haikal?'

In this way, perhaps Malay *adat* is regarded as too open and receptive

[37] There are two musical motifs that chart their romantic relationship. The guitar phrasing is more tentative- sounding and is used to characterize the initial attraction between the two. Later, the tune of a Malay song that Mustika introduces to Haikal becomes their love theme.

to Otherness and to adaptive and hybridizing possibilities as to disavow any notion of purity of identity. There is a detectable sense of shame among contemporary Malays such as Pak Ungku in acknowledging ownership or heritage of a hybrid culture amidst a post-colonial nationalist search for an authenticity to call one's own in a period of global flows and external influences.

Thus, Engku Leh proffers and prefers Islam over Malayness as the uniting factor of Malay–Muslim cultural identity: 'Too much thinking about Malayness will destroy us. Isn't Islam larger than Malayness?' Deftly avoiding such a scrutiny of Malayness, an endeavour that would have raised even more questions about the invention of tradition and the constructedness of the category 'Malay',[38] Engku Leh opts for a transnational, transethnic vision: the Muslim *ummah*. Further, he observes that modernity, and concomitantly secularism, has loosened the Malays from Islam and produced a schizophrenic breed of Malays who are confused and in a dilemma about their roots and identity. While orally his words sound rational, they contradict how he is presented visually on screen.[39] He and his followers are dressed like the Taliban in long gowns, turbans and with menacing eyeliner. Such costuming and caricature would suggest that the film's ideological position regards this brand of Muslim fundamentalism as a negative foreign import to Malaysia, one which, despite sharing a similar anti-modernist discourse with some disenchanted elements in Malay society, has its own specific ethnically localized (in Afghanistan) oppressive tendencies that have no place in a modern and tolerant Malaysia.

Engku Leh's preference for Islam as opposed to Malayness, which is imbued with ethnic and sociocultural particularities of custom (*adat*), still hinges on a deep sense of shame for him, and self-castigation for others, including modern Malay intellectuals who focus their critique on the feudalist mindset, corrupt structures, power relations and money

[38] See Adrian Vickers (2004), "Malay identity': modernity, invented tradition and forms of knowledge', in Timothy P. Barnard, ed, *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, Singapore University Press, Singapore, pp 25–55.

[39] 'Setiap tutur kata Engku Leh sebetulnya waras, wajar dan rasional, penonton tahu itu, tetapi kerana Engku Leh telah didatangkan dengan pakej seperti seorang pegawai penguatkuasa Taliban di tengah bandar Kabul maka audien merasakan kesesatannya'. Faisal Tehrani, 'Apanya, Erma Fatima? (Reaksi)', Website: http://members.tripod.com/Dinakan/karya/karya38.htm.

politics of Malay/sian society.[40] The e-mail on Haikal's computer screen at the beginning of the film reads: 'Islam offers crucial and fundamental teachings, that humankind is not a slave to anyone or any other powers, both in the temporal and spiritual realms, except to God, his creator. So long as the Malays cannot free themselves from being a slave to power, laws, procedure, method, fatwa and a system that violates the principles of human freedom according to Islam, then revolt will . . .' This e-mail message may insinuate the modern shackles of feudalism and the notion of loyalty to one's rulers and the state, for example, which may conflict with Muslim principles of social justice.

In another obvious self-orientalizing gesture, we are introduced to Engku Leh visually as the mysterious East or Islam, or even as the Prophet Muhammad, who cannot be visually represented according to traditional Islam. Our first introduction to him occurs when Mustika goes to visit him at his camp and we hear his voice. He is writing Arabic script on a white curtain. We first see his shadow behind the thin, translucent curtain of scripture, almost like a shadow puppet. The curtain acts as a veil, strangely making him a rather exotic, mysterious and feminized figure, seemingly unconnected with the masculine authoritative voice that emits from it. As his father Pak Ungku flicks aside the curtains, we see Engku Leh sitting, his back to us, dressed in a grey robe and white turban, with long hair. In his second appearance giving a speech at a public rally, he is shown with his back to Haikal and the camera, as the filmmaker prolongs our curiosity.[41] This visual strategy of frustrating our scopophiliac desire to see the third person in the love triangle continues in his next appearance, when Haikal goes to see him to discuss his quest for Malayness. The camera pans around the exterior of the shack and coyly plays with the curtains to frame Haikal's face as he peeps into Engku Leh's room, only to be greeted with an image of his back or a hand counting prayer beads. Into the fortieth minute of the film and at the end of his interview with Haikal, we are finally rewarded with a medium shot of his handsome profile, and the voice of radical Islam is, at last, fully embodied.

[40] See Shaharuddin Maaruf (1992), 'Some theoretical problems concerning tradition and modernization among the Malays of Southeast Asia', in Yong Mun Cheong, ed, *Asian Traditions and Modernization: Perspectives from Singapore*, Times Academic Press, Singapore, pp 241–265; Farish A. Noor (2002), *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History*, Silverfish Books, Kuala Lumpur, pp 118–122, 217–219.

[41] After this shot, his face is very briefly shown as he stands together with the crowd, though he is subsequently blocked by them raising their hands in the air, chanting, 'God is great! God is great!'

There are enough signs to suggest that the two men in Mustika's life are not all that different in their attitudes towards her. While both men embody extreme opposites, they also share parallel traits that suggest that neither of them is a suitable life partner for her. In the car, Haikal refuses to divulge where they are going. In fact, he had tricked her into the car by telling her they were going to Pak Ungku's – this parallels Ravana's kidnapping of Sita Dewi in the Ramayana *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) mythology. He does not stop the car when she begs him repeatedly to do so. At his mother's house where he has taken Mustika to see his daughter, he also assumes that she will willingly become a mother to Sofia, or that Mustika will marry him when he tells his mother that he wants to have his daughter with him. When his mother asks, 'Who's going to look after her?' his eyes fall on Mustika who is in another room performing her prayers. Here again, various traditional feminine roles are projected on to her: as mother to Sofia, submissive or compliant wife to Haikal and submissive follower of God.

In a parallel scene, Engku Leh refuses to respond to her questions about where Haikal's baby daughter, Sofia, is after the kidnapping. The expressions of both men in the separate incidents are stony, grim-faced, quiet and resolute. This inability to communicate and express their emotions in a calm, articulate manner when it comes to issues of the heart is exacerbated through violence for the villain (Engku Leh hits Mus so hard that she falls to the ground), or for the supposed 'hero' Haikal, through her Harlequin-romance style love for him (both are motifs that appeared in *Ku Kejar Kau Lari,* or *I Pursue, You Flee*). Upset with Haikal, Mustika walks away from the car, but realizes the foolishness and irrationality of her behaviour, stranded in the middle of a highway. She turns to look back at him and falls for the look of love and vulnerability he gives her.[42]

Doubly problematic is that despite the flaws in both men, Mustika ends up with one of them, and not the one with whom she has fallen in love. A more feminist and progressive ending would be for her to reject both men who want to control her ideologically and physically. One wants her to cover up and be segregated from other men ('I want you to be a dutiful Muslim woman, no living in sin'); the other wants her to be mother to his child. Neither considers her wants or desires, as both believe they know what is good for her.

[42] This exchange of looks between Mustika and Haikal (of desire, romantic longing) occurs several times in the film and is significant in a culture of film censorship in which on-screen kissing is not allowed.

Mustika's decision to remain with her fundamentalist fiancé is a disappointment for those who would like to see her fulfil the romantic plot with Haikal. Although at least four years have elapsed since Engku Leh's fight with Haikal in the water in Trengganu, and we are sketchily led to believe that he has been rehabilitated,[43] the audience is not certain that he has given up his radical and militant ideology. Assuming he has changed as she had hoped, neither are we convinced that she should return to him after all that has transpired; this is also because we are not shown the basis of her long-term relationship with Engku Leh and what he was like before he became radicalized in the UK.

However, if we read the characters in symbolic terms, are we to believe that *adat* and Islam are wedded to each other and belong together, whereas *adat* and modernity are incompatible? As I have argued, *adat* and modernity actually share similar liberal or open attitudes about female sexuality. In fact, modernity (ie Western liberal discourse, tertiary education in the 'West' and exposure to all things 'Western') facilitates the conscious and unconscious recuperation of Malay *adat* in the form of, for example, a refocusing on sexuality.[44]

Sadly, in the end, it is not Mustika's ability to negotiate a fine balance between *adat,* Islam and modernity as the model Mahathirist Malay woman that matters as much as her virginity, placed at a premium above reason and credibility during a time of liberal modernity that presumes sexual promiscuity and premarital sex to be the norm for the modern woman. Preserved until her wedding night, as we are to learn by the film's conclusion, Mustika's virginity proves to be the (anti)climax of the plot. We are to applaud Mustika for her status as 'the last Malay woman' because she has managed to preserve her chastity despite the temptations posed by Haikal in the love triangle.

[43] Despite Pak Ungku's intervention to save his son's soul by reciting the Quran over a hysterical, frenzied Engku Leh, and following this, Engku Leh looking repentant, with a cool blue sky behind him as opposed to the previous dark night lit with orange flames, obviously no-one is convinced of this. Note the tone of incredulity in Faisal Tehrani's review: 'Dan di balik latar langit jingga [*sic*] dengan tampalan puisi Iqbal (entah kenapa dan entah difahami atau tidak isi puisi mistik tersebut) Engku Leh perlahan-lahan insaf' (Faisal Tehrani, 2002); 'Indeed the "re-socialization" of Ku Leh to "normality" does not necessarily mean the end of the discourse that he has been associated with. *The Last Malay Woman* is cleverly silent on this since it is an ongoing discourse, which, since 11 September 2001, has taken on new narratives of identity-making and re-engagement, in the context of a new world order and a globalization that continuously homogenizes Islam' (Zawawi Ibrahim, 2004, p 36).

[44] Khoo Gaik Cheng (2005), *Reclaiming Adat in Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature,* University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.

This ideal image of womanhood is unrealistic and anachronistic to contemporary 1990s Malaysian urban womanhood. Despite having her own independent ideas about gender roles and modern relationships, Mustika finally lives up to Haikal's idealization of her as the pure Sita Dewi who, untold but hinted at visually in this text, had to prove her fidelity and purity to Rama after being rescued from Ravana in a trial by fire in the *Ramayana*.[45] To include the proverbial bloodstain on the wedding sheets[46] as proof of Mustika's virginity also seems to concede too much to Islamic patriarchal power, with its high valuation of female virginity before marriage and laws to punish premarital sexual relations (*zina*) (Reid, 1988, pp 156–157). As anthropologist Aihwa Ong has noted: 'Malays acknowledge sexual drives and provide cultural means for their adequate satisfaction in daily life. Until recently, parents arranged early marriages for sons and daughters for the legitimate management of sexual needs (among other reasons)' (1990, p 416).

Erma clearly sympathizes with this perspective. It would seem she acknowledges the importance of sexuality, especially female sexuality, by portraying it sensitively in the fantasy love scene in which Mustika imagines going to Haikal's room and his slow seduction of her.[47] In the ensuing montage, there is a metaphorical allusion to masturbation and sexual release. Mustika moans and in a Bollywood gesture, rolls on the

[45] Contemporary feminist Indonesian writer Leila Choduri and filmmaker Deepa Mehta have focused on this as a sign of unfair gender treatment and the continual oppression of women in their works: see the short story *The Purification of Sita* and the controversial Indian film, *Fire* (1996).

[46] An Indian reviewer writes: 'This year's choice from Asian Directors included atrocious entries like *The Last Malay Woman*, a thoroughly regressive, hidebound, chauvinist extolling of traditional womanhood by a woman director (Erma Fatima Rahmat). Song, dance and music à la Bollywood, plus the sacrifice of true love for a previous engagement with the Muslim fanatic (who becomes a good man after a fight with the hero in the waters, against the backdrop of raging fire, not to forget a last minute rescue of a baby from the flames). Worse was to come. After his village trip to recover his lost Malayan [*sic*] culture, the playwright sheds his Westernised approach, and stages a new play about the woman who 'offers' her virginity to the bridegroom. Her meek surrender echoes the words of the girl he had loved and lost, spoken to her spouse on her wedding night! Curtains down but not before a nauseating post nuptial shot of the stained sheet'. See Gowri Ramnarayan (2000), 'Still no character or class', *The Hindu* online edition, 6 February, Weblink: http://www.hinduonnet.com/2000/02/06/stories/09060221.htm.

[47] Here again, the sound provides a supplementary meaning. As in an earlier scene in which Haikal attempts to seduce her at a *kampung* house while she is playing the *gamelan* one night, the sound of waves rolling on the shore is prominent in this scene too, symbolizing and naturalizing female desire.

bed, clutching the sheet around her. This scene is spliced with Haikal turning on the shower. Then in a different location altogether, Engku Leh, as if sensing he has been betrayed by Mustika, beats a drum (shaped like a log) so hard that his mallet breaks in two! However, recognition of female sexual desire aside, Mustika (not unlike Embun, as we shall see later) retains control over this desire and sacrifices her growing attraction to Haikal to remain a loyal (and pure) fiancée to Engku Leh.

While Erma tries to recuperate *adat* in the face of a resurgent Islam and a potentially homogeneous Westernization, it bears asking which aspects of *adat* are being recuperated and how such a strategy might empower or disempower Malay women. In *The Last Malay Woman*, the *makyong* is less privileged visually and narratively compared with the *wayang kulit* characters Rama, Sita Dewi and Ravana. The film opens with a *wayang kulit* performance and the film's poster and VCD cover feature Sita Dewi, the leather *wayang kulit* puppet. Ideal womanhood, as represented by Sita Dewi, is adopted unquestioningly. Neither is it deconstructed through feminism or made to become reconciled with the roles of a modern career woman. For example, the film ends with Haikal educating Sofia on the ways of being a 'good traditional Malay woman'. He tells her, 'When you grow big, you must be like Sita Dewi. A woman who is full of purity and loyalty. Dad wants you to prove that innocence and loyalty still exist in this world'. The film narrative ends when the white sheet transforms into the screen of the *wayang kulit* and Sita Dewi appears. A flame from behind sets the puppet and the screen on fire, as if to prove that Mustika is indeed the last pure Malay woman, before reverting to the black screen. Similarly, this closing image is revisited in Erma's later film *Embun*. As Embun rallies the spirits of the male villagers and plots her brother's getaway one night, she is framed speaking behind the rising flames of a campfire. This shot, which anticipates Embun's death, suggests that she will be the last Malay nationalist fighter.

In the *Ramayana*, Sita is the object of pursuit and romantic interest between two male forces and it is her role that is emphasized in Erma's film, rather than the roles of Rama (dubiously fitting the ignoble Engku Leh) or Ravana (posed as the seductive force of secular modernity, Haikal). Sociologist Zawawi Ibrahim argues that it is 'through her [Mustika]' that Haikal comes 'to understand and acquire the consciousness of the Malay inner self–*jiwa* [soul]' (2004, p 37). I would contend that it is not enough that she is merely a rite of passage or a vehicle for self-understanding for both men. In this sense, Mustika's character

follows a particular lineage of representations of women by male authors in Malaysian literature and theatre whose symbolic female bodies/characters mediate the transactions, fulfilment and sometimes cross-cultural understandings of and among men.[48]

Erma Fatima's *The Last Malay Woman* does not go far enough to challenge patriarchy. Indeed, the film's position on women and gender roles in modern Malay society tries too hard to conform to the mixed messages found in the media about women and modernity: simultaneously of the professional career woman and chaste mother, of being both modern – though not so modern as to constitute a threat – and traditional (but not backward). Such a tension can seemingly only be resolved with the rejection of a modernity that is culturally rootless, and the moderation and domestication of militant Islam.

Embun (2002)

This film poses a different set of problems. While *The Last Malay Woman* advocates moderation, *Embun* presents a Malay woman of super-hero-like proportions (the title character), who transcends her personal tragedies in order to lead her village in the anticolonial struggle against the Japanese during the occupation of Malaya. The film betrays none of the angst about Malay identity found in *The Last Malay Woman*, unsurprisingly since 'the Malay dilemma' is predominantly an issue of the Melayu Baru, or New Malay, produced by the NEP (1971–90). However, *Embun* lacks the complexity and ideas of *The Last Malay Woman* as Erma was seeking to commercialize a nationalist film by heightening its dramatic qualities to extremes. In her determination to create a nationalist 'herstory' that demonstrates that women make equally capable, if not more capable nationalist heroes than men, the film version focuses on Embun rather than on Koishi, the 'good Japanese'. If Puteri UMNO is indeed 'Father's daughter', originally 'conceived to function as vote-mobilizers' for UMNO (Maznah Mohamad, 2002b), the protagonist shows herself to be a true 'national' daughter. She continues the anticolonial nationalist struggle after her brother Bayu, a Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) leader, is imprisoned and her father is

[48] These women are usually prostitutes. See Lloyd Fernando (1976), *Scorpion Orchid*, Heinemann, Kuala Lumpur; A. Samad Said (1997), *Lantai T. Pinkie*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur; A. Samad Said (1961), *Salina*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur; and Dr Anuar Nor Arai (2003), *Ronggeng Rokiah* (theatre performance).

killed by Japanese soldiers.[49] In addition, being gang-raped by the Japanese does not succeed in traumatizing or stopping her in any way. In particular, the scenes in which she goes around the countryside encouraging Malay villagers to plant rice twice a year have parallels in more contemporary news footage and photo opportunities of politicians looking as if they are performing their duties.

Despite the high production values, skilful cinematography, art direction and some good acting on the part of Umie Aida who plays Embun, the film has many failings that can be attributed to the direction and screenplay, re-tooled from Rohiman Haroon's original script, *Titisan Air Mata Embun* (*The Teardrops of Embun/Dew*).[50] Erma commits ideological violence on the original creative text as well as on Malayan history: first, by making vast changes to the script rather than merely interpreting it visually;[51] and by making these changes without recourse to the six months' worth of historical research and material that Rohiman Haroon had collected in order to write the script. Erma's creative liberties have served to highlight the not uncommon lack of respect directors have for scriptwriters in the mainstream film industry: 'In Malaysia, scriptwriters are considered not to be knowledgeable, in the eyes of many directors, a script is just raw material not a screenplay' (Rohiman, interview in *MASSA*, p 43).[52]

Second, Erma's ethnic chauvinism, no doubt inspired by her perception of UMNO politics, overrode historical truths when she 'e-raced' (erased) the real suffering of the Chinese at the hands of the Japanese by portraying the Malay community as bearing the brunt of Japanese atrocities. This is doubly ironic since the film is set in Bayan Lepas, which is in Chinese-dominated Penang. There are hardly any Chinese

[49] KMM (Malay Youth Association, 1937–41) was headed by Ibrahim Yaacob, a radical anti-British Malay nationalist.

[50] Rohiman has publicly accused Erma Fatima of not attributing the screenplay to him and for 'chopping up' his script. See 'Hasil Kerja Saya Dicencang', *MASSA*, 24–30 August 2002, pp 41–43.

[51] Mahadi J. Murat, the President of Gafim (Federation of Film Professional Societies of Malaysia) and a scriptwriting lecturer at FINAS, commented that even though someone has the right to reorganize another writer's original script, nevertheless they should not stray too far from or change the original intention of the scriptwriter. A director's only role is to interpret the product and translate the script into images. ['Walaupun seseorang itu mempunyai hak untuk merombak hasil sesebuah karya penulis asal skrip tetapi seharusnya ia tidak lari atau mengubah kehendak asli penulis skrip. Pengarah hanyalah mempunyai peranan untuk menginterpretasikan hasil daripada skrip kepada imej'], *MASSA*, 31August–6 September 2002, p 41).

[52] '[D]i Malaysia, penulis skrip dikatakan tidak berilmu, bagi pandangan kebanyakan pengarah, skrip adalah bahan mentah bukan lakon layar'.

or Indian characters in the film and, when represented, they are mere extras in crowd scenes (for example, in the film's opening scene when the Japanese first enter Malaya) or regarded as outsiders, such as the Chinese boatman who is taking Bayu to join Force 136. According to the film, it is Malay women who are being raped and held as sex slaves; it is Chinese women who are sexually complicit (portrayed as comfort women servicing the soldiers in one scene); and it was Malay men who fought and died to defend Malaya against the Japanese. Such a reductive historical revision of the resistance during the occupation of Malaya conveniently erases the real anti-Japanese imperialist struggles of groups such as the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), which were led by the predominantly ethnic Chinese Malayan Communist Party, the Chinese Dalforce volunteers and other groups who were eliminated in the Japanese army's subsequent 'clean-up' or *sook ching* campaign (Cheah, 1983, p 21). The *sook ching* massacre had reportedly claimed 6,000 to 40,000 Chinese lives (Cheah, 1983, p 23). Moreover, according to Rohiman, there were no Malay women raped during the Japanese occupation because of the promises given to the KMM by the Japanese that they would not disrupt the lives of the Malays.[53]

Erma's disrespect for historical accuracy compounds the failures of the film as a serious historical and national document, produced jointly by two state bodies, FINAS (the National Film Development Board) and Filem Negara Malaysia (Malaysian National Film), which have responsibility for ensuring an unbiased account of Malaysia's multiethnic history.[54] Anachronisms abound, ranging from the mundane to the laughable: Koishi's sideburns rather than shaven head; wristwatches instead of pocket watches worn by Japanese officers of that era;[55] the radical

[53] Interview with the author, 13 October, 2003; also *MASSA,* 24–30 August 2002 interview, pp 42–43. From historian Cheah Boon Kheng (1983): 'The KMM support of the Japanese was allegedly given conditionally – in return for Japanese money and promises that Malay independence would be considered, that Malay sovereignty, religion and customs would be upheld, and Malay women and property respected' (p 102).

[54] FINAS and Filem Negara Malaysia jointly produced *Paloh* (director Adman Salleh) the following year. While *Paloh* encountered other problems, it is laudable for its accurate representation of Malayan society and the relations between the Malays and Chinese at the end of the occupation and the beginning of the communist insurgency. Filem Negara is more well known as a producer of documentaries than fictional features.

[55] A letter from 'Sasterawan Muda' to Berita Harian entitled 'Antara kelembutan Embun dan kerakusan Erma Fatima' points out these historical inaccuracies. Many of the criticisms can be read in the feedback/commentary link following Faisal Tehrani's review of *Embun* on kakiseni.com, an 'arts and culture in Malaysia' Website.

ethnic nationalist Kesatuan Melayu Muda chanting 'Allahu Akbar!';[56] double-cropping of paddy, which was only widely introduced in the 1960s;[57] and Koishi calling upon the Vienna Convention as rules not to be flouted by the military in the final scene! Historical inaccuracies begin right from the film's opening scenes. The first meeting where the male villagers complain about the Japanese is supposedly held one year after the Japanese entered Penang: this would be in December 1942. However, according to historian Cheah Boon Kheng, 'the Japanese treated Malays more favourably than Chinese in the first two years of their rule' (p 66), and Malay disillusionment with the Japanese military administration only began with the transfer of the four Malay states, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu and Perlis, to Thailand in October 1943 (Cheah, 1983, p 27). Moreover, while the male characters discuss the *Heiho* (auxiliary servicemen) and the *Giyu Gun* (Volunteer Army), two groups set up by the Japanese to recruit Malayans, which eventually succeeded in attracting mostly Malays, these two bodies did not recruit members until June 1943 and December 1943! (Cheah, 1983, pp 34–35).

Historical inaccuracies aside, the gender politics of the film are equally problematic. While the attempt to invent a 'herstory' is laudable, it is the lengths to which Embun's personal heroism and sacrifice are evoked that seem exploitative. Erma's strategy of creating heroines is to victimize the Malay woman in order to make her a better martyr. She constructs obstacles and scenes where none existed in the original script in order to heighten the drama: killing off Embun's father; having Embun court certain disaster by dressing herself up before going to the Japanese military administration's headquarters to ask for her brother's release; the gang-rape that ensues; the capture and sexual enslavement of her girlfriend; the riverside scene in which Koishi spies upon the Malay women; and finally, the deaths of Embun and Koishi while Bayu lives. Much criticism of the film has focused on the controversial rape scene, debating its necessity and significance, and whose decision it was to have the actor playing Akashi expose his buttocks for the scene, and whether this nudity marred the honour of Malaysian

[56] Erma must have confused the Kesatuan Melayu Muda – which was interested in forming a nation out of Malaya and Indonesia – called Indonesia Raya during the late 1930s–40s with the contemporary Islamic militant group, Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (also KMM).

[57] 'Malaysia', Malaysian ICID document, No 2.3, p 3, Website: http://www.icid.org/v_malaysia.pdf>.

films when shown abroad.[58] Embun's untraumatized psychological state after the rape, not flinching when Koishi who has fallen in love with her puts a hair pin in her hair and touches her, not associating him with the other Japanese soldiers who had raped her, proves to be another setback for the audience. Erma exploits the femininity and *kesopanan* (courtesy and politeness) of her Malay heroines, both in *The Last Malay Woman* and in *Embun*. Rohiman's original character Embun was conceived as a tomboy. Raised in a family of boys, she dresses like a boy, has short hair, and is able to climb trees and dig for cassava. But Erma, unable to break from the ideal representation of the Malay heroine as gentle, possessed with natural beauty, graceful and winsome ways (Ungku Maimunah, 1994, p 16), transforms her into someone with long hair who wears a sarong around her midriff (*berkemban*) (*MASSA*, 24–30 August 2002, p 42).[59]

This brings us to the river scene. A sunny, idyllic pastoral filled with the carefree laughter of girls washing clothes and bathing by the river, clad only in sarongs wrapped around their midriffs, this scene seems more to replicate scenes from old Malay films than from the period of the Japanese occupation when no parents would risk their daughters being raped by allowing them to be *berkemban* by the river. Embun's friends tease her about her state of happiness and about being in love with 'a Japanese crocodile', Koishi. As the girls splash around and Embun in turn gets her revenge on them by flinging their clothes into the water, Koishi appears suddenly, watching the girls' horseplay in quiet amusement. The elements of romantic drama and the build-up of this relationship between the two characters would have been more credible if it had not been for Embun's gang rape, traumatic for the audience, but already seemingly forgotten by the characters.

The present figures so strongly in Erma's post-*dakwah* nostalgia to reclaim the Golden Era (1950s) cinematic image of sarong-clad women by the river that it takes precedence over historical fact. This revisionist history and the imposition of a 1990s ethno-religious ideology over the past are troubling for their basic assumption that such an identity is

[58] The actor claims that Erma, as director, wanted him to bare his buttocks to have a more realistic scene for the international film festival audience (the director's cut); Erma denied this and said he was the one who pulled his pants all the way down to his knees. See interview with Mahadi J. Murat (*MASSA*, 31 August–6 September 2002, pp 41–42); interview with Hamzah Hussin (*MASSA*, 31 August–6 September 2002, pp 42–43); interview with Rohiman Haroon (*MASSA*, 24–30 August 2002, pp 41–43).

[59] Indeed, in the film version, she has no younger brothers.

somehow not newly constructed, but a fixed and stable part of the original and undisputed beginnings of Malay national identity. Similarly, in her attempt to convey one simple but politically driven message, Erma loses the complexity of history and the nuances of identity found in Rohiman's script. The film suggests that Embun's national loyalty takes precedence over personal love as she tells Koishi, 'Our feelings of being together can't be realised in this world, Koishi. Because your blood and my blood is different. I can't possibly let the honour of my people down.' But more than that, as her discourse of essentialism demonstrates, 'The blood that flows in your veins, Koishi, is the blood of colonisers. Whatever it is, you are a coloniser' – the film homes in on a nationalism based on ethnic purity. Rohiman's Koishi, of mixed Japanese–Malay heritage, who comes to Malaya with the Japanese army to search for his Malay father secretly, is transformed into a pure Japanese whose linguistic versatility and knowledge of Malay customs is merely attributed to his own interest and education in the Indonesian language.[60] *Embun* is about a homogeneous Malay identity unshaken by threats of hybridity. The heroine fortunately does not get pregnant from the gang rape so consequently never worries about having a mixed-race child. Koishi's and Embun's deaths at the end also symbolically reaffirm the rigid ethnic nationalist account that interethnic or international love cannot be permitted. In Rohiman's version, Embun and Koishi get married after he converts to Islam, but are separated when he is arrested and sent home to Japan to be court-martialled. The two are reunited only in the 1980s (perhaps during Mahathir's Look East Policy?)

If *The Last Malay Woman* began an earnest search to know and understand the roots of Malayness as manifested in its complex discourse, that short-lived search ends abruptly in *Embun*'s refuge in a representation of ethnic purity, made secure within its boundaries by the nationalist will of a heroine, more than anything or anyone else. In fact, Bayu, Embun's patriotic brother, acknowledges and accepts Koishi as a legitimate partner for his sister before they part ways, by asking him to look after her. Unlike Embun, he is not as concerned about preserving blood purity. Interestingly too, what constitutes Malay identity is much looser by Rohiman's account. He explained that 'Embun' was named after his Acehnese mother and that the Acehnese, who had such 'classic names' as Embun and Bayu and who had settled in Penang, were true patriots (*pejuang*) (*MASSA*, 24–30 August 2002, p 42).

[60] Even so, Koishi's supposed Indonesian accent while speaking Malay is not pronounced at all.

How does *Embun* perpetuate or discontinue the discourse of Mahathirism? Rather than foster the Vision 2020 notion of a multicultural developmentalist state, Erma's ideology in this film is a throwback to an earlier political and cultural discourse of ethnic nationalism focused solely on Malay rights.[61] Arguably, the film's setting in the 1940s, and heritage of ethnic pluralism under British colonial rule whereby most Chinese and Indians still did not regard themselves as Malayans, allowed for such an ethnically singular vision of nationalism to be realized. However, it appears that in carving out a space for the Malay woman in national politics, issues such as multiethnic representation can be marginalized or, in this case, erased. While the British-led resistance group Force 136 is referred to as an alternative group for Bayu to join in order to continue the anti-Japanese struggle, neither the MPAJA nor the Malayan Communist Party are mentioned at all. Perhaps this is to be expected when so much of Erma's vision and perceptions that go into *Embun* are based on the current system of politics, premised along ethnic-religious lines, shaped by the conservative race-based politics of the National Front, which the British had favoured over the Malayan leftists.

Conclusion

Ideologically, Erma's heroines, in their capacities and limitations and the symbolic roles they play, reflect the mainstream politics of UMNO: one that purports to have a 'moderate' stance on women, modernity and the nation when compared with PAS and other religious 'fundamentalist' groups. Nevertheless, such a moderate stance does not exclude the temptation to represent women as symbolic bearers of the national or ethno-religious collective. In fact, *The Last Malay Woman* being a film about ideas heavily frames Mustika in symbolic terms. Even her name, derived from Sanskrit meaning 'who belongs to a sect or a clan', is pregnant with impending meaning. Thus, perhaps her return to her fiancé is already anticipated and her encounter with Haikal is merely

[61] The Vision 2020 document seemed to gesture towards overcoming ethnic divisions by proposing to build a '*bangsa* Malaysia', a 'Malaysian nation/race'. On the other hand, just as the Islamic militancy portrayed in *The Last Malay Woman* resonates with post-9/11 global realities as pointed out by Zawawi, the struggle for grassroots Malay rights in *Embun* may uncannily anticipate the proposal from UMNO Youth for a return to the spirit of the pro-Malay NEP in the guise of the New National Agenda at the 2005 UMNO General Assembly.

part of her individual spiritual journey to Islam. Symbolically and as one 'who belongs to a sect or clan', Mustika's character ultimately shows the difficulty of conceiving Malay Muslim women as individuals making choices that are independent of or oppose their ethnic and religious collective identity. Even Embun's proactive behaviour in leading the resistance against the Japanese, though gender-transgressive, is normalized and made exemplary in the name of anticolonial nationalism; and her individual romantic feelings for 'the enemy' are similarly sacrificed at the altar of nationalism. Further, the anachronistic 'Allahu Akbar!' chant of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda in *Embun* is telling, for this slippage speaks to the government's successful efforts at Islamizing Malay identity now to incorporate (in equal measure) religious and ethnic nationalism.

Erma's films illustrate the way the discourse and strategies of gender and national politics unsettle one another, evoking further questions regarding definitions of feminism and its praxis in Malaysian popular imagination and national consciousness. For example, her pro-women statements and bold actions are read as feminist by veteran film industry insider Hamzah Hussin, who advised her not to sacrifice her feminism and to continue giving a woman's perspective (*MASSA,* 31 August–6 September 2002, p 43). Labelling Erma Fatima as a 'feminist' displays the common perception of feminism as an ideology that may not fit comfortably with local sociocultural norms. Even as it marks a positive move to elevate women's status in a predominantly patriarchal modern society, to emancipate women and struggle for women's rights (*memperjuangkan hak-hak orang wanita*), feminism is always deployed seemingly at the cost of other group rights in the 'fragmented vision' (Kahn and Loh, 1992) of Malaysian culture and politics. In fact, the word 'feminism' is rarely used by women's advocacy groups, particularly Malay Muslim women's groups. This is because first, ethnicity as an identity marker supersedes gender in Malaysia (Maznah, 2002a, p 216). Second, 'Most Muslim women have remained non-committal in terms of reconciling women's liberation with the prevailing tenets of Islam' (Maznah, 2001, p 239). Thus, perhaps it may be too much to expect of a commercial filmmaker, let alone one embroiled in UMNO politics, to undertake concurrent issues of ethnicity, gender and religion in an equitable manner in her work.

In view of this, Erma's resignation from Puteri UMNO can only signal a return to the more serious focus on filmmaking as art. While she has come a long way since her debut in 1987, she also has much

lost ground to regain with upcoming film projects. As questions confront the New Malays with regard to the future direction of Malay identity and politics under the leadership of PM Abdullah Badawi, it would be interesting to follow Erma's parallel career as a filmmaker in years to come.

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